

# Helping a Friend Who Has Been Raped or Sexually Assaulted

Live Well to  
Learn Well

Web:  
[health.cornell.edu](http://health.cornell.edu)

Phone (24/7):  
607-255-5155

Fax:  
607-255-0269

Appointments:  
Monday–Saturday

*Check web for hours,  
services, providers,  
and appointment  
information*

110 Ho Plaza,  
Ithaca, NY  
14853-3101

Rape and sexual assault occur on college campuses across the nation, most often between people who know one another. As a student, you may find yourself in a situation in which someone you know is raped or sexually assaulted. Here are some ways you can provide assistance and support.

## Help them take the first steps

Immediately after an assault, help your friend to:

- **Consider getting medical attention.** Your friend may benefit from being examined for physical injury and infection and/or discussing options for pregnancy prevention, if necessary. Post-assault medical services are available at Cornell Health and at Cayuga Medical Center. Your friend may choose to have physical and medical evidence of the assault recorded for legal purposes. Specially trained medical providers at Cayuga Medical Center can collect the evidence necessary (607-274-4411). Should your friend decide later to press criminal charges, such evidence will significantly increase the possibility of successful prosecution.
- **Feel supported.** Feelings of trust and security may be diminished, so offer to stay with your friend; ask if they feel safe and what they need.
- **Enlist the help of a confidential advocate.** During regular business hours, you may contact Cornell's SHARE Office Victim Advocates (607-255-1212 or [victimadvocate@cornell.edu](mailto:victimadvocate@cornell.edu)). The advocates can offer personal support, provide information and options, and help your friend decide what they need. Alternatively, the local Advocacy Center is available 24/7 at 607-277-5000.
- **Consider notifying the University or the police.** An informational report to the University does not obligate your friend to file a formal complaint, but could be helpful if your friend needs some supportive measures to feel safe. An informational report to the Police may be helpful if your friend might consider future legal action.

## Be supportive

### Do ...

- Believe your friend. People rarely lie about rape or assault.
- Listen to your friend and concentrate on understanding their feelings.
- Allow your friend to be silent; you don't have to talk every time they stop talking.



*Your friend may experience a variety of challenges after a sexual assault.*

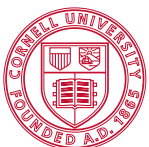
- Let your friend know that you understand their feelings. For example, you might say, "You must have been very frightened."
- Ask how you can help.
- Help your friend regain a sense of control. Support the decisions they make about whom to tell and how to proceed.
- Tell your friend it's not their fault.
- Offer shelter or companionship so your friend doesn't have to be alone.

### Do not ...

- Ask questions that imply that the assault was your friend's fault, such as "Why did you go to their room?" "Why didn't you scream?" "Why didn't you run away?"
- Touch or hug your friend unless you're sure your friend is comfortable with physical contact.
- Act in ways that are upsetting to your friend. Be wary of phrases like "If I could find the creep, I'd kill them." Although you may be trying to be supportive, that type of comment might upset your friend even more.
- Tell your friend what to do; rather, help them explore options. Among the complex decisions your friend will have to make are who to tell, and whether to report the assault. Cornell's SHARE Office Victim Advocates can be helpful in discussing such options.

## How your friend may feel

People respond to sexual assault in different ways, ranging from extreme calm to extreme agitation. Your friend might experience any or all of the following reactions: emotional shock, denial, nightmares, sleeplessness, intrusive memories



or thoughts about the assault, inability to work or make decisions, difficulty concentrating, impaired relationships, and feelings of guilt, despair, depression, fear, anxiety, self-blame, and anger. Many victims appear to themselves and to others to feel in control, only to become distressed again within a short time.

Some of these reactions may be short-lived; others can be troubling for months or years. In any case, it is important to know that information and support are available by contacting the counselors at Cornell Health (607-255-5155).

## Acknowledge your limits

Despite your best intentions, there are limits to what a friend can do to help.

At times, your friend may not want to deal with the assault and, as a result, may even avoid you. If you need to express feelings your friend doesn't want or need to hear, find a trustworthy confidant or counselor. There will also be times when you need time off from helping, or when you should help your friend find other support.

