



# TOOLKIT FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

OF YOUTHS WHO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY  
ASSAULTED





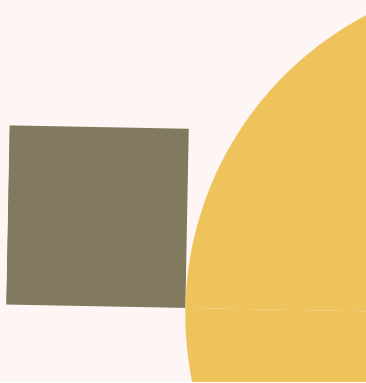
## NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

In this Toolkit, we use the term Parent and Caregiver, but we recognize that family systems come in all shapes and sizes. Guardians or Caregivers may take the form as foster parents, older siblings, cousins, aunts or uncles, grandparents, and many other configurations. We will also use "teen" and "loved one" to refer to a youth in your care who has been harmed by sexual violence.

The term "Survivor" is used to refer to individuals who have experienced sexual violence. We feel that Survivor speaks to the strength that many people embody.

In the Criminal Legal system, people who have been sexually assaulted are often referred to as "Victim." It is also often used when referring to people who have recently been sexually assaulted. In this Guidebook, the term Victim does not imply weakness or assign blame or guilt. It is used in the context of the Criminal Legal System to indicate that a crime was committed and has caused harm.

People may choose to identify with other terms, and that is why it is so important to respect one's right to self-define.






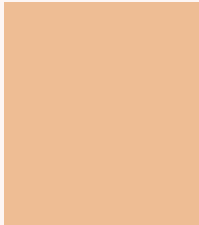
## IT CAN BE HARD TO KNOW WHERE TO START

As a parent, you may feel a range of emotions, from shock and disbelief to anger and helplessness. These emotions may feel overwhelming and difficult to manage.


Some parents feel guilt and blame. Others may feel frustrated that their child is not reacting in a "normal" way following an assault.

It is normal for family, friends, and loved ones to also struggle with the impacts of sexual assault.

The intention of this booklet is to provide some information and resources that may be helpful in supporting you and your loved one.



**Healing can look different for every person, but it is important to know that, with time and support, it is possible.**



# PROTECTING YOUR CHILD

Parents may feel that they need to take more control over their teen's life in order to set boundaries and protect them. They may want to stop them from hanging out with certain friends, not allow them to go out, or take away access to their phones.

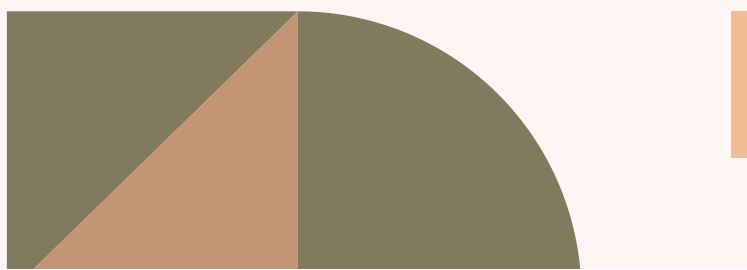
Your teen, however, may perceive this as a punishment, and these actions can perpetuate feelings of self-blame. Strict rules can also cause further isolation, which may be harmful to their healing process.

**Sexual assault is a power-based crime that can leave survivors feeling helpless.**

**Allowing your loved one to resume a normal routine may help regain a feeling of control over their life.**

Sitting down with your teen and sharing your concerns around safety is a good start. Working together to create a plan on healthy boundaries can help create some structure and normality.

Being included in opportunities for choice and decision-making may help restore a sense of autonomy for them.





