

Responding to a disclosure

RESPECT. NOW. ALWAYS. PROJECT

Literature tells us that the response within the first 15 minutes of a person's disclosure of sexual assault, sexual harassment or other sexual violence is 'critical' to their wellbeing, recovery, and decision-making. Research also indicates that people who disclose their experience of sexual assault to university staff are seeking support to ensure their wellbeing and safety.

ASSESS IF THERE IS AN IMMEDIATE RISK TO HEALTH AND SAFETY

If there is an immediate risk – including further violence or self-harm – **action must be taken**. You can contact the following:

Police and Ambulance Services (immediate safety and medical concerns) – 000

1800 RESPECT (sexual assault counselling and information) – 1800 737 732

Macquarie University Security (on campus emergency) – (02) 9850 9999

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND?

Your response should focus on supporting the person to get the help they need. It is important to be supportive and non-judgemental, and here are some simple actions you can take:

- Listen to and acknowledge the person's disclosure
- Recognise how difficult it is for a person to disclose
- Affirm that it was not their fault – perpetrators are responsible for their own actions
- Be supportive and encouraging
- Walk the person to Campus Wellbeing, if appropriate

WHAT SHOULD I AVOID DOING?

Remember, your response should focus on supporting the person to get the help they need. Being non-judgemental and supportive reminds them that seeking support is the best thing to do. Avoid the following:

- Asking questions such as “What were you wearing or doing?” and “Did you flirt with them?” – this may come across as blame, and prevent the person from feeling safe
- Trying to “fix” the problem for them - as it is important that they receive the support from a qualified professional
- Touching the person – someone who has been sexually assaulted may find physical contact difficult and may not want to be touched.

GIVE THEM THE POWER TO MAKE DECISIONS FOR THEMSELVES

People who have been impacted by sexual assault and sexual harassment often feel powerless. Decisions should not be made for the person who has disclosed their experience. Rather, they should be presented with all the options around seeking support and/or making a complaint, with the ultimate decision being their own.

FIND OUT MORE

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RECOGNISE YOUR OWN LIMITATIONS

It is important to keep in mind that while you may be supportive, you cannot 'fix' the problems presented to you during a disclosure. Unless you are a clinical psychologist, it is inappropriate for you to personally offer counselling or advice. Sometimes, the best support you can offer is to help the person get in contact with trained professionals.

WHERE CAN I REFER SOMEONE FOR SUPPORT?

It is critical that people who have experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment are given access to appropriate support.

When someone discloses to you, encourage them to access on and off campus support. A good question to ask is "What kind of support do you need right now?"

Campus Wellbeing is available to all students on campus to provide support, access to safety plans and assistance with complaints and information.

Open 8:30 – 5:30 (Monday – Friday)

Level 2, building C8A

1800 227 367 or

campuswellbeing@mq.edu.au

Specialist sexual assault counselling services are an external option which can provide support to people who have experienced sexual assault and sexual harassment, as well as the individuals supporting them:

1800 RESPECT (sexual assault counselling and information) – 1800 737 732

North Sydney Sexual Assault Service (forensic, medical and counselling support) – (02) 9462 9477

NSW Rape Crisis Centre (24/7 phone and online counselling) – 1800 424 017

KEEPING A RECORD

Should a criminal investigation or internal discipline process take place following the disclosure, anyone involved may be called to give evidence. Notes and documents may also form evidence. Every effort should be made to ensure that written records are clear, accurate and appropriate. However, keep in mind that you are not investigating or gathering evidence. You are simply recording the things you are told and what you observed. Consider recording:

- Name of the person disclosing
- Time and date of disclosure
- Time, date, and location of the incident
- Brief description of disclosure

HOW CAN A DISCLOSURE IMPACT ON ME?

It is important to look after yourself. Exposure to a person's experience of trauma may impact upon your own mental and physical wellbeing – this is known as *vicarious trauma*.

1800 RESPECT – Rape & Domestic Violence Service Australia (1800 737 732) provide support to friends, relatives, colleagues, and professionals dealing with vicarious trauma.

If you are a staff member, you can contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), for a free confidential counselling, coaching and wellbeing service. The EAP service is provided 24/7 by Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC). Call DTC on 1300 360 364 or log in to eapdirect@mq.edu.au for online support.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

The University has developed a dedicated website with a range of useful information about confidential counselling, medical support, and complaint options, for anyone who has experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment.

Please visit:

www.mq.edu.au/respect

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