



Middlebury

Helping a Friend

For friends and partners of survivors of sexual misconduct, relationship violence, stalking, and other personal violations

●●● **In an Emergency**

See the back of this booklet for contact information.

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It can be upsetting to see a friend struggling or in pain.

Providing support to someone who has experienced sexual or relationship violence is no different. These violations can take away people’s sense of power and leave them feeling helpless. Offering gentle, consistent, and nonjudgmental friendship and support can alleviate the strong and confusing emotions your friend or partner may feel.

Regardless of your own knowledge or experience with sexual or relationship violence, you can play a key role in supporting survivors and restoring their sense of control.

You can:

- Help her focus on her strengths.
- Provide a safe place for them to explore their emotions.
- Reinforce that no one is responsible for being assaulted, stalked, or abused.
- Reassure him that he has the right to any and all of his feelings, even those that are conflicting and confusing.
- Identify professional resources for additional support.

This booklet is designed to provide information, suggestions, and resources to help you be a supportive friend or partner to a survivor of sexual assault, relationship violence, and/or stalking.

Listen and Believe

Active listening is an important skill when helping a friend or partner who is a survivor of sexual violence. Think about a time when you needed support, and recall someone who listened to you in a way that made you feel “heard.” How did they do that?

Do

- Believe, no matter how strange, upsetting, or unlikely the events may seem.
- Accept and honor her emotions without judgment.
- Be honest. You may not “understand,” but you can empathize and care.
- Reflect. The only way to ensure that you understand is to ask. Try something like: “It seems like you are feeling . . .” and “Do you mean . . .?”
- Allow them to define their experience on their own terms. Imposing labels or definitions takes away their right to make sense of their experience for themselves.
- Affirm the things he is doing right, such as reaching out to you. For example, you could say, “Anything you’ve done so far is the right thing, because you are here, and you are talking to me.”
- Meet her wherever she is in her process of healing, understanding, willingness to talk, or asking for help. Her needs will shift over time; remain flexible and present.
- Thank them for trusting you and respect their privacy by keeping the information confidential. If your friend has shared their experience with others, ask permission before having conversations about your friend with others.

Avoid

- Suggesting how he should feel—for example, indicating that he should feel more outraged or that he should calm down.
- Advice that begins with “don’t.”
- Trying to “fix” or “rescue” her. Instead, support her in charting her own path.
- “Investigating” or probing for more information than your friend is willing or able to share. Avoid “why?” questions, as they can imply blame.

Help Restore Control

Interpersonal violence can profoundly undermine survivors’ sense of control—over their safety, over their decisions, even over their own bodies. Rather than acting for them, ask questions to help them identify and articulate their needs. Then ask what role you can play in helping them meet those needs, understanding that they likely will change over time.

Sometimes the simplest questions are the most important ones

- “Do you want to talk about it?”
- “What do you think you need the most right now?”
- “What can I do to help?”
- “Is it okay for me to give you a hug?”
- “Would it be helpful if I . . .?”

Understanding Trauma

Survivors may experience and exhibit a wide variety of reactions as a result of the physical and psychological impact of trauma. A survivor's decisions, actions, and feelings may appear counterintuitive and illogical when considered in the context of what we might expect under "normal" circumstances. However, when the impact and effects of trauma are taken into account, these decisions, actions, and feelings may be completely logical and understandable. This may be confusing both to the survivor and to you. Although some responses are more commonly seen, there is no reaction to sexual violence that is "normal" or "abnormal."

Common reactions

- Shock, confusion
- Memory loss or trouble accessing memories
- Depression
- Hypervigilance
- Mistrust of self and others
- Shame, guilt, self-blame
- Anxiety
- Isolation
- Anger
- Denial, minimization, attempt to "normalize" their experience
- Physical manifestations of distress: shaking, nausea, loss of appetite, etc.

Survivors also may experience flashbacks, nightmares, frightening thoughts, sleep disturbances, emotional numbness, and/or irritability. They may experience dissociation, which

can create a sense that everything is changed or unreal. Some symptoms may be moderate—survivors may feel spacey, as if in a daydream—while other symptoms may be more severe. Survivors may lose track of time, develop memory gaps, or experience a sense of themselves as existing outside of their own body. Survivors also may react strongly to triggers, which are experiences that cause symptoms of trauma to surface or worsen.

Your friend may cycle through some of these feelings and experiences in no particular order or not experience any of them. Some feelings may recur after a period of "normalcy," and this may feel discouraging. Encourage them to be patient and to understand that this may take some time. Reassure them that you do not expect quick recovery and that you will be honest with them if they are ever asking for more support than you can give them.

