

# SURVIVORS GUIDE

An information guide for victims of sexual assault  
in the Bow Valley and their friends and family



Bow Valley  
**HARMONY**  
project

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Harmony Project committee created this guide to support victims of sexual assault and their natural support systems such as friends and family. This group is committed to working collaboratively to establish a comprehensive and effective community response to sexual violence. Each organization has a unique mandate.

The working group acknowledges the commitment and contributions of:

Addiction and Mental Health, Alberta Health Services  
 Banff and Canmore RCMP  
 Banff LIFE, Town of Banff  
 Banff Mineral Springs Hospital  
 Bow Valley Victim Services  
 Calgary Sexual Assault Response Team  
 Community Social Development - Town of Canmore  
 Settlement Services, Town of Banff, Town of Canmore  
 YWCA Banff

This Collaborative Community Response is a project of the YWCA Banff. In addition to the significant contributions of time and expertise invested by the above-noted partners, YWCA also acknowledges support from the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services and financial support from the Government of Alberta Family and Community Safety Program.

## CORE BELIEFS OF THE HARMONY PROJECT COMMITTEE

- It is a basic human right for all individuals to live their lives without violence or fear of violence.
- Anyone can be a victim of sexual assault.
- Sexual assault is about power and control, not intimacy.
- Anyone impacted by sexual assault has the right to sensitive, immediate and appropriate care.
- Everyone has the capacity and resiliency to recover from sexual assault.
- Victims of sexual assault are not to blame and perpetrators must be held accountable.
- Services addressing sexual assault need to be delivered in an inclusive, respectful, and equitable manner regardless of ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation or ability.

Sexual assault is a common issue and you are not alone in your experiences. You deserve to be supported and have the right to resources that meet your unique needs. Some local resources include:

## GETTING THE HELP YOU NEED

When it comes to what service to access, your medical care and whether or not to contact the RCMP, the decision is yours and you have the right to make an informed choice. It is important that those around you respect your choices.

### **Bow Valley Addiction & Mental Health**

Offices located in Canmore, Banff & Lake Louise  
Intake Line: 403-678-4696  
Counselling, information, referrals

### **Bow Valley Victim Services**

403-760-0197  
Support, information, referrals

### **Hospital - Banff Mineral Springs**

305 Lynx Street  
403-762-2222

### **Hospital - Canmore General**

1100 Hospital Place  
403-678-5536

RCMP - Banff 403-762-2226

RCMP - Canmore 403-678-5516

RCMP - Kananaskis 403-591-7708

RCMP - Lake Louise 403-522-3812

### **Walk -in Counselling & Urgent Mental Health**

Banff Mineral Springs Hospital / Canmore General Hospital  
2pm-9pm daily (no appointment necessary)  
Counselling, information, referrals

### **YWCA Banff**

403-760-3200  
(Monday-Friday, 9am - 5pm)  
Information, referrals

### **Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse**

1-877-237-5888 / 403-237-5888  
24 hour support line for victims and those supporting them

### **Calgary Sexual Assault Response Team**

403-955-6030  
Forensic evidence collection, 3rd option, referrals and support  
Sheldon Chumir Centre - 1213 4th Street SW  
Forensic evidence collection, 3rd option, medical care, referrals & support

