

Eleven Things Not to Say to Survivors of Sexual Assault

(And What to Say Instead)

By Lawrence Cohen

1. **“Only crazy people need therapy.”** Some experiences, like rape, are traumatic for virtually anyone, no matter how well adjusted they are. Psychotherapy and rape crisis counseling can be very helpful for women with mild, moderate, or severe problems due to sexual assault.
2. **“I’ll kill the guy who did this to you.”** While the anger is a natural reaction, it can be very harmful because the victim, who has faced one man whose anger was out of control, must now try to calm down another man, so that there won’t be anymore violence.
3. **“It’s better not to talk about it.”** Studies have shown that talking about stressful events speeds up recovery, if people are allowed to talk at their own pace. Let her know you’re willing to hear when she’s ready to talk.
4. **“Why are you afraid of me? I didn’t do it.”** Rape and incest often make women fear men, at least for awhile. It also causes confusion about the relationship between sex and intimacy. Survivors may need to exert and feel more control in a relationship than they did prior to the assault.
5. **“It was my fault.”** Victims often blame themselves. Many partners and family members also insist on blaming themselves. In fact, sexual assault is no one’s fault except the perpetrators.
6. **“Going to the police (or testifying in court) will just make things worse.”** In fact, some studies show that reporting to police and testifying, though painful, actually help women recover. These actions also help get rapists off the street, and convey the message that our society does not condone violence against women.
7. **“Why can’t you just forget about it?”** Forgetting may be impossible because the reminders are constant: sex, interactions with men, harassment on the street, being in vulnerable positions, and pornography are all possible reminders.
8. **“When you fall off the horse you have to get right back on.”** This saying may be true of some fears, but it does not apply to resuming sex after a sexual assault. Let her decide when she’s ready to have sex (or drive alone). Watch out for subtle pressures on her to have sex. If recovery time seems excessive, seek couple’s counseling.
9. **“What’s the big deal?”** For many reasons, sexual assault is a very big deal, even for sexually active women, even if it happened many years ago. An assault can totally upset a person’s belief that the world is a safe place to be, that she is in control of her sexuality and her body, and that she knows who to trust. Rape is not sex; it is a life threatening act. Incest is not sex, it is betrayal.
10. **“Why didn’t you fight?”** Freezing, submitting, and fighting are all natural responses to being attacked. Since your partner survived, she did the right thing. Learning self-defense is recommended for all women, but untrained women must use their instincts to either fight or submit; neither one is wrong.
11. **“Nothing I say or do will help.”** Yes it can! Allow but don’t force her to talk about it and express her feelings. Listen without criticism, judgment, or condemnation. Patience and love have healed many wounds.

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