When we understand the impact of trauma, it is easier to recognize how and why trauma survivors may use certain behaviors that can appear unhealthy to navigate traumatic circumstances. Your friend may be using coping mechanisms that are concerning to you, such as self-harm, self-medicating with prescription or illicit drugs, drinking alcohol excessively, or increasing sexual activity. In some cases, it will be best to continue to be a nonjudgmental and supportive presence. However, in other cases it is important to share your concerns with people who can offer more specialized support. For more information, see [When and How to Seek Help](#) on p. 14.

The Pace of Recovery

It may take survivors months, even years, before they are ready to look closely at their experiences and begin the process of identifying their needs. A survivor's most pressing immediate need may be to try to regain a sense of normalcy in their life, and this may require them to consciously or unconsciously postpone acknowledging their own distress. For friends and partners, it can be frustrating if the survivor opts not to seek immediate care from a counselor, report their experience right away, or file a complaint. Be patient and understand that your friend may be using every bit of energy just to function at a basic level. Helping survivors regain autonomy means letting them set the pace.

Considering Filing a Complaint

If survivors are struggling with whether or not to file a complaint, it may be helpful to reassure them that they do not need to make a decision immediately. You also can gently suggest that they preserve as much information as they can about the event in case they decide to pursue a complaint in the future. This can include writing down their best recollection of what took place, including locations, estimated timing, witnesses, or names of individuals with whom they may have communicated immediately before and after the incident, and preserving any relevant texts, photos, or other records. If the survivor feels comfortable doing so, they also may want to ask people they believe could be witnesses to do the same. They also may want to note any injuries or pain they experienced, and have photographs of visible injuries taken by a trusted friend or the medical staff at the Parton Center for Health and Wellness.

You also can let them know that they can learn about the process of filing a complaint at Middlebury or with the police without committing to action or disclosing any information

about their experience. MiddSafe advocates, Commons deans, and the associate deans for judicial affairs and student life all can provide information about Middlebury's investigation process, and friends and partners are welcome to be present for these conversations as well. WomenSafe staff can provide similar information about filing a criminal complaint.

For Partners of Survivors

Partners of survivors have an important role to play in helping with the healing process. You may be a "safe" recipient of the survivor's strong and confusing feelings. You also may allow them to explore physical and emotional intimacy in a comfortable context. Here are some suggestions for doing so:

- Communicate before, during, and after physical intimacy. Consider using a safe word (other than "stop" or "no") to clearly communicate the approach to or crossing of a physical or emotional boundary.
- Keep track of questions that arise and discuss them when you are both in a safe place to talk.
- Be aware of boundaries: recognize that sometimes emotional and physical intimacy will be challenging, or not possible.
- Help them gather information about their needs. What are known triggers? What coping strategies have been helpful to your partner in the past? Who can offer them support for navigating these feelings and needs?

As a partner, you also may find yourself in need of support and care, but feel reluctant to acknowledge and express those needs. All partners deserve to have their needs met in a relationship, and this can be complicated when one partner is struggling and in pain. See **Taking Care of Yourself** on p. 13 for resources that can help you support your partner's healing process while caring for yourself.

Partner Abuse and Unhealthy Relationships

Intimate partner violence, also known as domestic, relationship, or dating violence, is a pattern of abusive behavior used by someone to gain or maintain power and control over their partner. Intimate partner violence may include physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, economic, and psychological actions or threatened actions.

Signs that someone is experiencing abuse may include any of the following:

- She seems afraid or anxious to please her partner.
- They frequently check in with their partner and often receive harassing calls or texts from their partner.
- He talks about his partner's temper, jealousy, or possessiveness.
- She rarely goes out in public without her partner, and she misses commitments without explanation.
- They have frequent injuries.
- He exhibits personality changes (e.g., an outgoing person becomes withdrawn or reflects low self-esteem when he used to be confident).
- She is depressed or anxious.

What can I do?

