



# How to Support a Survivor

Self-Paced Educational Module

## DoD Safe Helpline Info Paper

Updated March 2021

## What is *How to Support a Survivor*?

*How to Support a Survivor* provides concrete tools that can help friends, family members, and colleagues of survivors of sexual assault support a survivor's recovery.

This program identifies both helping behaviors that support survivors of sexual assault and harmful behaviors that should be avoided. The program also includes concrete steps to help you become a stronger supporter for the people in your life affected by sexual violence.

## Background

Roughly one in seven of the visitors to Safe Helpline who discuss an incident of sexual assault are friends, family members, colleagues, commanders, or other concerned parties looking for information on how best to support a survivor of sexual assault.[1] Following a sexual assault, the type of support a survivor receives directly affects the trajectory of their recovery.

*How to Support a Survivor* was created to give supporters tangible ways to help a survivor in their life. Many survivors don't choose to access help until months or years later. It is important, as a supporter, to be prepared for the challenges that helping a survivor entails.

## What Can I Expect From This Program?

Most supporters want to help even if they are not sure how to respond. This program consists of six training modules that include information about the effects of sexual assault, how to help empower a survivor, how to talk with a survivor, options for long-term support, bystander intervention, and how to take care of yourself.

Throughout the training, we've included specific examples and situations to help you see how the information can be used every day. It would be impossible to describe all the ways that people connect and support each other, so think of this as an overview rather than the detailed instruction guide. Remember, every survivor is different, and if you ever need additional support, Safe Helpline staff are here to support you 24/7.

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[1] Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. (2020). Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2019 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military. Appendix E: Safe Helpline Data. Retrieved from [https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/6\\_Appendix\\_E\\_Safe\\_Helpline\\_Data.pdf](https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/6_Appendix_E_Safe_Helpline_Data.pdf)

## What Can I Expect From This Program? Cont'd

### Unit 1: Effects of Sexual Assault

In the first section, we will discuss the effects of sexual assault to give you an overview of why a survivor may feel or act certain ways and why your support is important to their healing process. Unit topics include:

- Introduction to effects of sexual assault.
- Effects of sexual assault breakdown.
- How trauma can effect the brain.
- Coping strategies.
- Healthy coping strategies.
- Unhealthy coping strategies.

### Unit 2: Empowering a Survivor

Next, we'll move onto ways that you can help empower a survivor after an assault, and why that is important for their healing process. Unit topics include:

- Introduction to empowerment.
- Ways to help a survivor feel supported.
- Empowering a survivor through an initial crisis.
- Helpful and unhelpful ways to empower a survivor.

### Unit 3: How to Talk with a Survivor

Sometimes, survivors may be hesitant to share their experiences because of the fear of reactions from others. It's not always easy to know what to say when someone tells you they've been sexually assaulted; however, in Unit 3, we'll show you how encouraging words and phrases can avoid judgment and show support for the survivor. Unit topics include:

- What to say to a survivor.
- How to be there for a survivor.
- What not to say to a survivor.
- Ways a partner can support a survivor.

### Unit 4: Long-Term Support

Much of the guidance we've provided about supporting survivors of sexual assault has related to how to support them immediately after a crisis or after their initial disclosure. However, recovering from sexual assault or abuse is a process, and that process looks different for everyone—there's no timetable for healing. Unit 4 includes information about how to continue supporting a survivor weeks, months, and even years after the assault and how important that continued support is. Unit topics include:

- Ways you can show long-term support.
- Support network.
- Safe HelpRoom.

## What Can I Expect From This Program? Cont'd

### Unit 5: Bystander Intervention

In Unit 5, we provide information on ways that you can help prevent sexual assault from occurring in the future. One way that you can do this is called bystander intervention. Unit topics include:

- Bystander intervention introduction.
- How to intervene.
- C.A.R.E.

### Unit 6: Taking Care of Yourself

Survivors aren't the only ones who experience a wide variety of emotions. It's normal to feel disbelief or guilt when learning that someone you love or care for has been assaulted. In Unit 6, we will discuss how to manage these feelings and help you feel less overwhelmed. You can't support other people effectively unless you take care of yourself. Unit topics include:

- Boundaries.
- Resources.

## How Can a User Access the Online Program?

Users can access all Safe Helpline Self-Paced Educational Programs anonymously at [SafeHelpline.org/education](https://SafeHelpline.org/education) or via the [Safe Helpline app](#). To take this course for one hour of D-SAACP continuing education credit, please visit [Safe Helpline's Education Portal](#).

## What is DoD Safe Helpline?

The Department of Defense (DoD) [Safe Helpline](#) is the Department's sole secure, confidential, and anonymous crisis support service specially designed for members of the DoD community affected by sexual assault. Safe Helpline is available 24/7, worldwide. The DoD Safe Helpline staff provides live, one-on-one support to survivors, their families, and other DoD stakeholders. It is operated by [RAINN](#) (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), a national anti-sexual violence organization, through a contract with the [Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office](#) (DoD SAPRO).