How to respond to someone who discloses sexual assault

It can be pretty full on when someone tells you they have been sexually assaulted. You’ll probably have feelings of your own to deal with. The good news is that the survivor trusts you, and there are lots of things you can do to support them.

Here are the most important ones:

**Listen**
Hear what they say and try not to interrupt. Let them talk at their own pace. Show them you are listening by making eye contact and nodding. Don’t worry if they stop talking for a while – silences are okay.

**Believe**
Try not to over-do the questions. They can make it seem like you are doubting the story. It’s important that the survivor sees that you’re on their side and that you support them.

**Validate**
Tell them what they are feeling is right. Let them know you think their feelings are real by repeating the feeling words (like “it’s okay to feel scared”). Acknowledge that you have feelings about it too, but try to keep a focus on them.

**No blame**
In our society it’s pretty common for victim/survivors to be blamed for the assault. Try to avoid questions like ‘why did you go there’ and ‘why did you go out with him’ because they might make the survivor think they are responsible for what happened.

**Ask**
If you feel a bit helpless, ask them what sort of help they would like from you. They’re not expecting you to solve the problem, and you’ve already done a lot by just listening. Asking will help the survivor think about what they do next.

**Shhh...**
It’s important that they keep trusting you and feel like they’re in control of the story. If you think someone else needs to know, tell the survivor first. You can think together about who can be trusted, but don’t tell until the survivor is okay with it (except with mandatory reporting).

**Get help**
Explore with the survivor how they might keep safe if the assaults are still happening (safety planning).

**Referral**
Assist with information. Discuss options for referral with the survivor. Some referral options within Deakin are:
- CASA: A Centre Against Sexual Assault Counsellor/Advocate is available at Deakin campuses one day per week.
Deakin Student Life Counsellors offer free confidential psychological support to students.

To make an appointment with for one of the above, see contact details on the Deakin Health, Wellbeing and Safety website: Deakin.edu.au/health-and-wellbeing

**Get support**

Get support/supervision for yourself

**For staff:**
Supervision may be sought from line manager or supervisor. Counseling services available to staff can be found on the Deakin EAP website http://www.deakin.edu.au/hr/ohs/assistance.php

**For students:**
Counselling services are available for students via student counselling: http://www.deakin.edu.au/health-and-wellbeing