Be Safe
Ask. Listen. Respect.

Supporting Individuals Who Have Experienced Assault or Abuse

INTERVENTION

Therapeutic treatment from a trained provider can help an individual overcome the effects of sexual assault.

Understanding the Victim's Feelings

After sexual abuse, individuals may feel sad, scared, lonely, mad, embarrassed, or fearful. They may also feel love and anger at the person who hurt them at the same time. Some individuals experience mild symptoms, followed by a return to their typical feelings and behaviors. Others experience intense and long-lasting symptoms, which may meet criteria for a psychological disorder such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some common feelings people experience following sexual assault include:

- Shock
- Denial
- Depression
- Frustration
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Anger
- Guilt
- Wanting normalcy
- Avoiding closeness/intimacy

Individuals with autism may demonstrate a wide range of behaviors after experiencing sexual abuse or assault. These behaviors may include:

- More self-stimulating behaviors than usual
- Increase in self-injurious behavior
- Decrease in communication or adaptive skills
- Wanting to stay in the place where the abuse happened
- Acting as if in a favorite cartoon, movie, or story
- Acting out because of frustration, sadness, and anger

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Supporting the Victim

When victims of sexual assault or abuse seek treatment, the availability of a loved one who supports their efforts can go a long way in making treatment helpful. Some things that caregivers can do to support victims include:

Consistently affirm that you believe the victim

Victims should know that you believe what they share about the assault and that you believe that the assault was not their fault.

Validate the victim's behavior

Know that there is no right or wrong way to handle being assaulted or abused. Let them know they did the best thing they could under the stress of experiencing assault or abuse. Assure the victim that none of their behavior made them a willing participant.

Allow the victim to share with you at his or her own pace

Allow the victim to share as much or as little about the assault with you as is helpful for them.

If the victim agrees, participate in treatment

Depending on the needs of the individual, caregivers may participate in treatment to help them with communication and other needs, learn ways to support the victim, and become prepared to discuss the abuse with the victim.

Understanding and expressing emotions can be particularly difficult for individuals who have experienced abuse or assault. Change in behavior that sometimes occurs (e.g., increase in self-stimulatory behavior) may be a way of coping with intense and confusing emotions. If you notice that individuals are experiencing distressing emotions, you can help them by suggesting age- and developmentally-appropriate coping strategies. Some common ways to cope with feelings include:

- Watching tv or a movie
- Listening to music
- Taking time to be alone
- Coloring or drawing
- Writing in a diary
- Playing with pets
- Exercise or outdoor play
- Talking or being with a friend or family member
- Expressing emotions by crying, laughing, talking, etc.

Pennsylvania's leading source of autism-related resources and information
877-231-4244

The ASERT Collaborative is funded by the Office of Developmental Programs, PA Department of Human Services