



## Guidance on taking a disclosure of sexual violence

We know that making, and taking, a first disclosure of sexual violence can be extremely difficult, and for the survivor, the reaction of the first responder is 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. As such, we felt it important to devise a resource which allows our community members to spend some time thinking about how they would react and highlighting the sources of support available.

This guidance is intended to build on what you already know about how to support someone who is dealing with a traumatic event. Some of you will have spent many years in student facing roles, or perhaps have experience of working with people in

crisis in a different role. Therefore, the ideas and principles presented here may be more familiar to some of you. However, even the most experienced among us can struggle to know what to say and do when someone makes the courageous decision to disclose sexual violence.

This guidance is based on the most up-to-date research available on how to sensitively and appropriately respond to a disclosure of sexual violence by a student. It is intended to increase your confidence and provide a resource you can return to. It is deliberately concise to make it more useable and easier to absorb. If you would like further information, we offer training sessions throughout the year; please do contact us to register an interest. You will also find more information at <https://www.keele.ac.uk/sexualviolence/>

# STRONG

**S**  
Start by listening-  
don't push  
for details

**T**  
Tell them  
it's not  
their fault  
and they are  
believed

**R**  
Respect  
confidentiality-  
explain when  
and how you will  
share the  
information

**O**  
Options-  
provide them  
with the options  
of support  
available

**N**  
No assumptions-  
reporting to the  
police may not be  
what they want to  
do

**G**  
Get them to  
somewhere safe-  
Make sure they are in  
a safe location away  
from the perpetrator

## 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.

## COMPASSIONATE AND NON-JUDGEMENTAL RESPONSES

Reassure the student that they did the right thing in telling you what they have been through, and that you will do all you can to get them the help and support 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. Given the trauma of what has happened, these things are often exactly the things that 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 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 observe 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 the situation is too big to be carried by the two of you alone.

## 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 based in Student Services in the Tawney Building. The team is able to respond rapidly to a referral.

However, a number of alternative options are available, including services which offer an online, one-to-one chat forum.

## 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**; please do not include any of your own opinions, and please only use the words used by the student. You may wish to structure your notes around questions of Who? What? When? And where? Notes should be concise, factual, and stored with the appropriate attention to data protection legislation.

With the student's consent, you may wish to share those notes with the support provider 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

Before sharing the information disclosed to you by the student, you must get their consent, while also informing the student that if they disclose information which implies a risk of harm to themselves or to others, you will be obliged to tell someone. As a minimum, information disclosed to you by the reporting student should only 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 **and/or**, necessary to prevent harm to the student and/or others.

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

If you would like further information, please see our website and click on 'Give Support'

<https://www.keele.ac.uk/studentservices/supportandwellbeing/sexualviolence/>