Friends are often essential support in the recovery process, but remember also that a counselor with expertise working with victims of rape and sexual assault can play an important role in your friend's recovery.

## Key facts to consider

### Victims of sexual assault and harassment often know the perpetrator.

Universities across the country have acknowledged sexual assault by acquaintances on college campuses since research confirmed it in the 1980s. Before that, it was assumed most sexual violence was perpetrated by strangers, who stalked and attacked unsuspecting individuals.

### Nonconsensual sexual contact is the most common form of sexual violence on college campuses.

A 2021 campus climate survey at Cornell found that 30% of senior women had experienced nonconsensual sexual contact by force or incapacitation since entering Cornell. Most of the time, the offender was a fellow student or other member of the campus community.

### Victims are never to blame for the assaults perpetrated against them.

Regardless of a person's appearance, behavior, flirtations, previous behaviors, or level of intoxication, a victim is

never responsible for the sexual violence perpetrated against them. Unfortunately, a society steeped in bias and gender discrimination often blames the victim, rather than the perpetrator of sexual violence.

### Sexual assault and rape are expressions of hostility and aggression.

Sexual violence is an abuse of power in which one person acts without regard for the feelings, pain, or trauma inflicted on another. The consequences of sexual assault/rape may be significant regardless of whether the perpetrator is a stranger or known to the victim.

### Anyone can be victimized, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Although the majority of sexual assault and harassment is perpetrated by men against women, sexual violence can happen to anyone. Understandably, some victims are uncomfortable seeking help. For example, male victims may be less likely to confide in their friends due to stigma, embarrassment, or the fear that they will not be taken seriously, especially if the perpetrator is female. Gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals may face additional barriers to seeking help, including homophobic reactions to their disclosure, or fear of disrespect or disbelief by authorities and others reportedly available to help.

### Victims often do not immediately share what happened with others.

Many victims need time to process what has happened, decide who they trust enough to tell their story, and work through the possibility that they may face disbelief or be blamed for what happened. These obstacles often keep victims silent, in spite of community expectations that victims immediately seek help from authorities. It may take time for them to feel comfortable confiding in a family member, friend, or community resource without the risk of judgment, shame, or victim blaming.

## NY State Law

Forcing or coercing someone to have sexual intercourse or engage in other sexual contact is against the law. Specifically, in NYS, if a person is forced to have sexual intercourse or if an individual is deemed unable to consent, the perpetrator's behavior is considered criminal. This includes any amount of force or threat of injury that places the person in fear for their life. A person is

unable to consent if they are mentally incapacitated or physically helpless due to drug or alcohol consumption, are asleep or less than seventeen years of age. Forcing or coercing someone to engage in a sexual act (other than intercourse) under the circumstances mentioned above is also a sex offense and against the law.

## Cornell Policy

Cornell University will not tolerate gender-based harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, or other forms of sexual misconduct committed by or against students, staff, or faculty. Cornell University Policy 6.4, "Prohibited Bias, Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual and Related Misconduct" addresses the prohibited conduct.

University policy explicitly states: "Affirmative consent is a knowing, voluntary, and mutual decision among all participants to engage in sexual activity. Consent can be given by words or actions, as long as those words or actions create clear permission regarding willingness to engage in the sexual activity. Silence or lack of resistance, in and of itself, does not demonstrate consent. The definition of consent does not vary based upon a participant's sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression."

## Support for students

### For assistance following a sexual assault, you or your friend may contact:

- Sexual Harassment & Assault – Response & Education (SHARE): [SHARE.cornell.edu](http://SHARE.cornell.edu)

### Confidential resources include:

- Cornell Health: 607-255-5155 (24/7)
- SHARE Office Victim Advocates: 607-255-1212 or [victimadvocate@cornell.edu](mailto:victimadvocate@cornell.edu)
- Advocacy Center (local resource) 607-277-5000 (24/7)

### Reports can be made to:

- Office of Institutional Equity and Title IX: 607-255-2242 or [TitleIX@cornell.edu](mailto:TitleIX@cornell.edu)
- Cornell Police: 607 255-1111 (24/7)