

Guidance on taking a disclosure of sexual violence

Introduction

We recognise that making a disclosure of sexual violence can be extremely difficult for the victim-survivor, and therefore the reaction of the first responder can be crucial in determining whether they access ongoing support and how they experience that support going forward.

We also know that anyone can be a first responder, at any time, and for some that will be a daunting prospect. For staff who are themselves survivors, there may be additional concerns about taking a student disclosure. A list of local and national support providers is included with this guidance, together with suggestions for self-care, and staff can access support via [Occupational Health](#).

This guidance provides key information about managing that initial interaction if you are the first responder to a disclosure made by a student. The Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Team based in Student Services can provide ongoing support and advice to student survivors and encourages any staff member who has received a disclosure to refer the student to this specialist team as soon as possible.

This guidance is intended to build on what you already know about how to support someone who is dealing with a traumatic event. It is evidence-based, drawing on findings from the [USVReact study](#) and expanded further in our first [disclosure workshops](#) which are available for any staff.

This document is intended to be a resource you can return to when needed. It is deliberately concise to make it user-friendly. It is sent alongside a list of resources and support providers which can be shared with the disclosing student if they are not yet ready to speak to the Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Team.

Responses to Trauma

When someone discloses sexual violence, they may:

- Be incredibly sad and crying
- Appear flat or calm or matter-of-fact
- Exhibit memory loss
- Demonstrate an inability to concentrate
- Have a panic attack
- Be unsure, questioning

Each is a normal reaction to a traumatic event. There is no 'correct' way to respond to trauma and you should not presume that someone is lying or has not been affected by an incident simply because they are not presenting as you would expect them to.

Compassionate and Non-Judgmental Responses

Reassure the student that they did the right thing in telling you what they have been through, and that you will help them to access the specialist support that they need and want.

Make sure to leave control of the situation with the student as far as possible. When someone experiences sexual violence; they are often deprived of the most basic control over their own bodies. It is important to reinstate the person's power and control over what happens next.

Not everyone will want to report the incident to the police or take up support options; let them decide what they want and need.

In some circumstances, you may need to act without the consent of the student. Where a student discloses that they or someone else is at risk of serious harm, you will need to let the student know you are duty bound to tell someone. In the first instance, you should report your concerns to Student Services.

Safety and Risk

Be mindful that the student may have physical or mental health needs as a result of what they have been through. If the incident occurred recently, they may need medical attention or sexual health advice.

If the student is sure they do wish to report the incident to the police, and the incident happened within the last 7 days, the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) at Grange Park in Cobridge will be able to collect any DNA evidence sensitively and professionally. Advise the student that it will be easier to collect DNA evidence if they are able to refrain from smoking, drinking, eating, and showering/bathing. Given the trauma of what has happened, these things are often exactly what survivors instinctively want to do. You can advise them it would help the police if they were able to refrain, but don't pressure them, particularly if they are distressed.

It would also help if they could keep the clothes that they were wearing unwashed and in a sealed bag. If the incident took place in their room, it should be sealed - the Security Team will be able to do this until the police arrive.

Be alert for indications that the student is particularly vulnerable; the student may say they feel unable to cope, or that they do not want to carry on. You may see evidence or indications that the student is self-harming. In this situation, it is important to share this with the Student Services team, and let the student know that you are sharing the information so they can be appropriately supported.

Onward Referral

Included in this guidance is an extensive list of support options available to survivors of sexual violence. These include options based at Keele, in the local area, nationally, and online. Where the student agrees, the easiest and most immediate option will be to refer the student to the team of specially trained Sexual Violence Liaison Officers (the Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Team) based in Student Services. The team is able to respond rapidly to a referral.

You can contact Student Services by phone on 01782 734481 or email student.services@keele.ac.uk. For immediate concerns, phone is the preferred option.

However, several alternative options are available, including services which offer an online, one-to-one chat forum, which can sometimes be a preferable option to a student in the initial stages.

Note Taking

Normally, you will not need to ask for more detail than that which is offered by the student – any further detail which is needed can be collected by a Sexual Violence Liaison Officer, or other support provider.

If you make any notes, you may be required to produce them as evidence in any subsequent criminal investigation by the police.

As such, any notes made should be a record of what is said by the student only:

- Do not include any of your own opinions
- Only use the words used by the student.
- You may wish to structure your notes around questions of Who? What? When? Where?
- Notes should be concise, factual, and stored with the appropriate attention to data protection legislation.
- Ask the student to confirm your notes are accurate and send a copy to their personal email address so they have a record of their disclosure if they later decide to report the incident to the police.

With the student's consent, you may wish to share those notes with the support provider (most often the Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Team) to minimise the number of times the student has to retell the same details. The support provider will be able to expand on this and work with the student to devise a plan for moving forward.

Confidentiality

If possible, before a student makes a disclosure you should advise them about the limitations of confidentiality and that you will need to share their disclosure to help them access support.

If this is not possible due to a student sharing information with you without warning of the content, then it's important that you explain sensitively and reassuringly why you would like to pass on the information. A helpful phrase can be:

'I'm really glad that you've told me this information, that can't have been easy for you. As I'm not a specialist in this area I can't keep this information to myself, and therefore I am going to refer you into the university's specialist Sexual Violence Prevention and Support team. I'm going to share with them what you've told me, but this is just so you don't have to start right from the beginning again and ensures that you can get the specialist support to help you through this.'

Information disclosed to you by the reporting student should be shared with a third party on a need-to-know basis, that is, only when sharing the information is beneficial to the health and wellbeing of the student, to access support or necessary to prevent harm to the student and/or others.

Resources and Further Information

Both you and the disclosing student can find further information and support resources on the [#NeverOK web pages](#).

If you feel the student is at immediate risk of harm or of harming themselves, you may want to contact Student Services, Security or 999 in an emergency.