Self-Care for Friends and Family Members

When someone that you care about tells you that they have been a victim of violence, you may have a range of reactions that could include:

**Shock**
- You may be very surprised to hear what has happened.
- You might have difficulty figuring out how to respond.

**Anger**
- You might feel angry at the perpetrator for hurting your loved one.
- You might also feel angry at your loved one for not telling you sooner or for telling you something that is hard for you to hear.
- This can be especially true if the assault was committed by someone that you know. An example of this would be sexual assault that is committed by a family member.

**Sadness**
- You might feel sad for your loved one, for his or her family, or for what this assault may change about both of your lives.
- If the person who committed the assault is a mutual acquaintance or a relative, you may also feel sadness for them although you dislike their actions.

**Anxiety**
- You might feel anxiety about responding the “right” way to your loved one.
- You might feel anxiety about how this will impact your relationship.

**Fear**
- Depending on the circumstances of your loved one’s assault, you might be concerned that they are still in danger or that something similar could happen to you.

*Almost anything is “normal”*
- Everyone has a different reaction when they find out that someone they care for has experienced domestic violence, sexual violence or stalking.
- There is no “wrong” way to feel. What is important is that you show your friend or family member that you care and that you can help support them.

**It’s also very important for you to take care of yourself.** Even though you were not the primary victim of the assault, hearing your loved one’s story and helping to support them can impact you as well.
- Helping someone who has experienced interpersonal violence can change the way that you see the world. Your belief in your personal safety might be shaken, especially if your loved one was assaulted somewhere that you go as well.
- Some family and friends of survivors may experience more conflict in their relationships, whether those are intimate partner relationships, friendships or family relationships. This can be especially true if the person who committed the assault is a mutual acquaintance or a relative.
• You might find that you’re more easily irritated or have difficulty tolerating frustration. You may experience nightmares, intrusive thoughts or difficulty concentrating.
• You might begin to feel distant and begin avoiding people and activities that you usually find enjoyable, especially if your loved one was assaulted in one of these places. You may feel guilty for being happy or doing things you enjoy.

Here are some ways to cope with these feelings
• Make sure that you are involved in activities that don’t revolve around your loved one’s experience. It can be easy to get caught up in what is happening to them.
• Get involved in a sport or hobby that you love. Find other people who are doing the same thing. Knowing that people are counting on you to show up can help motivate you.
• If you have a spouse or partner, make a date night and stick with it. Turn off your cell phones (within reason. If the babysitter needs to be able to find you, consider leaving him/her the number of the restaurant so that you can turn off your ringer.)
• Treat leisure appointments as seriously as business appointments. If you have plans to do something for fun, mark it on your calendar.
• If you find that you are getting too involved with what is happening to your loved one, set limits. Set aside time to do what they need you to do and when that time is up, move on to other activities.
• It’s very important for you to maintain your emotional health. You cannot help your loved one if you are in crisis yourself.

Work to manage your feelings
• Keep a journal. It may be helpful to write down some of the feelings that you are experiencing.
• Practice meditation or relaxation exercises. This can help with both the physical and emotional stress you are feeling. For example:

Sit or stand comfortably, with your feet flat on the floor and your back straight. Place one hand over your belly button. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose and let your stomach expand as you inhale. Hold your breath for a few seconds, then exhale slowly through your mouth, sighing as you breathe out. Concentrate on relaxing your stomach muscles as you breathe in. When you are doing this exercise correctly, you will feel your stomach rise and fall about an inch as you breathe in and out. Try to keep the rest of your body relaxed—your shoulders should not rise and fall as you breathe! Slowly count to 4 as you inhale and to 4 again as you exhale. At the end of the exhalation, take another deep breath. After 3-4 cycles of breathing you should begin to feel the calming effects.

• You might also consider talking to someone at the VIP Center or another counselor or advocate.

As you work to support your loved one, make sure that you take care of yourself as well. It can be easy to get caught up in their needs and to forget about your own. Remember that you cannot help them unless you are taking care of yourself! At the VIP Center, we are here to help you and your loved one. Call or drop by today.

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