- Reach out to resources for yourself. Middlebury's counseling staff, MiddSafe, and WomenSafe can partner with you to figure out the best way to support your friend and increase her safety.
- Identify resources for your friend that can provide information, support, and guidance. (See **Resources and Accommodations** on p. 16.)
- Tell your friend you are concerned for their safety and want to help. Using specific observations can be helpful: "They grabbed your arm really hard and that made me worried about your safety."
- Follow his lead. It may be difficult for him to talk about the abuse. Consistently offering support and concern lets your friend know that you are a safe person to talk to whenever he is ready.
- Share your concerns with a trained administrator, such as a Commons dean, a judicial affairs officer (JAO), a human relations officer (HRO), or the Title IX coordinator.
- **If you fear someone may be in immediate danger, call Public Safety (802-443-5911) or the police (911).**

Stalking Concerns

Stalking consists of a series of behaviors that can escalate and create an atmosphere of intimidation, threat, and fear for the stalker's target and for others close to them. Stalking actions may seem innocent at first—an anonymous note, someone showing up at unexpected times in unexpected places, communications through social media, small gifts, and other expressions of interest. If that interest is not reciprocated but the actions continue and intensify, safety concerns arise.

Because early incidents may seem harmless on their own, it can be easy for stalking targets, and their friends and partners, to fail to recognize them as part of a disturbing pattern and to minimize their significance. As a friend or partner, you can play an important role in helping identify concerns and seek support.

Trust your instincts

If someone's actions are disconcerting or feel "creepy" or unwelcome to you or your friend, share your concerns with each other and validate them.

Help your friend or partner recognize patterns

Make a list of all the direct and indirect contacts you and your friend believe a person has initiated, even those you feel may have been coincidental. Save emails, text messages, phone records, and other evidence.

Seek help as soon as possible

Stalking can escalate quickly, so it is important to reach out early to Commons deans; Public Safety, MiddSafe, and WomenSafe representatives; and other professionals who can recognize when safety risks may be present and respond accordingly. **Do not hesitate to "overreact" by calling Public Safety (802-443-5911) or the police (911) if you feel someone is in immediate danger.**

Taking Care of Yourself

It is extremely difficult to watch someone you care about deal with sexual violence, abuse, or stalking, and it is likely to take an emotional and mental toll on you. These feelings are normal, but they can be difficult to navigate while you also are trying to be a supportive friend or partner.

Things you may feel:

- Shock and disbelief
- Rage and helplessness
- Fear for the survivor's safety or health
- Preoccupation with the event and its aftermath
- Loss of security and trust
- Confusion about the survivor's responses and needs
- Guilt or responsibility for your friend's experience
- Anger at your friend, at the assailant, or at others around you

It is just as important to care for yourself in times of stress as it is to care for others and to seek support from someone you trust. It is also important to acknowledge your own limits. While you may care deeply for your friend and may be compelled by their trust in you, you are not a trained counselor. We all want to extend ourselves beyond our normal limits when someone is in crisis, but when doing so begins to compromise your own ability to function or leads you into situations for which you are not trained, no one is well served. In these situations, it is best to be honest with yourself and your friend.

Consider the following language:

- “You deserve to get the best possible care and support. I can’t give that to you right now, but let’s work together to figure out who can.”
- “I’m not sure what the next best step is, but I know how to find someone with more knowledge and experience who can help.”
- “It’s so important to me that you get the right information and care, and I think we need to broaden our team to do that. Can I share with you the names of some resources I think could be helpful?”

See **Resources and Accommodations** on p. 16 for more information.

When and How to Seek Help

Friends can serve an important role by identifying and helping survivors to connect voluntarily with appropriate resources. Unfortunately, you also may find yourself in situations in which you are sufficiently concerned about your friend’s well-being that you need to seek help with or without your friend’s permission. If your friend or partner is in danger, either from others or from themselves, **you must reach out to a trained professional.**

Examples of emergencies:

- Any situation in which immediate danger or threat is present
- A serious flashback or dissociative episode
- Suicidal thoughts, with a plan and/or the means
- Threats of harming others or property, with a plan and/or the means
- Stalking concerns, no matter how mild the stalking actions appear to be

In any unsafe situations, call Public Safety or the Middlebury Police immediately. If you can, also get in touch with your friend’s or your own Commons dean. In cases where your friend is thinking or talking about suicide, contact the Counseling after-hours care line (802-443-5141, follow instructions) or the 24-hour hotline at the Counseling Service of Addison County via Public Safety. Do not be afraid to overreact. If you are conflicted about whether or not the situation counts as an emergency, err on the side of caution and reach out.

Examples of other concerning situations

- Your friend is using coping mechanisms that concern you but do not seem immediately life threatening.
- You are worried your friend may be in an abusive relationship, but you aren’t sure.
- Your friend is missing classes, isolating themselves, eating poorly, or acting in ways that concern you.
- Your friend is suffering from the trauma of sexual violence and needs more support from you than you are able to provide.

