



RAINN

Friends and Family Toolkit

for Supporting a Loved One After Sexual Violence

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Every 68 seconds, someone is sexually assaulted in the U.S. This means that even if you haven't personally had an experience with sexual violence, it's likely that you know someone who has.

Talking about sexual assault can be difficult. For many survivors, the reaction of the first person they disclose to, often a friend or family member, can have a huge effect on their healing process.

That's why during this Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month, RAINN is focusing on the critical role that loved ones play in supporting survivors and their healing, as well as the importance of self-care and healthy ways to process while supporting others.

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HOW TO SUPPORT A LOVED ONE: REMEMBER TO 'TALK'

Most of the time, loved ones of survivors want to do anything they can to help—but aren't sure what to do. Whether someone you love has disclosed to you already, or you just want to be prepared for the moment someone does, taking the time to proactively learn how to support a survivor as they disclose can make all the difference. When the time comes to support a survivor in your life, remember this important acronym about how to **TALK**.



THANK THEM FOR TELLING YOU.

It's important to take a moment to acknowledge how incredibly difficult it can be to tell someone about this type of trauma. Showing your appreciation for their trust at the beginning of the conversation may help your loved one feel more comfortable.

You can begin to show your support by saying something like:

“ Thank you for telling me this. It means a lot to me that you feel you can share this with me. ”

ASK HOW YOU CAN HELP.

Even though your first instinct may be to try to give your loved one advice on what to do, it's important to let them make their own choices about what to do next. You don't have to have all the answers--you just have to listen and let them know that you are there for them to help in any way they need.

If this is the first time someone has disclosed the assault or if it has just happened, they may not be certain what support they need from you, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't ask. It's always better to ask than to assume that you know what they want or need. Simply saying something like, "I care about you a lot, and I want you to know that I am here to help in any way I can," can mean so much to someone who has just told you about their experience.

LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGMENT.

While it's normal to have reactions like anger or shock when someone you care about shares an experience of sexual violence, sometimes those reactions can make a survivor feel like they are responsible for your feelings and discourage them from feeling that they can open up.

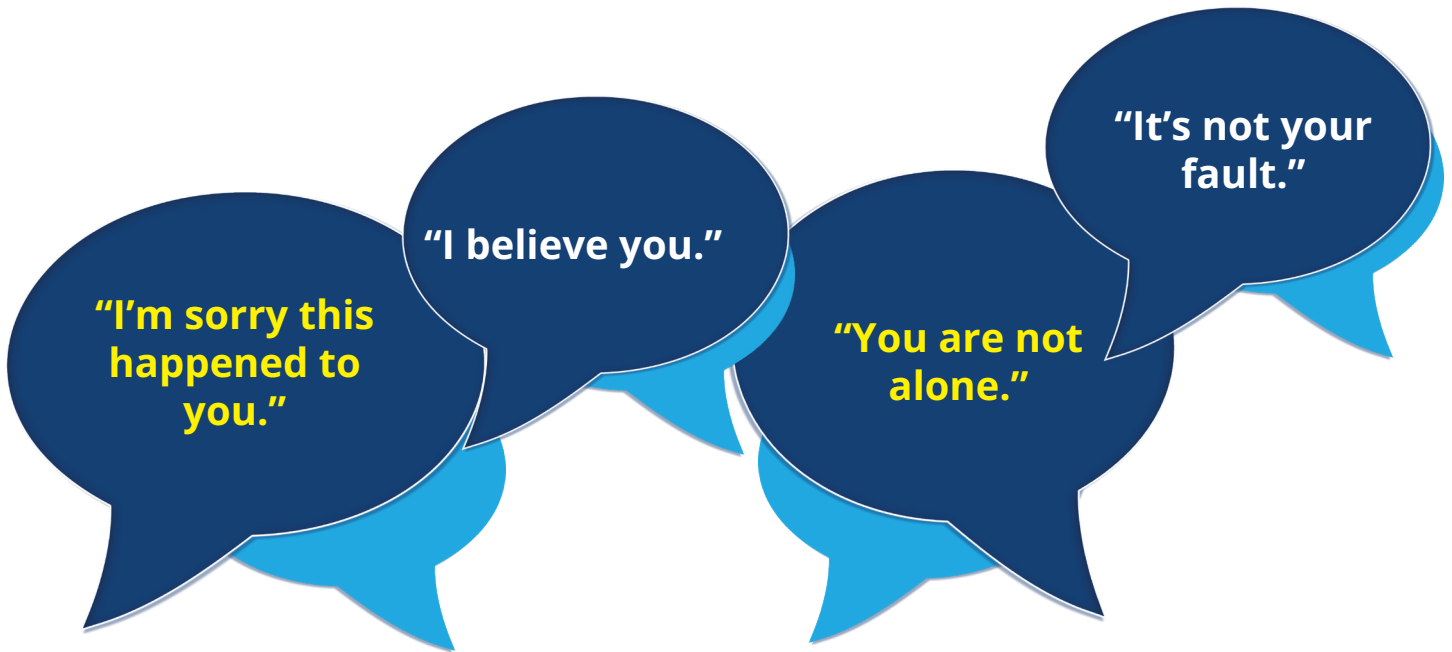
Listening without judgment can be one of the most healing things you can do for someone you love. What does this look like?