## MEDICAL ATTENTION

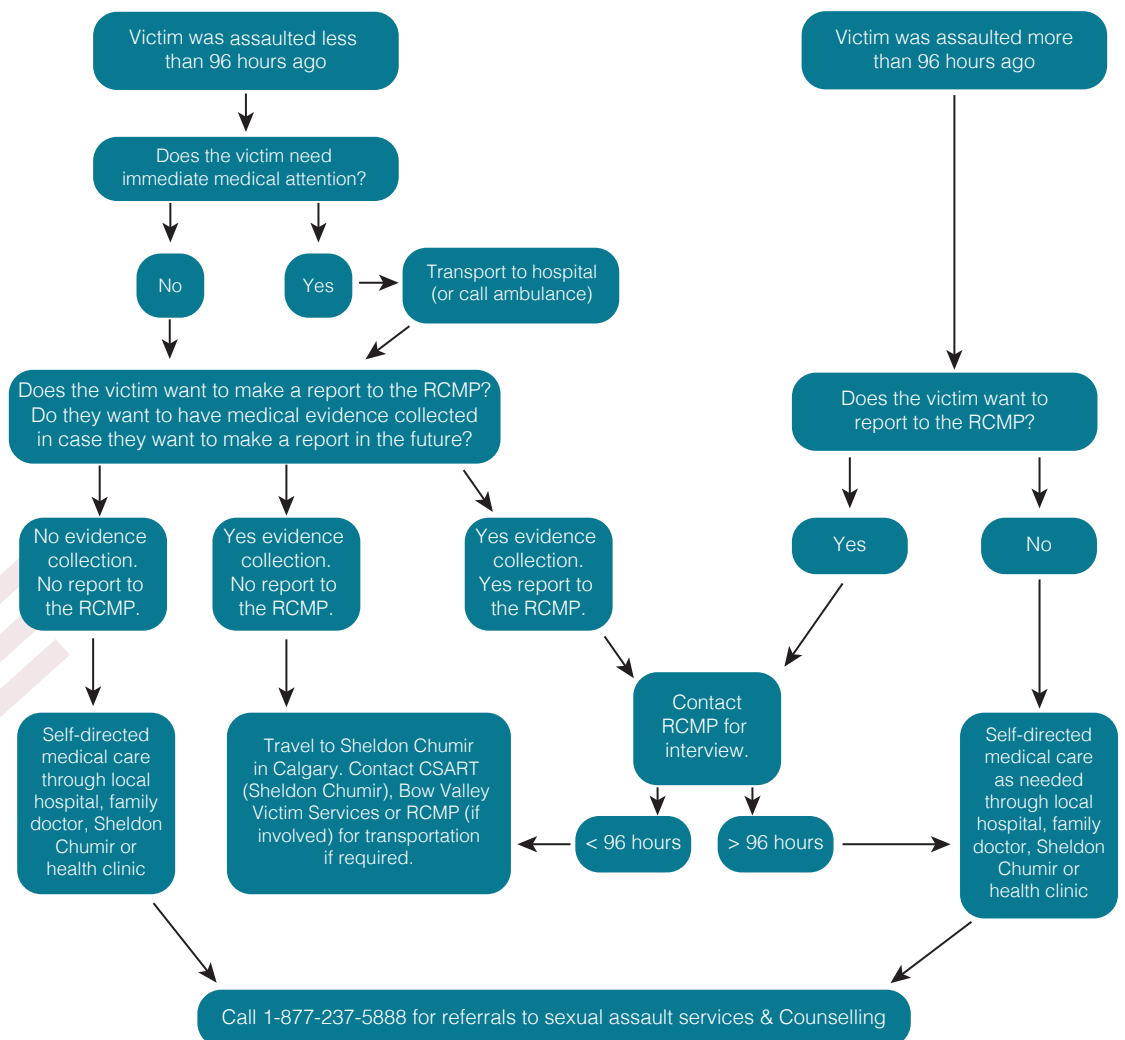
It is important to get the medical care that you need regardless of whether or not you intend to make a report to the RCMP. Medical care involves treating any internal or external injuries, treating and preventing sexually transmitted infections and/or pregnancy. A medical examination can be done at your local hospital and ideally would be completed as soon as possible and within 4 days (96 hours) of the assault.

If you were assaulted within the last 4 days (96 hours) there are 3 options available to you. These options are also laid out in the flow chart.

1. You may choose to have medical care, pregnancy and STI testing/treatment done by your local doctor, at the local hospital/clinic or at the Sheldon Chumir Centre in Calgary.
2. You can have the above medical care and forensic samples collected at the Sheldon Chumir Centre in Calgary and make a police report immediately.
3. You can have above medical care and forensic samples collected at the Sheldon Chumir Centre in Calgary and have it stored for a period of up to one year allowing you time to make the reporting decision that is best for you without pressure.

The Sheldon Chumir Centre will also do follow up blood work and care for up to six months.

### NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM



## REPORTING TO THE RCMP

You have just had a traumatic experience and making decisions might feel overwhelming. Deciding about whether or not to report to the RCMP can be a tough decision to make, or you might be very clear about what you want to do. You need to do whatever feels best for you.

To report being sexually assaulted, phone the police services/RCMP in the community where the assault occurred or call 911. It is best to avoid bathing, showering or changing your clothes until after your medical examination is finished. If you need to change your clothes put everything, including your underwear in a sealed bag. You might choose to have someone go with you when speaking to the police and you can also ask the RCMP to call Bow Valley Victim Services who can provide additional support.

A police officer will interview and take a statement from you to find out what happened and then an investigation may follow. Your interview will be audio or video taped. The police can lay charges when their investigation is concluded if there is sufficient evidence to do so. Sometimes your statement to the police will be enough evidence for them to lay charges.

