

Secondary Victims of Sexual Assault

A secondary victim is a person who knows someone who has experienced a sexual assault. The secondary victim can be a family member, a friend, a co-worker, an acquaintance, a teacher, a minister or pastor, or another important person in the victim's life.

The reason these people are called *secondary* victims is that they may experience some of the same feelings that the victim is feeling. These feelings can include:

- Feeling sad
- Feeling angry
- Feeling scared, afraid
- Feeling of disbelief
- Feeling guilty or responsible
- Feeling confused
- Not feeling anything; becoming numb
- Feeling the world is not a safe place
- Not being able to sleep
- Not being able to stop thinking about what happened
- Having trouble concentrating
- Trying to understand "why"
- Not feeling safe
- A change in eating patterns – you may eat too much or too little
- Feeling helpless
- Feeling hopeless

Secondary victims often do not know what to do. They know they want to do something, but are not sure what. There is an intense feeling of needing to help, but also the fear of doing something wrong. The best way to navigate around this feeling is to ask the victim if you can help and how. You need to be prepared for the answer "I don't know." In that situation, you let the person know that you are there and if they need anything they should let you know.

As with victims of sexual assault, you may need someone to help you with the feelings you have. If you have a support system, use it. If you do not have a support system, see if you can create one. The feelings you have are normal. There is no way to say how long these feelings may last, but they should lessen with time.

As with any traumatic situation, the best thing you can do is take care of yourself.