

# Helping Someone Who Has Been Sexually Assaulted

The following guidelines were developed to educate people in the University of Manitoba community on how to provide a compassionate, supportive, and consistent response to those disclosing a sexual assault. We recognize that people may feel unsure of how to respond when finding out about a sexual assault, and as a result, may unintentionally not be as helpful or supportive as the person disclosing needs. For example, making decision(s) for the person rather than supporting them in making their own decision(s) such as contacting police before understanding the situation and what the person's wishes are. The University of Manitoba wants to be a safe place for people to disclose a sexual assault and receive the best care and referral possible.

Sexual assault is a prevalent and traumatic event that is highly stigmatizing and can be life altering. People struggle to come forward for a variety of reasons such as shame, fears of not being believed and fears of being re-victimized. Because of this, it is crucial that all people disclosing be treated in a sensitive and respectful way. How a person responds when being told about a sexual assault can have a dramatically positive or negative impact on the person disclosing.

These guidelines contain the following key elements for responding in a compassionate, supportive, and consistent way:

1. [Provide a safe and comfortable space](#)
2. [Maintain confidentiality](#)
3. [Believe the person](#)
4. [Be non-judgmental](#)
5. [Be empathic](#)
6. [Listen effectively](#)
7. [Support the individual to make their own decisions](#)
8. [Recognize your own limitations and provide information and resources](#)
9. [Related University of Manitoba Policies](#)

Please refer to “Resources for Responding to a Disclosure of Sexual Assault” for additional information.

## Guideline 1: PROVIDE A SAFE AND COMFORTABLE SPACE

Providing a safe and comfortable space ensures privacy, a sense of safety, and conveys to the person that they matter. This is an important first step in restoring a sense of dignity and to begin the healing process for the person. Consider how you can maximize privacy and safety (do not touch the person without their permission, choose a room where other people can't overhear the conversation, limit distractions).

- “Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”
- “Where would you like to sit?”
- “It takes a lot of courage to talk about difficult experiences like this”

## Guideline 2: MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

A sexual assault is a very intimate and personal experience that impacts the entirety of a person. The trauma that someone might experience can include feelings of humiliation, degradation, embarrassment, shame, self-blame, fear and feeling out of control. Given this and the stigmatization that sexual assault carries, it is critical to be very clear about what you're going to do with the information that is shared as the person will be very concerned about what you will do with it.

You should assure the person that you will not disclose any information that they do not wish to be disclosed, except under specific circumstances. For example, in situations where there are safety concerns, appropriate steps would need to occur to reduce the risks of harm to self or others. This could include contacting counsellors, medical staff, or security personnel. In cases where the perpetrator is also a member of the university community, certain university administrators may need to be contacted in line with applicable university policies. It is important to emphasize that any such steps would involve disclosure of only the minimum amount of information necessary to address the risk, and would only be disclosed to people on a 'need-to-know' basis. Wherever possible, this information is shared without disclosing any identifying information about the person who has been assaulted. In addition, any personal information acquired or released would be bound by both provincial privacy legislation and applicable university policies related to confidentiality.

## Guideline 3: BELIEVE THE PERSON

Most often when someone is sexually assaulted they fear they will not be believed, or that their experience will not be seen as important. It's important to believe the person regardless of how they are behaving or what they are describing.

- "I believe you"
- "I'm really glad you told me"
- "I'm sorry this happened to you"

## Guideline 4: BE NON-JUDGMENTAL

People experiencing sexual assault usually blame themselves for what happened. No matter what the person did or didn't do, they are not responsible for being sexually assaulted.

- Do not suggest in any way that it was the person's fault;
- Avoid "why" questions (e.g. "Why didn't you scream?"; "Why did you drink so much?");
- Avoid words such as "should", "must", "ought", "never", "always":
  - Use of these words assumes there is one right way to feel about, deal with, respond to, and/or experience a sexual assault.
- Avoid advice giving (e.g., "you should report to police because you have a duty to protect society and other people.");

## Guideline 5: BE EMPATHIC

People who have been sexually assaulted often experience anxiety, guilt, vulnerability and shame, which can leave them sensitive to feeling judged and/or misunderstood. Because of this, it is important to never make assumptions. The best way to seek to understand what has happened and the impact of the sexual assault on the person is to listen effectively using empathy as they share their experience. Empathy is listening without judgment to try to understand another person's point of view, thoughts, and feelings.