If you have been assaulted within the past 96 hours (sometimes longer depending on the injuries) and you want to report this crime to the RCMP, forensic evidence will need to be collected and you will need to travel to the Sheldon Chumir Centre in Calgary. Speak to your local nurse about assistance with transportation. You may be eligible to access a program called Safe Night which pays for roundtrip transportation and shelter. At times Bow Valley Victim Services or the RCMP may be able to assist. Having forensic samples collected does not mean that you have made a decision to proceed with charges; it simply means that you are keeping your options open.

If you decide not to make a report to the RCMP right away you can change your mind and decide to make one later. There is no time limit to reporting to the RCMP. One thing to keep in mind is that reporting within 96 hours will allow them to conduct a more thorough investigation (time-sensitive video surveillance, talking to witnesses etc.).

## EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

You may feel like you just want to move forward with your life and forget about the assault, and you might find that the people around you are encouraging you to do just that. You may also find that this isn't possible. There is no right or wrong way to feel. You deserve support and there are resources available to you at any time during your healing. Finding someone you trust to talk to about your experience is an important step. Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse has a support line (1-877-237-5888) that can help you explore what you need and what services might be a good fit for you. Walk in counselling services are also available at the local hospitals in Banff and Canmore from 2pm-9pm daily. Alberta Health Services - Mental Health and Addiction also provide on-going counselling services in Lake Louise, Banff and Canmore.



## THE COURT PROCESS

If charges are laid, the police and the courts will determine if the accused can be released with conditions or if they will remain in custody while the charges are before the courts.

The accused will also be required to attend court regarding these charges on a pre-determined date. On this date, or on a future date, the accused will be required to advise the court if they are guilty or not guilty of the charges they are facing.

If the accused advises the court they are guilty, they will be sentenced by a judge. If the accused advises that they are not guilty, a trial and/or a preliminary inquiry will be held.

While criminal charges are before the courts, an Alberta Justice lawyer employed as a Crown Prosecutor will be responsible for the prosecution of the offense. The role of the Crown is to represent the public's interest, to ensure any matter before a criminal court is prosecuted appropriately. This means the Crown is not the lawyer of the person who has been assaulted. It also means that anyone who has been sexually assaulted does not have to hire their own lawyer.

The person who was sexually assaulted is only required to attend court if they are subpoenaed as a witness to testify at a trial or preliminary inquiry. If they wish to be updated on what occurs at other court appearances of the accused, this information can be provided upon request by victim services programs such as Bow Valley Victim Services (403-760-0197).

In 2007, Alberta adopted a Victim of Crime Protocol to ensure Albertans know what they can expect from the criminal justice system, as well as the roles and responsibilities of each sector of the justice system. It is important to know that in Alberta, all sectors of the criminal justice system are mandated to treat victims of crime with courtesy, compassion and respect.



*More details regarding Alberta's Victim of Crime protocol can be found at: <http://bowvalleyvictimservices.org/victims-crime-protocol>*

*More details regarding the Criminal Justice System can be found at: <http://bowvalleyvictimservices.org/court-information>*

## FINANCIAL BENEFITS

Alberta Justice and the Solicitor General pays financial benefits to eligible victims of violence crime in Alberta who have received physical and/or psychological injuries. Payments are awarded based on the injuries received and as an acknowledgment of the victimization that has occurred.

To be eligible to receive Financial Benefits:

- you must be the victim of a crime and this crime must have occurred in Alberta
- you must have reported the crime to the police and cooperated with their investigation
- your application has to be received within two years of when the crime occurred

This program recognizes that child victims and significantly incapacitated adults may not be in a position to apply for these benefits on their own. In these instances, a guardian or someone acting on behalf of the victim may apply.

This program does not pay for any cost or losses related to a crime e.g. damage to personal property, lost wages or medical costs. To assist with the recovery of these losses, you could also make a Request for Restitution. A judge will consider this application for restitution if the accused has been found guilty.

For more details or to apply for Financial Benefits or Restitution please contact Bow Valley Victim Services at 403-760-0197.

# MYTHS



**A person's behavior, attitude or appearance (dress/clothing) can provoke or invite sexual assault.**

FALSE: Regardless of how you dressed, what you had to drink or where you were, you were a victim of a violent crime and the perpetrator is 100% responsible for the assault. Anyone, regardless of age, sex, class, race, religion, sexual identity, occupation or physical appearance can be sexually assaulted.



