

RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE



This resource is intended to assist those who may receive a disclosure of sexual violence. The way someone responds to a survivor's disclosure of trauma has a significant impact on their healing. Negative reactions, like blame, doubt, or dismissal, are strongly linked to increased self-blame, shame, guilt, PTSD symptoms, and long-term distress. These reactions can also create a culture of silencing and isolation. Conversely, positive responses can help survivors feel more in control, reduce PTSD symptoms, and support their ability to cope and recover. **This resource provides tips on how to provide effective support when receiving a disclosure as well as common pitfalls to avoid.**

TIPS WHEN RECEIVING A DISCLOSURE

Pause and ground yourself.

Take a deep breath. Let your body language soften. You are setting the tone for how this person will feel in the next sixty seconds.

Listen with full presence.

Let the person speak without interruption. Avoid investigative questions. Do not ask for details or timelines. Your job is not to help them make a decision, rather to receive what they are willing to share.

Affirm and validate.

Say things like, "I am really sorry that happened to you," "thank you for trusting me with this," "you did not deserve that," or, "you are not alone."

Gently explain your mandatory reporting role (if applicable).

It is important to be clear, calm, and honest. You can say, "I want to support you as best I can. Because of my role, I am required to notify the University so someone from the Title IX team can reach out and offer support and resolution options. You are not required to respond or provide them with any information."

MANDATORY REPORTING

University of Notre Dame policy mandates that all non-confidential employees, as well as students working in roles with professional duties to the University, report potential or suspected instances of sexual or discriminatory misconduct that fall under the [University's Policy on Discriminatory Harassment, Sexual Harassment, and Other Sex-Based Misconduct](#).

Mandatory reports should be filed with the Office of Institutional Equity at speakup.nd.edu, equity@nd.edu, or **(574) 631-0444**. If you are unsure whether you are required to report an incident, reach out to the Office of Institutional Equity for guidance.

Offer referrals and explain options.

This is where you help the individual get to the right people based on what they need. That might be someone who can help them understand their options, someone who can help with housing, classes, or work schedules, or someone who can offer emotional support. Ask the person what feels most supportive to them in this moment.

Follow up with care.

Check in a few days later. Do not press for information. Let the individual know they are still on your mind and you are still available. Communicate care without pressure.

COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID

Trying to Make Sense of It Out Loud

e.g., *"This sounds like a gray area." | "That seems so out of character."*

Though it may feel like a natural response, trying to "process" with the survivor can sound like skepticism. It may feel like you're justifying the harm or doubting the credibility of their experience.

Instead: "What you experienced matters, and I appreciate you trusting me. You don't need to have it all figured out for this to be valid."

Offering Solutions Without Asking First

e.g., *"You need to report this." | "You should see a therapist." | "Let me take care of it for you."*

Even when well-meaning, jumping to solutions can remove the survivor's agency, especially if they're not ready for action. It mirrors the loss of control they may already feel.

Instead: "There are a few different options if and when you want to explore them. Would it be okay if I shared some of those with you?"

Minimizing or Rationalizing the Harm

e.g., *"It sounds like it could've been worse." | "I'm sure they didn't mean to hurt you."*

This may send the message that their experience doesn't rise to the level of "serious" harm, which reinforces the silence many survivors already carry.

Instead: "I'm sorry this happened. How you're feeling makes sense. You deserve care and support."

Labeling the Experience for Them

e.g., *"So that was assault, right?" | "That sounds like rape." | "Was it just a bad hookup?"*

Labeling someone's experience too quickly can feel overwhelming, confusing, or push them into a definition they're not ready to claim.

Instead: "However you want to name or not name this is okay. I'm here to support you no matter what." Mirror the language they use to describe the conduct.

Making Promises You Can't Keep

e.g., *"This will stay just between us." | "People will always trust you when you share your truth."*

False promises about confidentiality, can lead to deep feelings of betrayal if reporting is mandated. Survivors may feel lied to or ambushed, damaging their trust in you and the University.

Instead: "I can't promise what will happen next, but I can promise I'll support you however you need. You're not alone in this."

Asking for Too Many Details or Trying to "Understand the Full Story"

e.g., *"What exactly happened?" | "Were you drinking?" | "How far did it go?"*

Even gentle questioning can feel like an interrogation. Survivors often fear being doubted or blamed, and needing to "prove" their experience can be retraumatizing.

Instead: "You can share only what you feel comfortable sharing. I believe you, and I'm here to help however I can."

Giving Safety Tips and/or Prevention Advice

e.g., *"That's why we shouldn't drink alone." | "Next time, text someone before you leave."*

These "tips" can come off as blame, implying the survivor didn't do enough to protect themselves.

Instead: "You didn't deserve this. It's not your fault. I'm really glad you reached out."