

# How Can I Help

(ICASA 2002)

## From the Start ...

Rape can traumatize not only the victim, but also her family and friends. One of the greatest hardships is not knowing how to help. Each woman's reaction to being raped is individual. Her pain and her needs will be unique. This pamphlet provides guidance for those whose family member or friend has been raped.

### Let her Take the Lead

A rape victim has experienced a devastating loss of control over her life. She needs to be in control of her actions – so don't push her in any way. Regardless of your intentions, if she feels that you are being pushy or coercive, you won't be helping. For instance, if she wants to talk, listen. If you are uncomfortable listening, help her find someone who can listen. If she doesn't want to talk, don't try to force her – she needs to set her own pace.

Let her tell you what she wants to do. Ask her, "How can I help you?"

Talk to a counselor, find a local rape crisis center. ICASA rape crisis centers provide free and confidential counseling services.

### You Can't Erase the Rape

There is no way to change the fact that she was raped. You can't change history but you can be a loving and non-judgmental friend or partner. Remember that your support can ease her recovery.

### Face Your Own Fears

Rape is ugly. Rape is scary. You may be uncomfortable thinking about it. You may find that you experience anger at the victim or her attacker. You may feel fearful. You may feel guilt at not having been able to prevent the attack. There are a number of other feelings you may have that may affect your relationship. You can't deny your own feelings, but don't let them interfere with the concern and aid you're trying to give.

### Seek Counseling if You Need It

Rape crisis counselors are aware that the violence of sexual assault can affect others close to the victim. They can respond directly to your questions and concerns. ICASA rape crisis centers provide free and confidential counseling to the victim's family and friends.

### It's Not Her Fault

Rape is always a crime and the rapist is a criminal. Don't blame the victim. Victims don't cause their attackers' behavior.

### Don't Question Her Actions

Don't second-guess your friend's behavior. Don't ask her why (Why did you go there? Why did you stay? Why did you open the door?) Don't say "You should have" or "You shouldn't have" (You should have had locks on the windows... You shouldn't have been doing the laundry at that time of night... You should have fought... You

shouldn't have fought... If you hadn't gone over to his apartment, it wouldn't have happened... You shouldn't have worn that outfit...). These responses can only increase her pain and self-doubt. Don't focus on the victim's behavior. The rapist's behavior is the problem and should be condemned. Nothing the victim did or didn't do caused the rape. The responsibility for the crime lies with the person who committed it.

### **Leave Comparisons Alone**

It doesn't help to compare her experience with others who have been raped. Some day she might want to learn more about the reactions of other rape victims, but any such discussion should be at her request.

Don't compare what did happen with what could have happened. (e.g. Well, at least you're alive.) During her attack her overwhelming emotion was the fear of being killed. It's up to her to decide whether or not she was "lucky" to have survived.

### **Face the Issue**

People often tell a victim of a crisis, "Don't worry / Don't cry / Don't think about it." This is impossible. And it's not helpful for someone who has been raped.

Telling her to deny or downplay the experience she's just been through might suggest to her that you aren't concerned. Neither the crime nor its aftermath will go away by ignoring them.

### **Be Ready to Listen**

Tell her she can discuss her experience with you. Some women need to process the experience by repeating details or talking about their feelings. Other women may want to talk, but not about the particulars of the rape. Try to listen non-judgmentally and don't ask specific questions. Your curiosity about the details of the sexual assault should not overpower your desire to be supportive and gentle with the victim. Offer her the opportunity to talk, but never insist that talking will cure her. Remember that she has just been coerced and she won't be helped by further coercion.

### **What More Can You Do?**

If you want to help your friend or relative in concrete ways, be creative, but recognize your limitations. Do not offer more than you can give. Any assistance, however small it seems to you, will demonstrate your concern and care. Your care and help can aid your friend or relative's recovery and healthy adjustment.

### **In Public**

Sometimes the routines of life will be threatening to a woman dealing with the aftermath of rape. Traveling home from work or school or even grocery shopping may be frightening to her. If your friend or relative expresses concern about her safety in these situations, offer to drive her home or accompany her on public transportation.