**Most victims are sexually assaulted by a stranger.**

FALSE: In 82% of sexual assaults the perpetrator is someone the victim knows like an employer, co-worker, friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse, neighbor, or relative (<http://aasas.ca/>). Even if someone does initially agree to engage in sexual activity, they can change their mind AT ANY POINT. If someone doesn't consent or cannot consent and their partner doesn't accept it but instead continues to pressure or force them into any sexual activity, they are committing sexual assault.



**All sexual assault victims resist physically or scream for help.**

FALSE: It's very common for someone to "freeze" or to "check-out" when they are being assaulted, especially if the perpetrator is someone they know. These are coping strategies that help a victim to survive and are actually different ways of resisting. Sometimes fighting back can put the victim in more danger.



**Someone in a committed relationship (marriage, dating, common-law) cannot be assaulted by their partner.**

FALSE: Entering into a relationship does not give anyone the right or ownership of another person's body. Being in a committed relationship is no different than any kind of hook up, when it comes to consent each person has the right to not give their consent at any point. Every time two people engage in sexual activities, consent must be obtained.



**Sexual Assault can be an accident.**

FALSE: Sexually assaulting someone is an intentional choice. This myth makes consent seem confusing, that anything other than screaming "no" and fighting back can be "mistaken" for consent. Consent isn't complicated: when someone wants to stop and the other person wants to continue, the burden is entirely on the person who wants to continue to make sure their partner wants to as well (<http://www.consented.ca>). Someone may feel they are getting mixed messages but that is not an excuse for sexual assault. If it is unclear what their partner wants, communication is the only way to make sure both people feel safe and comfortable with what is happening. It is the responsibility of the person initiating the sexual contact to obtain consent.



### Only women can be sexually assaulted.

FALSE: Sexual assault is often considered to be a “women’s issue” but males are also sexually assaulted. It can happen to any guy, regardless of his sexual orientation, size, strength, appearance, occupation, race or culture. It happens at home, at work, in locker rooms and in cars – just about anywhere a perpetrator thinks he can get away with it. Most men have never considered the possibility of such a thing happening and are therefore totally unprepared. The majority choose not to report and suffer in silence. People of all genders can be victims and perpetrators of sexual assault.



### Someone can still consent if they are incapacitated by alcohol or drugs.

FALSE: Under the Canadian Federal Law, anyone who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol cannot consent to sexual activities. If they are drunk, asleep or passed out, they are incapable of consenting to sex. In media and our society there is a complicated link between alcohol and sexual assault where victims are often blamed for having consumed alcohol and perpetrators justify their actions. This is opposed with many images in the media of people consuming substances and having consensual sex.

Sometimes people consume substances and they are still able to have consensual sex. In fact, sometimes people want to have sex after they have been drinking. Therefore, really clear communication of consent is even more important when the partners involved have consumed substances.

Regularly and continually checking in is crucial and it can be important to check in the next day as well.

Ask yourself:

- Can this person communicate clearly?
- Are they coherent?
- Are they sober enough to fully know what is going on?
- Did they say no when they were sober and now they are saying yes? It is okay for people to change their mind, but since we know that alcohol can play a big role in people being able to communicate consent, play it safe. Wait until they are sober and check in again; if you do have sex have even more check ins than normal

If there is any doubt, mixed messages, uncertainty, or confusion, don't do it.



### Date rape drugs are used in the majority of sexual assaults.

FALSE: It is very difficult to determine if date rape drugs were used in a sexual assault because of how quickly they leave the victim's system. In fact, alcohol is the substance used most frequently to facilitate sexual assault. (Campus Sexual Assault Study, National Institute of Justice, 2007). Sexual assault is about power and control and perpetrators exert power over victims in many ways. Most sexual assaults occur by people that victims know and trust, and due to both this and dynamics of power, perpetrators often do not have to use substances to gain and maintain control.

For more information check out the following websites:

Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services - <http://assas.ca/>

Calgary Communities Against Sexual Assault - <http://www.calgarycasa.com/>



# AFTER THE ASSAULT

The impacts of sexual assault are many and may show up in different forms and at various stages of your life. These impacts may vary depending on your age, the relationship between you and the perpetrator, the nature of the assault, the length and frequency of the sexual assaults, the degree of violence involved, the reactions of those around you and the resources available to you.

Everyone has different reactions to being assaulted. There is no right or wrong way to feel or act. Whether a sexual assault happened recently or years ago, it has certain effects, some of which are common to a majority of the victims, others might be more specific to your situation. You may display a variety of behaviours that others might not understand. These behaviours are coping strategies and you are surviving in whatever way you can.

