



How To Be an Ally to Sexual Violence Survivors

In the United States, **half of women and almost one in three men** experience some form of sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes.

We're here to help

It's an experience that can be devastating, with lasting effects on relationships, careers, and health. The support a survivor receives, or doesn't receive, makes a big difference. But how are you supposed to react if someone reveals to you that they are a survivor of sexual violence? What are the best ways to show support and be an ally? Staff advocates from the Sexual Assault Response Network of Central Ohio (SARNCO) have the following ideas and best practices to share.

Listen and believe

The best first step you can take is to provide space for listening. Above all else, you can start by listening to and believing survivors. You're not an investigator or prosecutor. It's helpful—vital, even—to be someone who listens without judgment. Don't push for information, let them decide how much of their story they want to share with you and give them time. Reassure them that what happened was not their fault.

Express and show support

When you receive a disclosure and you're not expecting it, sometimes it can be difficult to know how to respond. But simply letting the survivor know you are there for them goes a long way.

If you're unsure how to respond, SARNCO recommends these phrases to help acknowledge what's been shared and how important and serious it is:

- Thank you for telling me.
- I'm sorry this happened. It shouldn't have happened to you.
- It took a lot of courage for you to tell me about this, and I believe you.
- You are not alone. I'm here for you.
- I care about you, and I am here to listen or help in any way I can.
- There's no excuse for sexual violence. No one deserves to have this happen.
- Let me know how I can help today, and in the future, too. You are not alone.

If a survivor chooses to report what happened, you can also support them by helping them navigate the criminal justice system or going with them to appointments.

Honor their autonomy by respecting their decisions

Wanting to help and trying to fix things may come from a good place, but every survivor's journey is unique, and it is important they are able to drive their path to healing and recovery. Only they can choose what's best for them, at their pace; they should not be rushed.

People don't always make the choices you would make for yourself, and it's especially important to respect a survivor's autonomy because they are the expert of their own life. Sexual violence is about power and control. Ensuring survivors are in charge of what happens next is key to restoring their sense of agency and control over their life. There are several ways to ensure you are respecting a survivor and their decisions.

Avoid judgement

One way to show respect is by withholding judgmental comments. It's more beneficial to express support than it is to have a judgmental response. We can try to put ourselves in other people's shoes, but we can never truly walk in them and fully understand the future benefits or consequences of certain actions. SARNCO advocates are trained to meet the survivor where they are and focus conversations on the best next steps from the survivor's perspective.

Don't minimize their experiences

Sometimes people try to comfort survivors by minimizing what happened, so it doesn't seem 'that bad,' or by saying something like, "It could have been worse." You may think you are comforting a survivor, but these statements can be retraumatizing and cause more harm. Instead, validate the impact of the violence and that the survivor's feelings (whatever they may be) are appropriate, normal responses to trauma.

Avoid assigning language

Respecting a survivor also means being careful with your word choices. Survivors will need time to process what happened and to be able to talk about it. This may mean they aren't ready to use terms like rape or sexual assault to describe what happened, or they aren't ready to label themselves as victims or survivors. Mirror whatever language the survivor is using and avoid preemptively assigning language to them or their experience.

At SARNCO, advocates tend to use the term survivor to refer generally to those who have experienced sexual violence, but when interacting with individuals, it's best to ask for and use the terms each individual prefers.

Don't pressure them

Some people aren't ready to report abuse. If they're living with the perpetrator of the violence or are in close contact with them at work or another social setting, it may not be a safe choice to report. They may fear retaliation or the loss of support from family and friends, and that can be devastating.

It can also be intimidating for survivors to trust strangers and professionals with their experiences, especially if they have heard about cases in the media or in their personal lives where survivors weren't believed or supported, or if the repercussions for perpetrators were minor.

It may simply not be the best time for a survivor to file a report. Coming forward and reporting may lead to criminal investigations that can be lengthy and require a lot of effort. If the survivor has priorities that demand their attention, reporting may not be the best option for them at this point in their life.

If survivors express interest in counseling or reporting, it's ok to provide options or offer to make a report together. But it's generally best not to push them toward any kind of choice.

Don't take matters into your own hands

If a survivor expresses they aren't ready to report their assault, resist any urges to do it for them. There are only a few instances when SARNCO advocates will take action on their own. When survivors need immediate medical attention or emergency services, advocates will find them help. The state of Ohio also mandates reporting the abuse of children, people with developmental disabilities, and the elderly. These are protected populations, and some of the most vulnerable in our society. But even when a SARNCO advocate must make a report, it is done compassionately. Advocates will involve the survivor and let them know they can report together.

Keep things confidential

If a survivor shares their story with you, it's important to respect their courage in doing so. Avoid sharing survivors' stories with your family, friends, or co-workers. It's not helpful for the survivor. If you feel like you need to talk to someone, SARNCO is here to support you as a co-survivor. Call the SARNCO helpline or come in to meet a SARNCO advocate. You can reach the helpline 24/7 at 844-OHIO-HELP (844-644-6435) or via chat at the Ohio Sexual Violence Helpline website: OhioSexualViolenceHelpline.com.

Reassure them it's not their fault

Take the opportunity to reassure them the violence was not their fault. Many survivors are concerned about being blamed or implicated in some way for something somebody else did to them. This can lead to feelings of guilt and shame. It's important for us as allies and advocates to let people know they have nothing to be ashamed of and they did nothing to cause what happened. It's also important to avoid 'why' questions, like 'Why were you at that place,' which suggests blame. There's nothing that you can do to deserve sexual violence. The person who chose violence and who caused harm is the only one to blame. The only person to blame for sexual assault is the perpetrator.

Educate and care for yourself

As an ally, it's helpful to know the possible effects of sexual violence on a victim. You may see these effects before or after a survivor shares their story with you. Consider learning about the common reactions to a traumatic event and prepare for times when they might occur.

Seek training and volunteer

SARNCO hosts free training sessions three times a year. In it, people are trained to be advocates who answer SARNCO helplines, respond to hospitals, work at outreach events, etc. They are SARNCO champions, and our advocates couldn't do what they do without them. To sign up for an upcoming training session and learn more about volunteer opportunities, visit SARNCO's website: OhioHealth.com/SARNCOVolunteer.

Care for yourself

Being an ally to sexual assault survivors is complex and challenging - it may necessitate additional self-care and processing. Reach out to a confidential resource like SARNCO's 24/7 help or chatlines (listed below) to talk through the impacts of vicarious stress and trauma and to make a plan for your long-term wellness as a caregiver. You can reach the helpline 24/7 at 844-OHIO-HELP (844-644-6435) or via chat at the Ohio Sexual Violence Helpline website: OhioSexualViolenceHelpline.com.

Make a donation

Support survivors throughout Franklin County and Central Ohio by donating to SARNCO through the OhioHealth Foundation by visiting Foundation.OhioHealth.com/SARNCO.



**Stay
Connected!**