

# SAY IT WITH COMPASSION: HOW TO HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH A STUDENT AFTER THEY REVEAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE

*Unlike victims of other crimes, survivors of sexual violence are chronically accused of lying. It's an epidemic of distrust that impacts student reporting and healing. Sexual Violence poses significant challenges to victims' physical, emotional, and academic wellness. A number of factors have an impact on victims' healing including the response they get when they disclose to others. Here is a list of things to say to ensure you respond with compassion and sensitivity. As a visible and respected member of our campus community you have the opportunity to support victims' healing and encourage more students to come forward.*

## WHAT TO DO/SAY:

- ⇒ **Respond.** If a student reveals what happened to you over email, it may be easy to ignore that aspect of the conversation and not acknowledge what was disclosed. This can be very invalidating and harmful.
- ⇒ **Inform them.** Tell the student that you are responsible for reporting what they have disclosed to you and that they can continue, but if they want a confidential source there are places on campus they can go.
- ⇒ **Start by believing.** Tell them you believe them. By providing a safe space free of accusation, you allow the student to be comfortable. This may make them feel secure enough to be open to other resources.
- ⇒ **Remind them that their assault was not their fault.** Survivors are often blamed for putting themselves in situations that "allowed" them to be assaulted. This is not the case and you should reassure them of that.
- ⇒ **Ask how you can help them.** By giving them a space to talk, you are already providing a number of things for a survivor of sexual violence, by knowing what options are available to students and how you can support them, you are helping them on a path to recovery.
- ⇒ **Let them know how they choose to proceed is entirely up to them.** Let them know they have options. Know confidential resources on campus and encourage students to connect with these experts to discuss their options and get support.

## WHAT NOT TO DO/SAY:

- **Do not place the blame on the student coming forward.** Do not ask what they were wearing, why they decided to drink, why they left alone, or any similar questions suggesting that it is the responsibility of the victim to avoid being assaulted.
- **Do not tell the student that they have to go to the police.** Sexual violence is a traumatic experience. Exposure to the police and other forms of authority can worsen that trauma.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON HOW TO HANDLE DISCLOSURES CONTACT:

Wellness, Alcohol, and Violence Education and Services (WAVES): Provides students impacted by sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, and stalking with a confidential space to receive support and discuss reporting options and living and academic accommodations. During business hours call (703) 993-9999, for the 24-Hour Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence Crisis Line call (703) 380-1434, <http://waves.gmu.edu/>