

RESPONDING WITH RAHMA

A Guide for Sexual Assault Disclosures

Too often, victims of sexual assault bravely reach out to their loved ones for support, guidance, and resources, and are met with blame and shame, rather than healing and support.

RAHMA AT THE CORE

How you respond in that moment of initial disclosure can have a profound impact on the survivor. Not believing a victim, blaming them for the assault, interrogating them, or siding with the abuser can have a lifelong impact on a victim's ability to heal, seek counseling and justice, and feel safe. The underlying virtue that we should uphold as advocates is that of *rahma*, or compassion.

RAHMA PRINCIPLES

Many people find it hard to find the right words to say when a victim discloses. It's even harder if their abuser is someone you know, love, and respect. On the other side of this card are a few easy tips, using the acronym *rahma* inspired by the Arabic word for compassion, to help you respond to your loved one in a way that promotes healing and justice.

"You are not alone. I believe you."

"Thank you for trusting me with your story."

"It's natural to wonder how your religious and cultural identity fits into all of this."

"Your confidentiality is of utmost priority."

"There are many trained professionals who can help."



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R

Respond by Listening

First, you should reflectively listen to what the survivor is telling you. This helps the person in several ways: it lets them know you understand what they're saying, it lets them know that you are listening to them, and it helps you clarify what the person needs. If a person expresses a feeling or emotion, be sure to reflect that back to them so they feel understood and heard.

A

Affirm & Believe

Many survivors make first contact about sexual violence after careful deliberation, and you may be the first person someone talks to about these issues. Disclosing is a brave step. Believe them and affirm any feelings they have about the situation. Ask open-ended questions like "How can I help you?" and "How are you feeling?" Don't ask for details of the assault or accused.

H

Honor Cultural and Religious Context and Values

As much as you may dislike a cultural value, it may be something the individual holds on to and deeply respects. When you are addressing a survivor's concern, always ask yourself what your role is, whether it's appropriate to challenge their cultural understanding, and the impact of you doing so. Raise awareness about the issue and correct misinformation, but don't make the victim feel silly.

M

Maintain Privacy

Don't share their identity with anyone, and follow the lead of the lawyers and advocates who are trained in maintaining confidentiality. Even sharing details you may not consider as immediately identifying, like the region they live in, or their age, with others may compromise their identity especially if they come from a tight knit community.

A

Assist with Providing Resources and Information

Sexual violence is about having power and control taken from the survivor, so one of the biggest roles we can play as advocates is to give that control back to them. Meet them where they are, and gently offer resources and information with compassion, but respect their agency to make the decision that is best for them.