Examples of supportive, non-judgmental reactions:

- **Give your undivided attention.** If someone starts telling you what happened to them, put down whatever you're doing and pay attention to them. Nothing on your phone or on the TV will be as important as what they're sharing with you. If you're driving or doing something else where giving your full attention to the conversation might put you at risk, you can say something like, "Thank you so much for telling me this. I want to be able to give you my full attention and listen to you in the way you deserve. Let me pull over/end this call/etc. so we can continue."

- **Focus on their feelings.** Listen to whatever the survivor is telling you in a calm and empathetic manner. Even if you're feeling angry or upset or shocked, try to keep those emotions within yourself and focus your attention on supporting the person in front of you.

Use supportive phrases, such as:



Examples of what NOT to do:

- Don't ask if they're absolutely sure it happened. This will likely make them feel that you do not believe them.
- Don't say that what they've described doesn't sound like sexual assault to you, or that it "isn't that bad."
- Don't ask for details about what happened--such as if they knew the perpetrator, what they were wearing, if they had anything to drink, etc. Those details don't matter right now; what matters is making sure that the survivor feels supported. Questions about the details can make someone feel blamed for what happened to them.

- Don't tell them that they should have gotten over it by now. There is no timeline for healing, and each survivor's journey is different.
- Don't insist that they have to do certain things--such as report to police, get a sexual assault forensic exam, or disclose to others. It is fine to let someone know that these options exist and to ask them if they are interested in pursuing any of them, but you should never pressure a survivor or attempt to control their healing process. Forcing the situation can make a survivor feel that control over their choices is being taken away, which may be retraumatizing after having experienced a lack of control over their body and physical safety during sexual assault.

KEEP SUPPORTING

Healing takes time, and it's crucial that survivors have the ongoing support and love they deserve throughout this process. Every survivor's healing journey is a unique and ongoing process, so continued care will look different for every person.

For many survivors, feeling that their normal life has been taken away from them can be especially hard. Continue to offer to do things together that your loved one has always enjoyed. For instance, if you enjoy cooking together or following the same TV shows, make sure you're reaching out to initiate those activities. Even if your loved one doesn't want to talk about what happened, it can be helpful to spend time together and feel normal.

CONSIDERATIONS DEPENDING ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP

No matter your relationship with a survivor in your life, many aspects of how you can support them will stay the same, such as believing them and listening without judgment.

However, depending on whether you're a family member, friend, intimate partner, teacher, coach, or have another relationship with a survivor, there may be nuances to how these conversations are likely to unfold, what resources you can provide, and what ongoing support looks like. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

For Family of Survivors

NOTICE if something seems off. Especially in cases of [intimate partner violence](#) and child sexual abuse, it can be hard for a survivor to recognize and name certain behaviors as abuse. That's why it's especially important for family members to notice when something doesn't seem quite right with a loved one.

In one survivor's case of child sexual abuse and grooming, the young teen's parents noticed that something was off and asked about it, which eventually led to the youth getting help. The parents correctly identified that their child was experiencing abuse and took action to provide whatever help was needed.

Now an adult, that survivor encourages parents to keep open lines of communication with their kids. Most importantly, the survivor advises parents to trust their intuition. By taking action the moment a concern arises, parents can change a child's life.

YOUR reaction matters. Having the support of family members can be an important first step in healing for many survivors. For [Tarhata](#), having her sister by her side to listen and support her helped her through a difficult time when other family members attempted to take control of her healing.