# U N D E R S T A N D I N G T R A U M A

**There is no right or normal way to react following a sexual assault because we all have different ways of coping with trauma and stress.**

**In most cases, the severity of these reactions will decrease over time, but it's important to reach out to a professional for support if symptoms worsen or continue.**


**Sexual assault can have a huge impact on your teen's sense of self and the way they see the world. Try to give them space while also letting them know you are there if they need.**

## **Confusion, Numbness, Shock, Disbelief, and Disassociation**

Some survivors have limited memory of what happened to them and they may feel confused. They may minimize, rationalize, or be in denial about what happened to them. Shock, disbelief, and disassociation are normal responses to something as traumatic as sexual assault. They are ways that the brain and body protect themselves from going into complete panic. Some survivors share that they feel disconnected from their body or mind. They may feel like they have an altered sense of time or reality.

## **Anger, Irritability, Overwhelm, and Frustration**

Sexual assault is a power-based crime that can leave survivors feeling like their sense of control and power has been taken away. It's normal for survivors to feel like they may never regain that sense of control. They may struggle with making decisions and asserting their needs. They may struggle with feeling angry, irritable, and frustrated. Sometimes these feelings can be inadvertently taken out on friends and family who are trying to help. If your loved one has been sexually assaulted, be sure to listen to their needs and try not to take their behaviour personally.





## **They may have Flashbacks, Nightmares, and Anxiety.**

Survivors may struggle with memories or flashbacks or nightmares of the assault. They might feel triggered by sounds and smells. Some survivors may have a hard time calming their nervous system. They may feel like they are on high alert. This is called "hyperarousal," and it's a normal trauma response.


## **Shame, Guilt, Humiliation, Embarrassment, and Disgust**

These are common feelings that can silence survivors and keep them from getting support. It is important that survivors be gentle with themselves and remember that what happened to them was not their fault. These are really difficult and uncomfortable feelings to sit with alone. Talking to someone who they trust can help these feelings subside over time. It may not feel like it right away, but survivors will not be broken or damaged forever.

## **Increased or Decreased Sex Drive**

Some survivors share that they have either a higher or lower sex drive. These are both normal and common responses following a sexual assault. For some people, regaining their sense of sexual control may look like having lots of sex. It might look like the opposite as well, with survivors having little to no sex drive. A survivor's healing process does not need to make sense to anyone but them. It's important to not judge the ways we cope or others cope with trauma.

This can be a difficult topic for parents to bring up. Let them know you are here to talk without judgement. Gently encourage them to connect with a local sexual health clinic to support safe sex practices.



# WHAT IF THEY DON'T WANT TO TALK TO ME?

It can be difficult knowing that your teen has been harmed and you aren't able to talk to them about it; however, it can be an even more difficult process for sexual assault survivors to feel pressured to retell their experiences.

Your teen may feel ashamed or may worry about your reaction. They may not want to hurt you by telling you what happened.

Although there are benefits to talking about what happened, it is best supported with a professional who can make sure that they are not retraumatized by the experience of processing any feelings or emotions that come up.

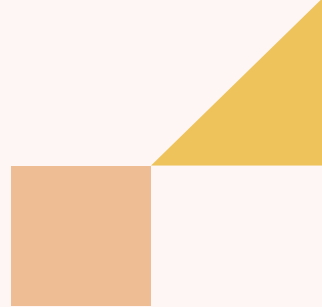
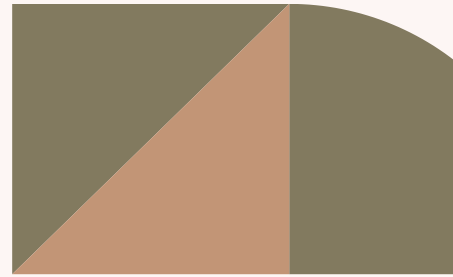
Let your loved one know that there is no pressure to talk to you and encourage them to reach out to a professional when they are ready.

## IF THEY DO WANT TO TALK:

- Listen empathetically – without judgment
- Honour their account of events
- Don't ask any digging questions
- Respect their need for confidentiality or privacy

Sexual assault can be complex. We know that in up to 80% of cases, people know the person who has assaulted them. There should never be any pressure to report or to seek support.

