



## Supporting Sexual Assault Victims in Muslim Communities

Coming forward as a survivor of sexual violence is an incredible act of bravery and courage. While families, friends, and therapists do much to support their loved ones through this process, it is crucial to note that the legal process can also be very lengthy, difficult, and emotionally draining, despite the fact that seeking justice can be empowering and satisfying. It is crucial for family, friends, and professionals to stand by their loved ones through every part of the process. Below are some tips to keep in mind:

### **Sexual violence survivors often carry with them a lifetime of consequences.**

Survivors of sexual violence often face a multitude of social, emotional, spiritual, and physical effects of the experience. Victims are likely to suffer depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and in particular are at increased risk for substance abuse and suicide. In additions, victims may experience flashbacks, anger, shame, blame, low self-esteem, inability to trust others, and a range of physical consequences such as sleeping and eating disorders and self-harm.

### **What can you do?**

#### **Continue to empower your loved one.**

- **Sexual assault and other sexual violence crimes take away the individual's power.** Encourage your loved one to trust his/her instincts, but do not pressure him/her to do anything he/she is not yet ready to do.
- **Positive language can have a profound effect on a survivor's ability to heal.** Validating a survivor's experience and feelings by telling them things like "I'm sorry this happened," "it's ok to feel angry," and "you're safe here" may seem insignificant, but can have a tremendous impact on a survivor.

#### **Create a safe space where which you and your loved one can find comfort.**

- One of the first aspects of a survivor's life to be compromised after the occurrence of sexual violence is his/her emotional and physical safety. Talk to your loved one about what makes him/her feel safe in their surroundings, interactions, and relationships, and then work together to create that space of refuge in your home.
- Make sure you enlist a team of trusted individuals who can commit to spending some time with the survivor in the days following the news breaking.

#### **Be mindful of the unique challenges that Muslim survivors face.**

- Because of Islam's emphasis on modesty, privacy, and purity, many Muslim survivors may feel an unusual amount of shame, guilt, and self-blame. They may also be preoccupied with anxieties regarding the future, such as their ability to get married and live normal lives.
- The community may also engage in certain forms of victim-blaming using the above as motivations.
- Try your best to minimize these emotions and explain to your loved one that there are a number of strong Islamic principles that are supportive of survivors, and that emphasis on purity and privacy never supercedes the safety of another individual.

#### **Ensure that your loved one has a plan for self-care.**

- When an individual is dealing with a crisis as emotionally draining as sexual assault, it is easy to forget or neglect one's own self-care.
- Encourage your loved one to not overlook eating nutritiously and regularly, sleeping, visiting the doctor, and exercising.

Emotional self-care is also crucial and can mean different things for different people, such as seeing a licensed counselor, journaling, or partaking in meditation or other relaxation exercises. Ensure that your loved one is engaging in emotional self-care on a consistent basis.

### **Limit your engagement with media and social media.**

- When news like this breaks, particularly in smaller or culturally close-knit communities, it not only spreads fast, but also goes viral. Along with that comes much criticism and commentary. Limit your and your loved one's consumption of such commentary.
- Media coverage and community commentary can easily trigger or re-traumatize a survivor. Try your best to be proactive and prevent such occurrences.

### **Engage in your own self-care.**

- Supporting a loved one through this process involves vicarious trauma. It is easy to get wrapped up in supporting your loved one. It is crucial to make time for yourself as well. If you do not take care of yourself, you will be unable to sustain taking care of others.
- Consider seeing a licensed therapist to help you unpack the emotions you may be feeling during this experience.
- Other coping mechanisms include journaling, pursuing a hobby or other relaxing activities, and spending time with other friends and family in ways that don't revolve around your loved one's experience.
- Finally, the national sexual assault hotline (1.866.656.HOPE) also offers counseling and advice for caregivers and supporters of survivor.

### **Know and use the resources in your community.**

- There are a number of resources in the community that are extremely useful as you help support your loved one, such as:
  - Rape crisis centers
  - Local and national hotline
  - Sexual assault therapists & counselors
  - Community organizations such as YWCA
  - Religious and community institutions
  - Survivor support groups