"She didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do," she shared. "She waited until I was ready.

She gave me the power of choice. Everyone was trying to make me do what they thought would help me. People were trying to force me to act in a certain way, but my sister didn't. Because of that, she truly gave me my voice back."

TALK TO the survivor, not about them. A negative reaction from a family member can have harmful effects on a survivor's healing. When [Danyol](#) told his family about the child sexual abuse he experienced by his cousin, they openly expressed disbelief in his story, making him feel profoundly isolated.

"There was so much conversation about me without me, but no one ever had a conversation with me," he said.

IT'S okay if a survivor waited to tell you. It can be hard to talk about an experience with sexual violence, and sometimes it may feel most daunting to bring it up with people you are closest to. If a family member tells you about something that happened to them in the past, that's not a negative reflection on you or your relationship with them, it just means that they needed time and may have been worried about how sharing their story would affect someone they care about.

This was true for [Christy](#), whose close relationship with her mother made it harder to tell her because she wanted to protect her mother's emotions.

"I'm an only child and my mom is my best friend, so I wanted to tell her, but couldn't stand the thought of breaking her heart. As the years went on, I never found the right time to talk about it," Christy said.

DON'T blame yourself. Seeking the support of family can be complicated for situations in which a family member is the perpetrator of abuse. For [Lisa](#), who found out that her daughter, Nikki, experienced years of abuse by Nikki's step-father, it was hard not to feel self-blame for having not known the abuse was happening.

"As it started to settle in, I replayed it in my mind," she explained. "How could this happen? I had so much shame, so much guilt that I had brought this man into my house to molest my child. What kind of mother am I? The guilt and the shame were deafening—but at the same time I knew I had to do what was necessary for my daughter."

For Friends of Survivors

DON'T underestimate the importance of your support. For some survivors, their friends may know more about their personal life than their families, especially when it comes to issues of sexual violence. As a friend, you may be the first person a survivor opens up to, making your support in this time more important than ever.

The first person [Hannah](#) told about the sexual assault she experienced in college was a close friend of hers, who was very supportive, and she attributes much of her healing to that early support.

"I'm so thankful for the incredible people in my life who are a constant source of motivation, inspiration, and positivity," she said. "I'm in a much healthier state physically and emotionally than I've ever been."

While [Stevie](#) was in an abusive relationship, her friends helped her recognize the abuse in a way that did not make her feel she had to distance herself from them.

"They would drop hints, draw out details from me," she shared. "If I told them about abuse that happened, they would ask me how I felt, instead of telling me I should feel bad about it. This helped me start realizing for myself that the things he was doing were wrong. I cannot thank my friends enough who stayed with me the whole time, through leaving him and after."

BE there. After experiencing sexual violence, many survivors feel a profound sense of isolation from their loved ones and from the world around them. Being an ongoing presence in someone's life to help them feel less alone in their healing can make a huge difference.

For [Leilani](#), who is a survivor of campus sexual assault, she found strength in connecting with other women in her Indigenous community.

"This community of women understood my experience so deeply and personally," she said. "Indigenous women face rates of sexual violence well above the national average, and you don't hear many people talking about the missing and murdered Indigenous women epidemic."

For Intimate Partners

Talking to an intimate partner about sexual assault can be difficult—whether the assault happened recently or decades in the past, and whether you just met or have been together for many years.

Though a survivor should never feel pressured to tell an intimate partner about an experience of sexual assault, talking about past experiences can be helpful for both of you in understanding what you are each comfortable or not comfortable with doing.

LET them know you're there for them. Making it clear that you'll be there to listen in case something happens to your partner will go a long way in making them feel safe disclosing to you.

For a decade, [Sydney](#) didn't talk about what happened to her, until her husband opened up the line of communication.

"As funny as it sounds, we were watching *The Bachelor* and one of the contestants talked about something that had happened to her, and it was clear she had been silent about sexual violence for years," she shared. "My husband paused the TV and said he couldn't imagine having to be alone in that secret, and said that if something like that ever happened to me, he wanted me to know that he was there to listen and support me."

A few weeks later, Sydney told her husband about what had happened to her and as promised, he reacted in an extremely supportive way.

"It was scary to tell him, because it made it feel more real," she said. "But it was also a huge weight lifted off my shoulders and the true start to my healing. If he hadn't opened the conversation and made me feel that I could talk about it, my healing would have taken even longer to get started."