Try saying things like: "I am so sorry this happened to you," "it was not your fault," "I am so glad that you told me," "how can I help?" and "I love you."



# B L A M E



There are a lot of misconceptions and myths in our culture about sexual assault. These myths often perpetuate feelings of blame and perpetuate shame among survivors. In your child's healing process, it's so important that feelings of blame are not reinforced by the people who matter most to the survivor.


You may have concerns about your child's behaviour or feel that they made choices that contributed to them being assaulted. It is not a helpful or supportive position to take. The only person to blame is the person who assaulted your child.

Discussions around safety and personal boundaries are important, but they must be approached in a gentle way, especially following an assault.

Try approaching these conversations collaboratively and from a place of promoting self-care, safety, and wellness in all areas of their life.

It is normal for parents to also have feelings of self-blame and shame around the assault. It is important to acknowledge that it was not your fault either.

**Responsibility and accountability lie  
with the person who chose to commit the assault,  
not the survivor and not the parents.**





# MODELLING SELF-CARE AND SELF-COMPASSION

As a parent, it can be hard to take care of yourself while taking care of others, especially when the people we love are struggling.

Modelling self-care and self-compassion can have a positive impact on yourself and your teen. It can reassure them that you are taking care of yourself so that they can prioritize their own healing journey. It can also help you keep your stress levels down while supporting others.

## Tips for Self Care

**Physical:** Keeping your body healthy and strong during times of stress is important. Routines around sleeping, eating, and exercising can be helpful to create stability. Have compassion for yourself if this feels difficult. Simple things such as making sure you have breakfast every day or a walk around the block can make a world of a difference.

**Emotional:** This can look like spending time with a friend or supportive family member, or journalling, spending time outdoors, or simply taking a hot bath.

For some parents, their teen's experience of sexual assault may bring up their own past experiences of violence and trauma or feelings of blame and inadequacy. Connecting with a professional or counsellor who can help you process those emotions can be helpful, especially if you are having trouble coping.

**Be gentle on yourself.**





# WAYS YOU CAN HELP

## Listen and Believe




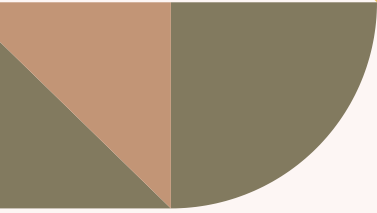
- Believe your teen if they tell you they have been sexually assaulted.
- Acknowledge how much courage it took them to tell you
- As parents, your first inclination might be to fix or understand what has happened, but questioning might make your teen feel like you are minimizing the impact or holding them responsible for what happened.
- Be present and listen with an open heart. Let them lead with how much they want to share. Healing from sexual assault takes time so be patient with the process.

## Grace and Dignity

- Avoid lecturing, especially at the point of disclosure. Your teen needs love, support, empathy, and an opportunity to be treated with dignity.
- Discussions about behaviour can come later in the recovery process.

Remind them that it is not their fault.






## Be honest, and if you say the wrong thing, it's okay to apologize.

- We are all human and we don't always get it right. If you say the wrong thing, it is okay to go back and try again.
- Ask your teen what kind of support they need. If they don't know, that's okay, too. Just letting them know you are here when they need can go a long way.

## Take Action

- If your teen has been recently sexually assaulted and wants support, connect with your local Sexual Assault Response Program (SARP). It can offer accompaniment to the hospital for medical support, support with the reporting process, and referrals for counselling.
- If your teen isn't ready to access support right now, it doesn't mean that they will never be ready. Every person's healing journey is different and they may access support later on.

## Learn and Advocate

- Many myths and misconceptions about sexual assault contribute to violence in our communities.
  - Advocate for more education around consent and sexual assault in schools or your community.
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This Toolkit was created by



**Islanders Working Against Violence**

For more information, questions, or comments, visit

[www.iwav.org](http://www.iwav.org)

Sexual Assault Response Program

[sarc@iwav.org](mailto:sarc@iwav.org)

(250) 931-7712