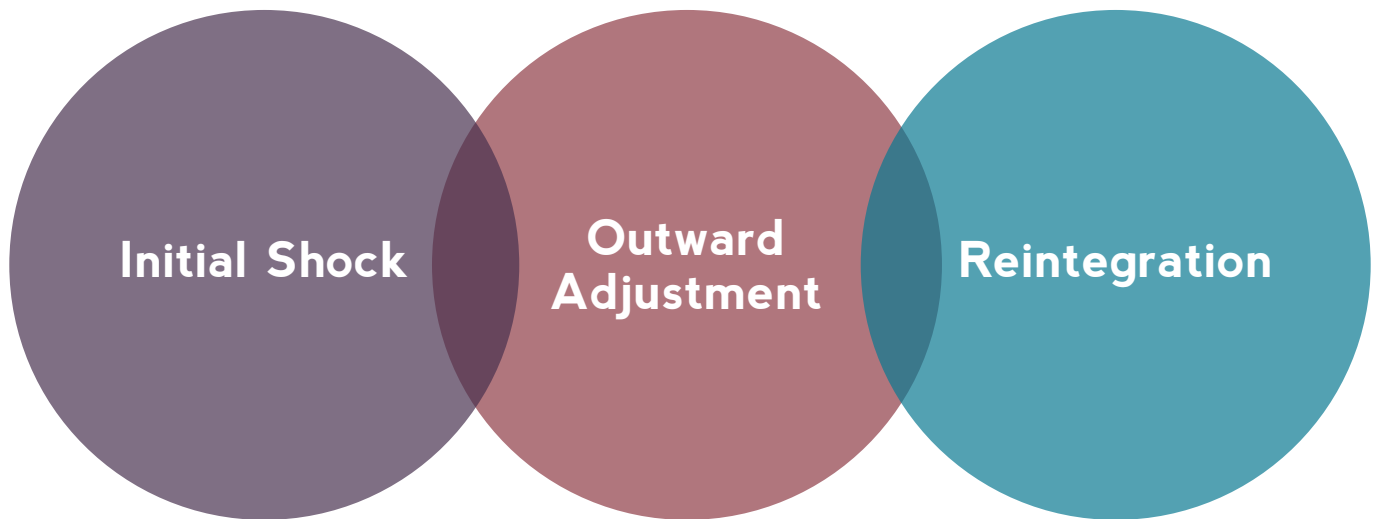


- Feeling lost and alone
- Having nightmares/flashbacks
- Feeling like no one understands
- Not being able to think clearly or focus on regular tasks
- Experiencing nausea and changes to eating patterns
- Having trouble sleeping
- Headaches and muscle tension
- Feeling unclean
- Experiencing grief and loss
- Thinking about the assault continuously
- Sexual dysfunction
- Not wanting to be touched by anyone
- Difficulty trusting yourself and others
- Disconnection from the world and day to day reality
- Paranoia
- Fear of being alone
- A lack of self confidence
- Being in shock and feeling numb
- Feeling angry
- Not wanting to talk about the assault

These symptoms can occur over a long period of time. You might experience them right after an assault or not until many years later.

# PHASES OF HEALING

Although the process is different for everyone, it is common for victims to experience different phases of their healing journey. These phases usually aren't experienced one right after the other, they can overlap and sometimes something can happen that triggers feelings related to the assault and you may revisit the previous phase. For example: a nightmare, a court date, seeing your attacker or someone who reminds you of them, hearing about a sexual assault in the media, etc.



## 1. Initial Shock

- This stage is very intense - it is experienced right after the assault and can last for days or months
- Common feelings/responses include: fear, anxiety, shock, nightmares, helplessness, confusion, anger, guilt about what you did or didn't do, shame, difficulty concentrating, feeling alone
- You might be very overwhelmed with all of feelings that you are experiencing; know that this is a normal reaction to trauma and it will subside

## 2. Outward Adjustment

- During this stage you might be trying to get your life back to normal - it can last from several weeks to several years
- Family and friends might encourage this stage and think you are recovering
- You might still be experiencing symptoms related to the assault such as: nightmares, feelings of depression, fears, issues around intimacy/sexuality, use of alcohol or drugs, shame/self-blame
- You want to be able to cope with memories of the

assault in a way that makes sense for you

- You want to regain control of your life and may not want to talk about the assault at all; you might deny that the assault still bothers you
- This might be a time of activity for you and you may decide to make changes such as moving or starting a new job

## 3. Reintegration

- Often feelings from the previous stage last for a long time and are a part of this phase as well
- Fear, anxiety and flashbacks to the assault are still a part of your life but you might not be experiencing these feelings as often as before
- You are using and identifying healthy coping strategies
- You start to feel empowered and more positive about yourself
- The assault doesn't define you, it is one part of your identity
- You are working towards finding a new way of being in the world

# IF SOMEONE YOU KNOW HAS BEEN ASSAULTED

The most important thing you can do to support someone is to sit back and listen.

