Sexual and gender-based violence can be experienced by anyone. As parents, guardians and other loved ones, you may find it very difficult to hear that your student was victimized. In addition, it may be hard to find the right way to support them without jumping in to take care of things. It might be challenging to know what to say, how to act, how to offer your support in a way that honors their autonomy and emerging adulthood.

There is no one right way to respond to this kind of violence. There are so many factors that come into play: the specifics of the assault, a survivor’s life story prior to that event, their support system on grounds and off, their connection to the perpetrator (Committed relationship? Casual date? Study partner or friend? Just met? Total stranger?)

Note that links to all of the resources mentioned below are available on the Gender Violence Resources page of the Women’s Center website at: womenscenter.virginia.edu/gender-violence/resources.

Developmental Issues

Your student, like all young adults, is also dealing with developmental issues. If your student is in their late teens or early-to-mid-twenties (when the brain has nearly completed most of its development), they are working on their:

- **Autonomy** and social relationships. These are the key life tasks for college students. This is when they learn how to manage new situations outside of family norms and take risks without the structured support of childhood.

- **Impulsivity.** As the brain matures, they are more vulnerable to social cues that can lead to risky behavior such as excessive drinking, drug use, and other behaviors that could potentially endanger them.

- **Boundary development.** They are still developing skills in setting healthy interpersonal boundaries with peers.

Focus on Empathy

Typical survivor responses include feelings of fear, confusion, distress, humiliation, anger, confusion, numbness, and guilt. Their memories of the event(s) may be scrambled or even have missing parts. This is all totally normal, and part of the reaction to trauma.

When responding to your student after an assault, here are some suggestions on how you can provide support.

- **Believe** your student when they confide in you and allow them to disclose what they feel comfortable sharing at their own pace. You do not need to know the details of what happened to be helpful to the person to whom it has happened. Ask as few questions as possible and make them as open-ended as possible. Take the stance that their disclosure to you is an honor and a reflection of their trust that you will support them. Keep in mind that it’s common for survivors to delay in telling those they love due to feelings of shame, embarrassment or fear of the reaction.

- **Affirm** your loved one’s desire to be in control going forward (restoring agency is essential to trauma recovery). They must make the decisions about how to respond in order to regain this agency.
• Use their terms for referring to the incident (even if you think a stronger or weaker label is warranted). At the same time, counter self-blaming messages by pointing out how strong and courageous they are by speaking out, and the decisions they made that made it possible for them to be present to tell you what happened.

• Listen with as little judgment as possible by reflecting their feelings first. For example: It sounds as though you were really confused by what was happening. Then you can follow up with a question: How did that impact your ability to react? This can help you avoid inadvertently shaming or blaming (neither of which help the healing process). It’s possible that they will tell you about choices and behaviors they voluntarily engaged in that could set your hair on fire. Keep in mind that self-assessment can come later. In the immediate aftermath of a disclosure, no matter how long ago the violence occurred, survivors need unconditional support and love.

• Encourage your student to reach out to on-grounds resources when they are ready. You can explain that if counseling seems daunting, they can start by checking in with the Women’s Center’s Confidential Advocate, who is nationally certified. The advocate is not required to report the incident to the University or any other authorities. A chat with the advocate often opens the door to seeking trauma counseling and other forms of assistance.

• Educate yourself about resources both on and off grounds. Most information is available online, including the resources page (shown in the first section of this document) where your student can see the options on and off grounds that are available to them and how to reach out for support when the time is right.

• Discuss options with your student, who may be very confused about what to do and may have difficulty making decisions. It’s easy for parents to fall into the role of decision-maker but do everything you can to avoid this. Gently guide them into making choices themselves. Be their scribe: write down as many options as they can think of and discuss each—what feels more important or the easiest right now? (Note: police can wait.) This may or may not include contacting an advocate through a hotline and/or the police. Reporting a sexual assault or intimate partner violence is often a difficult, long, and painful process for survivors. It’s not an appropriate option for everyone, but a trained advocate can help your student navigate the options. Starting with baby steps (such as telling a friend) might be the way to go.

• Ask for permission before giving advice (so you don’t get a “yes, but”).

Additional Considerations

• Be aware that submitting a report through the university’s Just Report It site does not initiate a report to law enforcement, although if the violence rises to a certain level of seriousness, UVA is required by state law to pass this information to the police. You can also explain to your student that sharing information through the Just Report It website sends this information to the Title IX Office at UVA, but police will not show up at their door, nor are they required to participate in any hearings. What this means in the short term is that someone will reach out to your student to find out if they would like to make a formal complaint or not, and especially if they would like academic and/or emotional support so that their academic career is not derailed by the stress of these situations. You can read more information about this on the Title IX website.