### **The Daily Routine**

For some time after her attack, routine chores and responsibilities may seem burdensome to your friend or relative. She may be grateful for assistance with errands, childcare, laundry, etc. If you are able, offer to help with these tasks. If you offer to help, it is critical that you follow through on your promise.

## **At Home**

Regardless of where she was raped, the victim will probably be concerned about the safety of her house or apartment. You can help her install locks on the doors and windows or other security measures she wants to take. She may decide to move to a new apartment or house. You can help her search for one or assist with the moving chores.

## **Need to Get Away**

Depending upon the circumstances of the attack, your friend or relative may appreciate having a place to stay outside her home or she may appreciate having a companion stay with her in her home. For women who have been raped, fear can be primary emotion. It can surface any time – especially when she is feeling vulnerable. It may intensify when she is alone.

Consider making your home available as a temporary refuge. Or offer to spend a few days with her at her home. Sheltering the victim or offering her assistance is a serious responsibility. Her pain will be closer to you as you take on the role of comforter. Make sure you're prepared to make a commitment of this nature before offering. Knowing and respecting your own limitations is important. If your family or other responsibilities prevent you from making this kind of commitment, you might offer to arrange a schedule of regular phone calls.

## **Financial Concerns**

For many women, rape has considerable financial consequences. The victim may not be compensated for time lost from work, whether immediately after the attack or later, during the trial. She may incur the expense of moving to a new home, or making other lifestyle changes that increase her living expenses. Don't assume that an offer of financial help would seem insensitive.

## **Professional Help**

Make sure that your friend knows that there are community resources she can contact for support. ICASA rape crisis centers provide free and confidential counseling services. If she seems interested, offer to help her get information.

If she chooses to seek counseling or therapy from a psychologist or a psychiatrist, she should be aware that not all of them have had training in the special needs of rape victims. You should screen any potential therapists by calling and asking them if their areas of expertise include counseling for rape victims.

Resist the temptation to choose a therapist for her. She needs to make her own decision and have control over her own life.

## **In Court**

If her attacker is caught and your friend decides to prosecute, your support will be invaluable. There are likely to be numerous contacts with an Assistant State's Attorney as well as one or more hearing and trial dates. She may have to go to court several times. At any point throughout the court processes, consider offering to accompany her. If possible, you could organize a few other friends who would be willing to rotate the responsibility.

## **Personal Support**

After the crisis seems to have passed, you may want and you may want things to get back to normal. However, your friend or relative may still be adjusting. Many victims suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. She may still feel traumatized even though, from your perspective, she should be fully recovered or functional. It is important that you remain supportive for however long it takes.

## **Intimacy**

Rape can affect a woman's feelings about sexuality. Some victims find that sex stirs up frightening feelings which they associate with the rape experience and are more comfortable if lovemaking is limited to holding and hugging. Other women experience no difficulty in this regard, distinguishing quickly between rape and consensual sexuality, and might welcome their partner's desire for intimacy. However, a lover must recognize the possibility of temporary change in an intimate relationship.

## **Abstinence**

If your partner wants to refrain from sexual activity, it is essential that you honor her wishes. Otherwise she may feel rushed or frightened by your desire to be sexual. Try to talk openly about this issue even if you have never talked openly about this subject before. It is vital to communicate now. If she hasn't brought up the subject, gently ask her about it.

As in other aspects of her recovery from rape, your partner's needs should be of primary importance and should guide your actions. Let her know you are willing to follow her lead.

## **Your Partner's Attitude About Sexuality**

### **May Impact Yours**

The opportunity to talk about this with someone outside the relationship has been helpful to others who have been intimately involved with a rape survivor. Consider seeing a rape counselor to discuss your feelings.

The empathy and concern you demonstrate during this critical period can aid in her recovery. It can also strengthen the bond between you and your relationship can emerge stronger for the experience.

Remember that even though some things change between you and your partner for awhile, most women recover from the trauma of rape and re-establish loving and full lives.

## **In Conclusion ...**

Think about the times in your life when you've felt vulnerable or faced a crisis – the death of someone you loved, the end of a marriage, a life-threatening illness, or loss of a job. Remember what helped you the most. Chances are it wasn't any one conversation or any one action, but rather the knowledge that friends believed you, empathized with your pain, were on your side, and were committed to seeing you through hard times. It is important that you provide the same support.