Sexual violence often affects trust. For many survivors, experiencing sexual violence can make it difficult to be emotionally or physically vulnerable with a partner. Try not to take this personally, and let your partner know that you will respect their boundaries and timeline.

The experience of the assault impacted [Christy's](#) ability to trust others, especially in the context of intimate relationships. "For me, trust was the first thing impacted after the assault," she said. "I used to be a very trusting person, but that was taken away from me."

YOU don't need to know the details to be supportive. Communicating with your partner about the specific sexual activities or situations that make them uncomfortable doesn't mean they have to tell you any details of what happened. If you're unsure how to discuss their preferences without prying into painful memories, you can try something like: "I completely understand if you'd prefer not to talk about the details of what happened. Without getting into specifics, is there anything you'd like me to know about what you prefer or what I should make sure to avoid?"

For [Val](#), having support from her wife without needing to share the details of an assault was an important step in her healing.

"We were attempting to be intimate, and I just broke down crying and told her I couldn't," she said. "I told her what happened to me, and she held me as I cried and didn't ask for any details."

Understand that flashbacks may happen unexpectedly. For some survivors, sex can bring back painful memories that sometimes cause [flashbacks](#) of an assault. If this happens with your partner, try to talk with them about how they would like to be supported during these times.

Accept that your partner's feelings about sex may change. Sexual assault can affect someone's relationship to sexual activities. Accept their choices and support them. Respect whatever boundaries your partner has and continue to check in with them.

For Teachers, Coaches, or Mentors

If someone under the age of 18 discloses to you and you are their teacher, coach, mentor, or work colleague, one important question to keep in mind is whether or not you are a mandated reporter. If you are unsure about whether or not you are a mandated reporter, it is important to refrain from making promises about not telling anyone and to be upfront with the survivor about the fact that, because of your professional role, you may be required to tell another helping professional about the situation.

A mandated reporter is an adult who is required by law to report to law enforcement or child protective services when they think that a minor or other vulnerable person—such as someone who is elderly or developmentally disabled—may be experiencing abuse.

Though it's true that often teachers, medical professionals, and foster care workers are mandated reporters, **the laws about who is a mandated reporter are different in every state.** To find out what the laws are in the state where you live, go to [RAINN's state law database](#). Select your state in the left box and select "Mandatory Reporting: Children" in the right box.

If you determine that you are a mandated reporter and a child or teenager you've encountered through your work has disclosed sexual abuse to you, you should contact child protective services in your state immediately. This does not necessarily mean that the child or teen experiencing the abuse will be removed from their home or separated from their family, it is simply the first step in determining what should be done to ensure they are safe.

Telling a child or teen that you are a mandated reporter. If a minor seems like they are about to disclose something to you, you may want to gently let them know that you are a mandated reporter so that they can maintain as much control over their story as possible and not be required to report if they aren't ready.

You can try saying something like, "I'm not sure what you're about to tell me, and whatever it is, I am here for you to listen. But first I wanted to let you know that because you're under 18 and I'm a [teacher/coach/medical professional], I'm what's called a mandated reporter. It means that if I think a young person is being hurt or abused, I legally have to tell the government or the police to help keep you safe. I am still here to listen if you want."

Regardless of your obligations to complete a mandatory report, it's still important to remember the basic principles of how to TALK: Thank them for telling you, ask how you can help, listen without judgment, and keep supporting.

LONG-TERM SUPPORT YOU CAN OFFER

As a loved one of a survivor, your support after disclosure can be crucial in the healing process. There is no timeline for healing, and the process will look different for each survivor. The ongoing long-term support you offer throughout the healing journey can make a huge difference. Although each person's healing is unique, here are some tips to keep in mind as you navigate your relationship with a loved one through this process.

Keep listening and believing. For some survivors, talking about what happened to them can be a helpful way to emotionally process. Even if you have heard their story before, each time they bring up what happened, make time to listen and offer supportive words.

Be patient and don't take it personally. If your loved one is acting in a way that's different for them, such as losing interest in activities they used to love or lashing out at family and friends, this could be a sign that they're experiencing depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other effects of trauma. Continue to offer support and resources and try not to take these changes personally.

Understand that there is no timeline for healing. Healing looks different for every survivor. Even if you feel confused or frustrated while watching someone else's healing process, try to just be there and support them without pressuring them. Try not to judge what a survivor is doing to cope, and NEVER tell a survivor that they should "get over it."