• If the incident was recent, gently encourage your student to seek medical attention, but understand that they have the right to decide what medical attention is necessary—or if they
should get any at all. Sometimes concern about contracting a sexually transmitted infection or the possibility of pregnancy is enough to propel survivors to seek health care. Even so, the idea of going to a hospital can be scary. One way to encourage them to get medical care is by simply stating, “I’m worried about your safety and health. These kinds of things can cause a kind of shock and you may not know how you’ve been hurt. The ER and Student Health have specially-trained nurses who can take care of you and you can get other kinds of help.” If you are unable to accompany your student because you are too far away, they can bring a friend with them, and/or have an advocate join them in the ER from the Sexual Assault Resource Agency (SARA) or the Shelter for Help in Emergency (SHE), local agencies here in Charlottesville. Your student’s options include: seeking care and having evidence collected (this is optional) at the UVA Emergency Department (24/7) or in Student Health (business hours); seeking preventative treatment only (STI prophylaxis and emergency contraception); or choosing to do nothing at this time. Whatever the choice, it’s important that your student make their own decisions in order to regain a sense of personal agency.

• **Help** your student get the professional care and support they may need. Counseling can be very helpful in assisting your student and yourself through the healing process of coping with an assault. The Maxine Platzer Lynn Women’s Center’s Counseling and Wellness Services and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) in Student Health and are your on-grounds resources.

• **Elevate** your student by consistently pointing out what a strong, courageous survivor they are, and how they made critical and excellent decisions in order to survive their ordeal. This is so important in all situations, and especially if the survivor is in an abusive relationship or being stalked, because the strategy of abusers is aimed at making them doubt their own sense of reality (“gaslighting”) and feel quite helpless or worthless.

• **Focus on safety going forward.** You can broach this issue by asking, “What makes you feel physically safe?”, “Who helps you feel safe?”, “What do they need to know in order to help you?” (For example: *What is your plan tonight when you go out so that you will feel safe, have a good time, and be able to relax without being triggered? How can I support you in your safety plan?*) Remember that the best plan is the one the survivor makes for themselves – if they say it, they are more likely to follow through.

• Lastly, **take care of yourself—you need support as well.** Pay attention to how this information is impacting you. If violence is a part of your history, this new information may trigger strong feelings on your part. **Making intentional choices to take care of your stress to reduce your own reactivity.** It is human to have an array of painful thoughts and feelings about the situation. Having your own support and self-care will help.

• **Your loved one will remember how you made them feel far longer than they will remember exactly what you said to them in terms of advice or analysis.**
Further Information for Particular Situations

Abusive Relationships

It is extremely difficult to witness a loved one experiencing emotional, physical or other kinds of abuse. In addition, survivors often become trapped in a pattern of repeatedly leaving and returning to the abuser.

Warning Signs

- Your student’s partner uses an unusual amount of control over their activities, finances, the way they dress, and/or their contact with family and friends.
- Your student has unexplained bruises or frequent "accidents," which cause them to miss school or work, or give inconsistent explanations.
- Your student appears frightened, exhausted, or on edge.

How You Can Help

- It can help to familiarize yourselves with the cycle of violence in abusive relationships. It may also help to understand that abusive relationships don’t “just work themselves out.” Your support and encouragement of your student is critical, and you can ease the isolation and loss of control they may feel by just listening without judgment.
- Help your student learn more about intimate partner violence. Show them facts about abuse on this website and guide them to local resources. Help them create a safety plan.
- The abuser may try to isolate your student. By letting your student know you care and are available, you provide them with a connection to the world and options for safety and support. A pattern of leaving and returning to the relationship can be quite wearing for family and friends. DO NOT GIVE UP. Keep in touch and let your student know that no matter what, you support them.
- Do not ask, “Why don’t you just leave?” It is far more complicated than it might seem--and even dangerous. Your student may be aware of the risks. Even when abusers threaten suicide if their partners leave, it is often more dangerous for a survivor when they end the relationship or have left the abuser, because then the abuser reacts to losing control by trying to reclaim their power in violent ways. If your student wants to leave, consult your local domestic violence program beforehand and make sure a safety plan is in place first.

Stalking

If a student is being stalked, it can be frightening trying to process and understand how to help. These are a few tips for how to be a supportive if your student comes to you for help.

- Believe them: Many stalking victims hesitate to tell anyone because they fear others will think they are overreacting or crazy. It’s important to tell your student that you believe them, and you want to help.
Family Member’s Guide to Supporting Student Survivors

- Stalking can deprive a survivor of a sense of safety and security. Help your student set up a network of friends who can accompany them to class, shopping, etc. They can also download the LiveSafe app that allows friends to walk with them virtually as they move about.

- Seek help and safety accommodations from the university through The Title IX Coordinator and the Office of the Dean of Students.

- Help your student document the stalker’s behavior and establish a safety plan. Documenting contact and communications from the stalker is an important step for a stalking victim to take. Safety plans may require a survivor to make changes to their living address, mailing address, transportation routes and other aspects of their lives. The What to Do If You Are Being Stalked page of the Stalking, Prevention, Awareness and Resource Center’s website (https://www.stalkingawareness.org/) provides a good introduction and access to further information as well as helpful tools.

- These days most stalking is done electronically. The Safety Net Project of the National Network to End Domestic Violence offers a Tech Safety App to help identify technology-facilitated harassment, stalking, or abuse and provide tips on what can be done.

- Logging a stalker’s behavior, safety planning, and addressing technology privacy can be daunting. You can support your student by helping them navigate some of these changes. Several UVA resources, such as the Title IX Office, Office of the Dean of Students, the Maxine Platzer Lynn Women’s Center, the police, and CAPS, as well as the local Shelter for Help in Emergency, can assist with these processes as well.