

What to Say & What Not to Say to a Victim of Sexual Assault

ARTICLES · RESPONDING WELL

By Justin & Lindsey Holcomb



Because sexual assault is a form of victimization that is particularly stigmatized in American society, many victims suffer in silence, which only intensifies their distress and disgrace. There is a societal impulse to blame traumatized individuals for their suffering. Research findings suggest blaming victims for post-traumatic symptoms is not only wrong but also contributes to the vicious cycle of traumatization. Victims experiencing negative social reactions have poorer adjustment. Research has proven that the only social reactions related to better adjustment by victims are being believed and being listened to by others.

What Not to Say

Hurtful reactions toward a victim may be intentional (victim blaming), or they may arise from ineffective attempts to show compassion by people who mean well but are uninformed. Below is a list of things not to say because they shame, blame, or doubt the victim:

- “I know how you feel.”
- “I understand.”
- “You’re lucky that _____ didn’t happen.”
- “It’ll take some time, but you’ll get over it.”
- “Why don’t you tell me more details about what happened?”
- “Don’t worry, it’s going to be all right.”
- “Try to be strong.”
- “Out of tragedies good things happen.”
- “Time heals all wounds.”
- “It was God’s will.”
- “You need to forgive and move on.”
- “Calm down and try to relax.”
- “You should get on with your life.”

What To Say

Below is a list of things to say that would support and encourage a victim:

- “I’m sorry this happened to you.”
- “I believe you.”
- “Thank you for telling me.”
- “How can I help?”
- “I’m glad you’re talking with me.”
- “I’m glad you’re safe now.”
- “It wasn’t your fault.”
- “Your reaction is not an uncommon response.”
- “It’s understandable you’re feeling that way.”
- “You’re not going crazy. These are normal reactions following an assault.”
- “Things may not ever be the same, but they can get better.”
- “It’s OK to cry.”

This post is excerpted from Justin and Lindsey Holcombs’ book, [Rid of My Disgrace](#). Justin Holcomb is a [GRACE Board Member](#).



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