Help with logistics. If the survivor in your life has chosen to get medical attention or report the assault, help them in any way they are comfortable with. Offers of general help can sometimes feel overwhelming, so your loved one may be more likely to accept help if it is for something very specific. This could mean driving them to medical appointments, accompanying them to the police department or to court hearings, making sure they have basic necessities like food and medicine accessible at times when they may not be able to provide these for themselves, or helping with child care.

Keep everyday life going. Some survivors feel that part of what has been taken away from them by experiencing sexual violence is a sense of being normal. Sexual violence can disrupt many aspects of everyday life. One positive thing you can do is to help your loved one feel “like themselves” again. Try to have some conversations that are not about what happened to them, text or call them like you usually would, and invite them to do things that you enjoy together.

Continue educating yourself. It’s crucial that loved ones of a survivor know how to provide support, but sometimes it can be overwhelming for a survivor to feel that they have to educate everyone around them. You can help relieve some of this burden by seeking out resources on your own to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of trauma and how you can help. Take a look at the list of resources at the end of this toolkit or go to rainn.org for more.

Be kind to yourself. It’s normal to have a difficult time processing the sexual assault of someone you care about and to experience a lot of heavy emotions as you accompany them in their healing process. Give yourself space to experience these negative emotions, practice self-care, and find healthy outlets to process, such as reaching out to someone trained to help on the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) or online.rainn.org.

EMOTIONS YOU MAY FEEL WHEN SOMEONE DISCLOSES TO YOU

It is common to experience a range of emotions when learning that someone you care about has experienced sexual violence, including anger, confusion, fear, frustration, guilt, and shock.



Remember, even though it is natural to experience these emotions, some survivors feel that they end up providing a lot of emotional support to the person they disclose to, which often is not helpful in their healing process. **Try your best to just listen** and TALK to a survivor and then, after the interaction, attend to your own emotional wellbeing and self-care.

SUPPORTING A SURVIVOR WHEN YOU'RE ALSO A SURVIVOR

For some survivors, talking with other people who have experienced similar things can be healing and make them feel less alone. However, hearing someone's story can bring up a lot of painful memories, especially if elements of what happened to them are similar to what happened to you.

Though it's important to be there for someone you love, it's also important to care for your own well-being. It's okay to set up healthy boundaries with others about what topics may be too painful for you to discuss.

If someone is telling you their story and you find that it is bringing you back to a dark place, it's okay to say something like, "Thank you for telling me this. I'm so glad you felt you could share what happened to you with me. Because of something similar that happened to me in the past, it's really hard for me to discuss this topic, but it's really important to me to make sure that you get the help you deserve. I'm happy to keep being a support system for you in other ways. Would you be comfortable brainstorming together who else in your life you might be able to share this with?"

HOW TO CARE FOR YOURSELF

There is no normal or one way you're supposed to feel when you find out someone you care about has survived an act of sexual violence. Regardless of what you're feeling, these emotions can be intense and difficult to deal with. Learning how to manage these feelings can help you support the survivor in your life and can help you feel less overwhelmed.

Good self-care enables you to better care for others, especially if there is someone in your life who has survived sexual violence. The [principles of self-care](#) for friends and family are similar to the self-care concepts for survivors, but there are some additional aspects to consider:



- **Maintain your lifestyle.** It can be difficult to stay emotionally strong if you are mostly focusing on the sexual assault. Maintaining your lifestyle and continuing to do what you enjoy is important for your emotional wellness. If you enjoy painting, cooking, exercising, spending time with friends, or other activities, keep them up. It may seem challenging to make time to do them, but they can be helpful self-care strategies in the long-run.



- **Make plans.** Sometimes talking about what happened can help you cope with your feelings, and other times it can make you feel more stuck. Make plans that give you a break from talking or thinking about the assault. It could mean starting a new hobby or revisiting one you already enjoy. You could go to dinner with a group of friends who understand this isn't time to discuss what happened. Maybe you prefer a solo activity, like going on long walks. Let this be a time where you can take your mind off the assault.



- **Decide if you can keep the secret.** When someone discloses to you, they may ask that you don't tell anyone else what happened to them. This might make you feel that you are the only person

who can help them and that you are responsible for their healing. It's important not to break someone's trust about something this personal. Try your best to honor their wishes and keep it confidential—your decision could impact your relationship with the survivor. If you feel that it's important to tell someone else to keep them or yourself safe, that decision is up to you.