- Without judgment, imagine yourself in the other person's situation
- Clarify feelings, "What I'm hearing is that you feel \_\_\_\_\_, is that right?"
- "What you're feeling is normal and okay"

## Guideline 6: LISTEN EFFECTIVELY

Listening effectively shows support and encouragement and provides an open and safe space to talk about their experience.

- Use open body language (be aware that having crossed arms and legs can convey a lack of openness)
- Use a soft tone of voice and low volume
- Be patient. Let the person set the pace, do not rush them
- Focus on WHAT the speaker is saying (content) and HOW they are saying it (feelings).

## Guideline 7: SUPPORT THE INDIVIDUAL TO MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS

Sexual assault is a crime of power and control; no one chooses to be sexually assaulted. Supporting the individual to regain power and control is a necessary and important step for healing and recovery. Remember, it is the person's experience and their decisions to make. The University of Manitoba recognizes individuals have the right to make choices for themselves and have these choices respected. This may include but is not limited to:

- Reporting or not reporting to police;
- Informing University of Manitoba Security Services, other departments or staff;
- Deciding whether or not to seek medical attention;
- Deciding whether or not to seek counselling services (e.g., Klinik, Student Counselling Centre, etc.)
- How much information is shared;

Statements/questions you can use to support the individual to make their own decisions include:

- "What would you like to do?"
- "Where would you like to begin?"
- "How best can I help?"
- "What's your biggest concern right now?"

## Guideline 8: RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN LIMITATIONS AND PROVIDE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

While you can provide the initial supportive and compassionate response, no one person has the skills, training and/or knowledge to provide everything the person needs and/or wants. There are services available that have people with in-depth knowledge and training around the issue of sexual assault. Please refer to [“Resources for Responding to a Disclosure of Sexual Assault”](#) to assist a person in making informed decisions and to learn about available resources.

Due to the complexity of sexual assault and the time sensitivity around some of the medical and legal decisions the person may face, here are some things to be aware of:

- LEGAL:
  - In cases where an individual may want to proceed with initiating a police investigation, forensic evidence can be collected. In Winnipeg, the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program can do this up to 120 hours after a sexual assault (and only if the sexual assault occurred within Winnipeg). Outside of Winnipeg this evidence collection is possible for up to 72 hours after the sexual assault.
- MEDICAL:
  - Emergency Contraception for pregnancy prevention can be taken up to 120 hours after the assault.
  - Prophylaxis can be provided for the following sexually transmitted infections: Gonorrhea, Chlamydia, HIV and Hepatitis B. Please note that the time frame that certain medications can be given varies (72 hours up to 2 weeks), so it is best to seek treatment as soon as possible for maximum effectiveness.
- SAFETY:
  - In rare circumstances, you may need to contact campus security and/or 911 if someone requires immediate medical attention and/or physical safety is compromised and/or threatened. For example:
    - You come across someone who is unconscious;
    - You are informed that someone is sexually exposing themselves in the tunnels on campus;
    - You learn that someone living in residence has threatened to sexually assault someone.

## Guideline 9: UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA POLICIES

Any person who believes that any member of the University has been subjected to sexual assault in the course of University-related employment, study, training or activities may discuss concerns and/or make a complaint under the Respectful Work and Learning Environment Policy and Procedures, located online at:

[http://umanitoba.ca/admin/governance/governing\\_documents/community/230.html](http://umanitoba.ca/admin/governance/governing_documents/community/230.html)

The University of Manitoba is committed to creating and maintaining a safe, positive and productive learning and working environment and will not tolerate threats, intimidation or

\*\*Footnote: The University of Manitoba would like to acknowledge the Empowerment Project, Fredericton Sexual Assault Crisis Centre <http://www.fsacc.ca/assets/TEP-FULL.pdf> in informing this document.

violence. Individuals who are found to have engaged in such activities will be subject to disciplinary action, which may result in termination of employment, expulsion from educational programs and a ban from university property, under the University's Violent or Threatening Behaviour Policy and Procedure:

[http://umanitoba.ca/admin/governance/governing\\_documents/community/669.html](http://umanitoba.ca/admin/governance/governing_documents/community/669.html)

Note: "[Resources for Responding to a Disclosure of Sexual Assault](#)" includes specialized sexual assault services that provide more in-depth information on the above points.