If someone you care about has been sexually assaulted, you may be experiencing an array of emotions, such as:

- Guilt that you did not prevent the assault
- Fear over the realization that you are also vulnerable
- A strong desire for revenge
- A desire to “fix it” and move on
- Victim blaming: rationalizing that the assault “wasn’t that bad” or “wasn’t really rape” or was the victim’s fault
- Impatience at your loved one’s long recovery

These feelings are common and can be hard to deal with on your own. It’s completely normal to reach out to a professional to talk about your own response to the assault, if needed. Remember to practice good self care, and keep these things in mind:

- It’s OK to set boundaries and limitations with your loved one in order to care for yourself, especially when you are experiencing high levels of stress.
- Don’t blame yourself. The only people at fault for sexual assault are the offenders!
Sexual assault, also referred to as sexual violence, is any type of forced or coerced sexual contact or behavior that happens without consent. Anyone can experience sexual violence regardless of age, race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or economic or cultural background.

Forms of sexual violence include: sexual assault, rape or attempted rape, child molestation, incest, unwanted touching (grabbing, fondling, forced kissing), sexual harassment or threats, sex trafficking, alcohol and drug-facilitated sexual assault, exposing one’s genitals or naked body to others without consent, voyeurism (watching someone engage in sexual acts without their knowledge or consent), and non-consensual image sharing.

The more you know about sexual assault, the more you’ll be able to provide positive support to a loved one who has been sexually assaulted. Visit cawsnorthdakota.org or contact your local domestic violence/sexual assault (DV/SA) advocacy agency to learn more about sexual assault and supporting your loved one.

The majority of sexual violence is committed by someone known to the victim. It can be anyone from a brief acquaintance to a spouse or partner. Because the victim knows the offender in most cases, they often feel somehow responsible for the assault. This can cause confusion and other emotions, such as guilt or shame. As a result, victims of sexual assault are less likely to report the crime to law enforcement.

In North Dakota, victims of sexual assault typically have 96 hours to obtain a forensic medical examination, although certain situations may extend that time frame. If the victim goes to the hospital for an examination, it’s important to know that most hospitals are required to report the assault to law enforcement. However, it’s always up to the victim to decide if they want to talk to law enforcement.

Even if more than 96 hours has passed, the victim still has the opportunity to obtain medical treatment and an evaluation for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Contact a DV/SA advocacy agency near you to learn more about medical treatment and reporting options.

HOW YOUR LOVED ONE MAY REACT

After a sexual assault, your loved one may experience a wide range of reactions and emotions. There is no one pattern or order of responses, but many sexual violence victims experience:

- Denial/shock
- Anger/irritability
- Self-blame
- Depression
- Guilt/shame
- Anxiety/panic attacks
- Flashbacks

Remember that your loved one is having a normal response to an abnormal situation. Be there to support your loved one in coping with emotions, accessing medical and mental health services, and seeking social support systems.

1. Believe them. One of the most common fears victims of sexual assault face is that no one will believe them. This fear may affect who the victim talks to about the assault and what they share. Remind them that you believe them and are there for them.

2. Listen without judgment or giving advice. The victim may be feeling many different emotions. It’s important to support them in expressing any feelings they’re experiencing.

3. Remind them that the assault was not their fault. Victims often blame themselves for the assault, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind your loved one that they are not to blame. The only person at fault for the sexual assault is the offender.

4. Remain calm. How you react to sexual violence will affect further reactions and responses from the victim.

5. Encourage your loved one to talk to a professional about their experience. You’re a strong supporter, but you might not feel equipped to provide all the support that your loved one wants. Provide information to contact the nearest sexual assault victim advocacy agency, staffed with professionals trained in working with victims of sexual assault. All services are FREE and confidential.

6. Be there for them. This may look like going with them to medical appointments, listening to them when they want to talk, or helping them contact professional help. Keep in mind that healing from sexual assault doesn’t happen within a specific time frame. Be there for your loved one throughout the entire healing process, however long that may be.

7. Give your loved one the opportunity to share their experience with you, but avoid pressing for information. They may not feel comfortable providing certain details of the assault, and it’s important to respect their privacy and boundaries.

8. Give the victim as much control as possible—the very thing that was taken from them during the assault. Let them choose who they talk to about the assault and where they get support. It’s their experience to share, not yours.

9. Only touch the victim if you’ve received permission first. Physical contact without permission can cause anxiety or flashbacks.

10. Don’t attempt to confront the offender or tell the victim you are going to “get” the offender. Doing or saying things like this can cause the victim additional stress. It may also create a dangerous situation for you and the victim.