In situations like these, there are confidential and nonconfidential resources available to provide information, help you navigate the complexities of caring for your friend, and assist you with determining if and when you need to take additional steps to support your friend’s safety. Confidential resources include MiddSafe, WomenSafe, or a member of Parton’s counseling staff, and nonconfidential resources include CRAs, Commons deans, coaches, and other members of the Student Life staff. All of these resources can share perspective and advice and can help you make thoughtful and informed decisions.

Resources and Accommodations

Supporting friends and partners—and yourself—in the aftermath of sexual and relationship violence or stalking can be difficult, but there are many resources in the Middlebury community, on and off campus, that provide professional help. MiddSafe advocates, Commons deans, the director of Health and Wellness Education, the associate deans for judicial affairs and student life, and members of the counseling staff can offer more information about a wide variety of resources, including the following:

- No Contact Orders and/or Relief from Abuse Orders
- Academic accommodations (dean’s excuses, late course drops, registration changes, etc.)
- Temporary or permanent room changes
- Counseling options on and off campus
- Strategies for managing symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, etc.
- Safety planning
- Filing a complaint on or off campus

You do not have to file an official complaint—or be a survivor yourself—to request accommodations and utilize resources if you are suffering from the direct or indirect effects of sexual violence. Many of these accommodations are also available to survivors who are struggling with experiences that occurred prior to attending Middlebury, at times when Middlebury was not in session, or related to individuals who are not members of the Middlebury community.

Middlebury Safe and Confidential Advocates (MiddSafe)

802-377-0239 (24/7 hotline when classes are in session)
[go/MiddSafe](#)

MiddSafe advocates are Middlebury College students committed to providing a safe and confidential resource for peers in need of support and information related to sexual assault, stalking, dating violence, domestic violence, and other personal violations. This group exists as a nonjudgmental, compassionate, and effective system for individuals in emergency and noncrisis situations. They can provide a menu of options to guide students toward medical, legal, and emotional resources on local, state, and national levels. MiddSafe advocates also can help friends and partners of survivors who need information and support.

Parton Center for Health and Wellness

802-443-5141 (counseling)
802-443-5135 (health services)
[go/parton](#)

In addition to medical care, Parton offers free and confidential counseling services for students and referrals to off-campus counselors as needed. Students who need access to a counselor after hours may call the Counseling after-hours care line (802-443-5141) and follow directions. To access a SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) after hours, students may call Public Safety (802-443-5141), who will connect them with the appropriate resources.

WomenSafe 24-Hour Hotline

800-388-4205
www.womensafe.net

WomenSafe is a local nonprofit organization providing crisis intervention, information, advocacy, safety planning, and emotional support to survivors of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, including all members of the Middlebury College community regardless of gender. They also provide medical and legal advocacy, and support groups for on- and off-campus survivors.

SafeSpace Vermont

866-869-7341 (Mon-Thurs 9am-6pm, Fri 9am-2pm)
pridecentervt.org/services

SafeSpace, a service of the Pride Center of Vermont, provides information, support, referrals, and advocacy to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning survivors of violence and offers education and outreach programs in the wider community. Support services include a hotline during established hours, direct advocacy, one-on-one support, and support groups.

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)

800-656-HOPE
www.rainn.org

This comprehensive national resource includes a telephone hotline and a secure instant messaging service. The online hotline is available to anyone directly impacted by sexual assault and connects users with a trained RAINN staff member.

Stalking Resource Center

www.victimsofcrime.org/our-programs/stalking-resource-center

This program offers a website with comprehensive information about preventing and responding to stalking, in all of its forms.

MaleSurvivor

www.malesurvivor.org

The MaleSurvivor website offers resources, programming, and in-person and online support connections for boys and men who have survived sexual victimization.

*For more information about confidential and nonconfidential resources, visit **go/sexualviolenceresources***

Everyone has a role to play in eliminating sexual and relationship violence. Caring for survivors—and for yourself—is a critical step on the path, and no one needs to do it alone.

A Note on Sources

While much of the content of this resource is original, we are also indebted to the many colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations whose efforts and materials on these topics contributed to our own.

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Middlebury

Emergency Information (24/7)

Middlebury College Public Safety Emergency Phone	802-443-5911
Middlebury Police Department	911
Non-emergency Phone	802-388-3191
Counseling Service of Addison County (CSAC)	802-388-7641
Middlebury Safe and Confidential Advocates (MidSafe)	802-377-0239
WomenSafe.....	800-388-4205

●●● *For more information about confidential
and non-confidential resources,
visit [go/sexualviolenceresources](https://go.middlebury.edu/sexualviolenceresources)*