Introduction

"I still can't believe this happened to **me**" expresses what most victims of interpersonal violence initially feel. Disbelief and shock, fear, anger, sadness, shame, guilt, humiliation, and anxiety demonstrate some of the confusing mix of emotions felt by victims of interpersonal violence.

Victims of any form of violence respond in a variety of ways, and may vary widely from one person to the next. Some are very quiet and still, acting and feeling numb. Others cry and yell. Still others make small talk, smile nervously, or crack jokes to relieve the tension. All are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Individual life experiences, coping skills, maturity, and support systems affect how we manage in times of crisis. Assault of any type is a crisis for the victim and for those around them.

Victims often feel that if only they had done something differently, the assault would not have happened. Such thoughts usually stem from an attempt to counteract the intense feelings of vulnerability and fear that follow such violence. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the decision to commit an act of violence was made by the offender. Being vulnerable because of circumstances or poor judgment is not a crime or a justification to commit any type of assault. The victim is never to blame for the offender's behavior or choice to be violent.

It is difficult to think clearly and make sound decisions while in a state of crisis, especially when you or someone you care about is directly affected. This booklet is a resource of options, information, and help available to victims.

Rape, sexual assault and other types of interpersonal violence are not limited by gender. Survivors may be either male or female, and so may offenders. In those instances where the survivor is referred to as female and the offender as male, feel free to substitute "he" or "she" as needed.

How Friends and Family Can Help

- First of all, ***believe*** the survivor.
- Listen to what he or she has to say about what happened — let the survivor tell you the information he or she is comfortable sharing. There may even be periods of silence and that is okay.
- You might consider saying something like:
  - "I'm sorry that this happened to you."
  - "What happened wasn't your fault."
  - "I believe you. You didn't deserve this."
  - "That must have been frightening/scary/horrible for you."
  - "How can I help?"
- Be as supportive as you can — ask what you can do to help.
- Do not assume you know what is best.
- Encourage the survivor to contact local agencies that deal with interpersonal violence for support and advocacy. She or he should not have to go through this alone — and neither should you.
- Contact local agencies that deal with interpersonal violence to get more information, support, and a better understanding of what the survivor may be going through and/or the medical or legal process. The more you know about assault, the more supportive you will be.
- Discuss with the survivor the importance of a medical exam to treat medical needs such as Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), pregnancy concerns, and possible injury.
- Be aware that your loved one may not want to be touched or held, and may need extra personal space. On the other hand, she/he may need you to hold her/him, or stay close. Take your cues from the survivor and when in doubt, ask.
- Offer protection or a safe place to stay. You can also offer to stay at the survivor's home if that would be better. Remember, the choice should be the survivor's.

- Recognize your own anger. It is a common reaction — someone you care about has been hurt; but it is not the survivor's responsibility to address, respond to, or deal with your anger.
- Remind the survivor that it was not her or his fault. Many survivors feel guilty or blame themselves. You may feel like a broken record, but this cannot be said too often.
- Be patient — and remind the survivor to be patient with herself or himself.
- Go with the survivor to the various appointments (doctors, police, lawyers, courts).

What To Be Careful Of:

- Avoid offering advice or telling the survivor what to do. She or he may not be ready to tell you everything yet, so be mindful of needing to "know all the details."
- Avoid taking control of the situation. Allow your loved one to have choices and control over the decisions that are made.
- Take care of yourself; your loved one is not in a position to take care of you. It is important to find other places to get the support and care you need…and deserve. Talk to friends, a minister, another trusted person, or call your local agencies.
- Don't avoid the topic. It can be helpful for your loved one to repeat the story several times. Don't discourage discussion if she or he wants to talk. If it becomes more than you can handle, offer the option of getting a therapist or counselor.
- Don't become impatient. You may feel impatient at times; healing is a long process. When you feel impatient, this is a sign to get extra support elsewhere for yourself.
- Don't treat the survivor like he or she is broken or damaged. This was not your loved one's fault. Survivors can heal and lead normal, happy lives in time.

Courtesy of: Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Maryland Victim's Bill of Rights

A victim of crime shall be treated by agents of the state with dignity, respect and sensitivity during all phases of the criminal justice process. In a case originating by indictment or information filed in a circuit court, a victim of crime shall have the right to be informed of the rights established in this Article and, upon request and if practicable, to be notified of, to attend, and to be heard at a criminal justice proceeding, as these rights are implemented and the terms "crime," "criminal justice proceeding," and "victim" are specified by law.

Article 47, Maryland Criminal Law Annotated

Finding a Counselor

A trained counselor offers an objective, confidential outlet for sharing your feelings and concerns. Counselors understand that crying is an important way of releasing stress and won't get upset, as family members or friends sometimes do. You don't have to protect the counselor from the ugliness of what happened or from the power of your emotions. A counselor can also assist you with information relating to police, medical, and legal issues. Don't worry that you can't afford counseling; most assault centers offer sliding scale fees, and if necessary, may waive it completely.

Progressing from a victim in a state of crisis and unresolved issues through the healing process to becoming a survivor, is often a frightening, lonely time. Counseling empowers you to take the steps necessary for you to feel in control of your life again. **It isn't fair to expect anyone, including yourself, to deal with everything alone**. This may be a time in your life when asking for help is the most difficult thing you have ever done and the greatest gift you can give yourself, especially if asking for and receiving help was not something you did comfortably prior to the assault.

When the trauma of the assault becomes a manageable part of your life's history, you have made the journey from victim to survivor. Not only have you survived the assault, you have scaled a major mountain in your life. In the end, you may climb to the top with a greater sense of power and self-worth than you had prior to the assault. Being a victim is no longer how you define yourself; instead you have used it as a tool, to grow in self-awareness and inner strength.

Healing comes in its own time and often slips in unnoticed until some event stops us abruptly and, inadvertently, we find ourselves examining our feelings and actions anew. So often we are unaware of new-found strength and self

confidence until circumstances demand it of us. You may find it has been building quietly and surely on the sidelines, waiting to be discovered and used to new purpose.

Recovery is difficult and demanding; it's a process and a journey that can't be hurried or orchestrated by anyone but you. The energy and courage you find within yourself to pursue this goal will eventually be rewarded in more ways than you may have imagined when you first began the journey.

There are certain basic things that are necessary in a counselor. You should make sure your prospective counselor:

- Believes that you were abused.
- Never minimizes your experience or the pain it's caused.
- Has information (or is willing to get information) about the healing process for survivors of interpersonal violence.
- Is willing to hear and believe the worst experiences you have to talk about.
- Keeps the focus on you, not on your abuser.
- Doesn't push reconciliation or forgiveness.
- Doesn't want to have a friendship with you outside of counseling.
- Doesn't talk about his or her personal problems.
- Doesn't want to have a sexual relationship with you, now or ever in the future.
- Fully respects your feelings (grief, anger, rage, sadness, despair, joy).
- Doesn't force you to do anything you don't want to do.
- Encourages you to build a support system outside of therapy.
- Encourages contact with other survivors of abuse.
- Teaches you skills to take care of yourself.
- Is willing to discuss problems that occur in the therapy relationship.

Courtesy of: Survival Skills for Healing