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WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual assault and abuse is any type of sexual activity that an individual does not agree to, including, but not limited to: inappropriate touching; vaginal, anal or oral penetration; sexual intercourse to which an individual says no; rape; attempted rape; and child molestation.

Sexual assault can be verbal, visual or anything that forces a person to join in unwanted sexual contact or attention. Examples of this are voyeurism (when someone watches private sexual acts), exhibitionism (when someone exposes him/herself in public), incest (sexual contact between family members) and sexual harassment. It can happen in different situations: in the home by someone s/he knows, on a date or by a stranger in an isolated place. Rape is a common form of sexual assault. It is committed in many situations – on a date, by a friend or an acquaintance or when someone thinks an individual is alone. Rape and sexual assault are never the victim's fault – no matter where or how it happens.

WHAT SHOULD SOMEONE DO IF THEY'VE BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED?

Immediately after an assault, an individual should:

- Get away from the attacker and to a safe place as quickly as possible. Then, call 911 or the police.
- Call a friend or family member s/he trusts. S/he can also call a crisis center or hotline to speak with a counselor. Feelings of shame, guilt, fear and shock are normal; so it is important to get counseling from a trusted professional.
- NOT wash, comb or clean any part of his/her body. S/he should NOT change clothes if possible so that the hospital staff can collect evidence. S/he should NOT touch or change anything at the scene of the assault.
- Go to his/her nearest hospital emergency room as soon as possible. S/he needs to be examined, treated for injuries and screened for possible sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or pregnancy. The medical professional will collect evidence using a rape kit for fibers, hair, saliva, semen or clothing the attacker may have left behind.

While at the hospital, s/he should:

- Decide if s/he wants to file a police report. If so, the hospital staff can call the police from the emergency room.
- Ask the hospital staff to connect him/her with a local rape crisis center. The center staff can help individuals make choices about reporting the attack and getting help through counseling and support groups.

HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED?

You can help someone who is abused or who has been assaulted by listening and offering comfort. Go with her/him to the police, the hospital, university administrators, or to counseling. Reinforce the message that s/he is not at fault and that it is natural to feel angry and ashamed.

RESOURCES

National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233)

National Sexual Assault Hotline
1-800-656-HOPE (1-800-656-4673)

Men Can Stop Rape
<http://www.mencanstoprape.org>

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN)
<http://www.rainn.org>

Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Office of Women's Health,
<http://www.womenshealth.gov>