## Do:

- Validate their feelings - there is no right/wrong way to feel when someone has experienced trauma
- Let them know that they have your unconditional support and that you will be there for them in whatever way they need
- Encourage them to make their own decisions about how they want to proceed
- Provide them with options and information as needed

## Things to avoid:

- Asking questions about what they did or didn't do (were you drinking? why did you go back to their place? did you try to fight back?); this can be interpreted as victim blaming
- Making them re-tell their story or share details they aren't ready to share
- Giving advice
- Getting really angry - this takes the focus away from the victim and they may start to feel guilty that they have upset you

Be sure to take care of yourself. After someone has shared their experience with you, you might be feeling sad/angry/overwhelmed and may need to reach out and get some support yourself.



Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse has a 24 hour support line that is available for victims as well as their friends or family members: **1.877.237.5888**

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Q. What key messages should you give someone who has been sexually assaulted?

A. If someone discloses to you that they have been sexually assaulted, the most important message that you can give them is that you **believe them**. Remember that one of the most damaging ideas about sexual assault is that survivors lie about it. The number of false reports is a very low 2 to 4%, similar to the number of false reports of any other crime (forensiceducation.ca). They are telling you because they trust you. You could play an important role in helping to get them connected to the services they need.

It's also important to tell them that **it's not their fault**. Anyone, regardless of age, sex, class, race, religion, gender identity, occupation or physical appearance can be sexually assaulted. Whatever choices they may have made, they are not to blame for the sexual assault. Consent is always necessary to obtain under the Canadian Federal Law. And even if someone does initially agree to engage in sexual activity, they can change their mind AT ANY POINT. If someone says "no" and their partner doesn't accept it but instead continues to pressure or force them into any sexual activity, they are committing sexual assault. It's very common for someone to 'freeze' or to be too scared to fight back when they are being assaulted.

**Q. What if your friend/co-worker/family member doesn't want to go to the police or to the hospital?**

A. It is important that you recognize the victim/survivor's right to make decisions, even if you disagree with them. These choices can be very complex especially when 82% of the time the perpetrator is someone the victim knows like an employer, co-worker, friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse, neighbor, roommate or relative (<http://aasas.ca/>).

Less than 5% of victims choose to report their assault to the police (<http://www.canadianwomen.org/blog/10-reasons-violence-still-a-problem>). Always ask a victim what they need and what they want to do and respect their choice. You can let them know that they can get medical care (STI testing, pregnancy test) from the hospital without pressing charges. You can also tell them that if they are unsure if they want to press charges, the Calgary Sexual Assault Response Team will collect evidence and store it for up to 1 year while they make that decision (this is called the 3rd option).

You could also suggest that they meet with a counsellor to work through their feelings and discuss what their options are.

**Q. What if someone was sexually assaulted a year ago but is just telling you about it now?**

A. This is quite common. Often and for many different reasons, victims might try to just get on with their lives and forget the sexual assault ever happened. As time goes on they might find that they are having trouble coping. Listen, let them know that you believe them and that it's not their fault and then ask them what they need. There are local options for free counselling if this is something that they are interested in. They can report the assault to the RCMP if this is something they want to do.

**Q. What if someone isn't sure if they have been sexually assaulted?**

A. Consent isn't complicated: when someone wants to stop and the other person wants to continue, the burden is entirely on the person who wants to continue to make sure their partner wants to as well. Perpetrators don't rape people by accident; they not only understand consent, but also choose to ignore it. They know that what they are doing is wrong and they choose to do it anyways (<http://www.consented.ca/>).

If a victim was drinking or using drugs prior to the assault, or the perpetrator used substances to gain access to the victim, they may have experienced a 'blackout' and not be able to remember what happened. Someone who is intoxicated to the point of blacking out is not able to consent. Alcohol is the substance used most frequently to facilitate sexual assault. (Campus Sexual Assault Study, National Institute of Justice, 2007).

Listen and give them the opportunity to work through it. If you don't feel like you can adequately support them, encourage them to talk to someone they trust or refer them to one of the services listed in this guide.

# References

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