Support for Students Who Experience Sexual Harassment or Assault

Inform students that counseling and resources are available through ISU Student Counseling Service (515) 294-5056.

If a student has been a victim of sexual assault while on your program, this is considered an emergency. If a student has been a victim of sexual harassment on your program, this is not considered an emergency, but you should call the Study Abroad Center during office hours at your earliest convenience. The following information will help you in dealing with these types of situations and help you in providing support for the student.

Most of us know someone who has suffered sexual harassment, abuse, or assault. When someone you know tells you that she or he was sexually harassed or abused, sometimes it's hard to know what to say. You might not want to pry, and at the same time you might want to express your concern. Your own feelings may make it difficult to be supportive of the victim.

Sometimes it's hard to find the right words to express caring and empathy. Here are some things that victims/survivors have indicated are helpful and supportive responses from people close to them. These are guidelines; they can help let the victim know that you care and that you want to be supportive. Think of it as basic first aid: it probably won't "fix" it, or make the trauma disappear, but it can help the victim feel less isolated and more safe or supported.

We often use "she" or "her" to refer to the victim/survivor, because women and girls are most often the targets of sexual violence; however, men and boys are also harassed and abused, and the information here applies to both male and female victims/survivors.

How to help someone:

1. Communicate these points:
   • I'm sorry that it happened.
   • I'm glad you survived.
   • It's not your fault.

2. Be a good listener. That means summarizing what the person tells you and noting what feelings they might be having. Be non-judgmental and non-blaming.

3. Ask the victim how she/he wants to be treated, especially when doing anything that may violate personal space. Even if you mean well and want to offer comfort, remember that the assaulter took away control over the person’s body. Victims may not want to be touched or accompanied; if they do, they can let you know when you ask. For example, ask: "Would you like me to come with you? Do you want a hug?"

4. Sexual abuse takes away the victim's power and control. Afterwards, the victim needs to be allowed to be in control and to make his or her own decisions. Even if you don't like the decisions made, you can best support the victim’s healing by supporting her or his decisions.
5. Make sure that the victim’s basic safety is secured. Is he or she going to be exposed to the perpetrator again? Does the living arrangement need to be changed?

6. Assist the victim in getting the help she or he wants and needs. This may mean providing phone numbers, transportation, information, etc.

7. Many victims blame themselves for the abuse. This helps them feel as if they can be in control in the future. They don’t feel that they can control the perpetrators, but that they can control themselves. You can tell them that no matter what they did, it was not their fault, but do not expect them to agree with you. You might also say the following:
   • They did not commit a crime; the assailant did
   • No one asks or deserves to be harassed, abused, assaulted
   • The perpetrator had an intention to harass, abuse, assault
   • The perpetrator may have prior experience
   • The action of the perpetrator probably caught the victim by surprise
   • Most of us are not trained in how to protect ourselves in these situations

8. Victims often feel guilty for not fighting back; tell them that no matter what they did, they acted in the best manner they could. Fear often paralyzes people. Sometimes it feels, or is, safer to "cooperate" or submit to an assault; this does not make them a willing participant. Submission does not equal consent. Perhaps they did what they needed to do to survive.

9. Talk to someone else about your feelings of the incident. Sexual assault can also be traumatic for friends, families, partners, and others close to the victim. You deserve support, too.

Some additional guidelines for avoiding further trauma to victims:

1. Avoid offering advice or telling them what to do; however, you can make suggestions and offer options related to securing future safety.

2. Don't tell them what you would have done.

3. Don't ask them why they didn't scream or fight. This will feel like you are blaming them, even if you don't intend it that way.

4. Don't ask them if they did anything to "lead them on." This includes asking what they were wearing, asking why they were with the perpetrator, etc. The assailant made the choice to commit an assault.

5. Allow them to talk about the incident if they want to. Nobody willingly "dwells on it." If they want to talk about it, they deserve to be able to do so.

6. You can suggest (but don't insist) that they talk to someone about the incident. Be aware that talking to an authority figure, a male, or even a counselor on a rape-crisis line can be scary. The advantage for them in talking to a crisis counselor is that the counselors are specially trained and experienced in helping victims understand their reactions and offering tips for recovery. Not
everyone finds it helpful to talk about it right away, and resuming usual activities initially may be a victim’s best choice. They know, better than anyone else, what will be most helpful to themselves.

7. Don't press them to report the incident to the police. Reporting is a very big step, and it might require more time, energy, courage, and safety than victims feel they have at this time. Reporting an assault in a foreign country, which may have different definitions of assault and attitudes toward victims, may also cause more trauma for the victim. You may assist the victim in finding out the process and climate for reporting in that community. If she or he wants to report, then provide support for that decision.

8. Don't break the victim’s trust in you by telling others about the incident without permission. Victims should have control over who knows and over when and with whom they talk about it.

9. Don't imply that it wasn't "real" assault or rape if they knew the person who assaulted them. At least 80% of sexual assaults occur between people who know each other.

Finally, do what you need to do as a Program Director for your own self-care. This can be emotionally draining. Call the Study Abroad Center and, for more information and support in handling this incident, contact:

• ISU Student Counseling Service (515) 294-5056
• ISU Sexual Assault Response Team Coordinator (515) 294-3116
• ISU Thielen Student Health Center (515) 294-5801
• ACCESS Assault Care Center (515) 292-0500

These are great resources, even from abroad.