- **Reach out and talk about it.** It's normal to have a difficult time processing the sexual assault of someone you care about. It can continue to be difficult as time goes on and your loved one begins their healing process. You can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) or visit online.rainn.org to talk. This can be a helpful way to process your emotions in a way that will not put a burden on the survivor. You also can consider talking to someone who is trained professionally to help you deal with these thoughts and feelings, like a [mental health professional](#).



- **Take time to relax.** Relaxation looks different for everyone. You might consider meditation or deep breathing exercises. Maybe journaling helps you sort through your thoughts and find peace. Build time into your day for these moments of relaxation so you keep them as part of your healthy routine.

Need to talk this through with someone?

If you'd like support after learning that someone in your life has experienced sexual violence or if you are a survivor yourself and want to talk, feel free to call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) or chat online at online.rainn.org (y en español rainn.org/es). We're here to help you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[National Resources for Sexual Assault Survivors and their Loved Ones.](#) This is a comprehensive list of resources and organizations that RAINN recommends survivors and loved ones check out for further information on specific issues or needs.

[Tips for Talking with Survivors of Sexual Assault.](#) This page provides specific, supportive language you can use when a survivor discloses and ideas for how to provide continued support.

[How to Support Someone Who is Experiencing Domestic Violence.](#) This article is a good starting point if you're wondering how to support someone who may be experiencing intimate partner violence, including recognizing the signs of abuse and ways you can help.

[Making a Safety Plan.](#) Here you will find information on creating plans for short-term and long-term safety that is most applicable for survivors of intimate partner sexual violence, child sexual abuse, and abuse by family members.

Resources for Parents

[Warning Signs for Young Children.](#) This page lists some behaviors that young children may show if they are being sexually abused.

[Warning Signs for Teens.](#) Warning signs look different for among age groups. This article will help parents, teachers, and others know what to look out for in teen behavior if they are experiencing sexual assault or harassment.

[Warning Signs for College-Age Adults.](#) College-aged adults, including students on college campuses, may show different signs of having experienced sexual assault or intimate partner violence that their parents, teachers, and friends can look out for.

Talking to Your Kids About Sexual Assault. This page provides ideas on how to start conversations—and keep them going—with children that will help keep them safe and feel they can go to you if something does happen.

If You Suspect A Child Is Being Harmed. Here you will find information on the steps you can take if you find out that a child in your life might be experiencing abuse.

Help for Parents of Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused by Family Members. Learn about how to handle a situation in which your child has been abused by a family member, including supportive phrases to use, natural reactions you may have, and how you can report the abuse.

HELP SPREAD THE WORD



Now that you've learned how to support a survivor with empathy, and practice healthy self-care, it's time to share this knowledge with others. This Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month is the perfect time to share the TALK method with your social networks, family, and friends. Here are a few sample posts you can use to spread the word about what you've learned:

- This #SAAPM, I've committed to learning how to respond to survivors with empathy with @RAINN. Learn how you can too: rainn.org/saapm #TALKtoMe
- The first response a survivor hears after disclosing greatly affects their healing process. Be a reason they feel supported. Learn how with @RAINN: rainn.org/saapm #SAAPM #TALKtoMe
- As a survivor myself, it's important that every survivor feels supported and heard. This #SAAPM, learn the dos and don'ts of responding to a survivor who shares their story: rainn.org/saapm @RAINN #TALKtoMe
- We can all be better advocates and supporters of survivors. Start today by learning @RAINN's #TALKtoMe strategy for supporting survivors: rainn.org/saapm #SAAPM
- When a loved one shares they've been sexually assaulted, you may feel at a loss for words. Be prepared to respond with @RAINN's #TALKtoMe strategy: rainn.org/saapm
- Every 73 seconds, someone in America is sexually assaulted, but you can be there for survivors. Learn more at rainn.org/SAAPM @RAINN #SAAPM #TALKtoMe

For RAINN's shareable graphics, please see the [RAINN SAAPM Social Media Toolkit](#).

A large, dark blue speech bubble with a white outline, set against a background of light blue and white radial lines. The bubble has a tail pointing towards the bottom right. The word "RAINN" is written in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters inside the bubble.

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rainn.org | 800.656.HOPE