

Caring for Our Communities

Acknowledgement of Country

This work was created on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people. We affirm that their sovereignty was never ceded and recognise that effects of colonisation are ongoing. We express our commitment to working alongside First Nations people for truth, treaty, and reconciliation.

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Special thanks

This zine was written by a group of Disabled young people, and represents their reflections and advice.

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Responding to Sexual Assault: An Overview

By Aoife Ryall

Recognising harm

The first step in responding to harm is being able to recognise it. Some kinds of harm are pretty apparent, like physical violence. Some kinds of harm or abuse can be more subtle, but they're still not okay. That includes things that harm people emotionally, or controls them and limits their freedom, like insults, taking away things someone relies on (e.g., medicine, mobility aides, comfort objects, etc.), misgendering, or stopping someone from accessing their money.

Sexual assault and rape are words used to describe sexual activity that someone didn't agree to or was not able to fully consent to (for example, if they were drunk). A lot of the time in the media, we see this depicted as violent attacks from strangers at nighttime, and this does happen, but it's not the most common example.

Being pressured or coerced into sex is also sexual assault, and not seeing a lot of other examples can make it harder to recognise the harm that we have experienced from people who are closer to us, or in positions of trust. If someone feels afraid to say no, that's not consent.

Supporting a friend

The most important way to support a friend who is sharing an experience of harm is to listen to them without interrogating them about their experiences or judging them, and to believe them.

Validating their experiences and affirming that it isn't their fault can be useful. It can also be helpful to reflect back the person's articulation of their experience. but if they are blaming themselves or minimising what happened, it's okay to say that it wasn't their fault. You could say that you can hear that they might see what happened one way, but you think they should know that it sounds to you like sexual assault, though it is okay if they don't want to see it like that. Some people find it comforting to have their experiences contextualised; some people don't.

It can be hard to resist the urge to try to throw solutions at people, but ask what your friend needs from you. They might need help navigating services or seeking post-assault healthcare. They might want some low-key movie nights where you don't talk about it at all.

Keep checking in with them about how they're doing. Don't share their story without permission. Seek your own support if you need to.

What happens next

If you've been hurt, or you're supporting someone who's been hurt, it's important to know that you have options. You don't have to decide what to do right away, and you don't have to decide alone. Talking to a trusted friend, a counsellor, or contacting a helpline can all be ways to get advice and support. 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) and the Victorian sexual assault crisis line (1800 806 292) provide information and advice 24/7.

Reporting to the police

Sexual assault and rape can be reported to the police. You can contact the [Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team](#) at your local police station directly, and they may arrange for a forensic medical examination to collect evidence to help prosecute the person who hurt you.

They recommend doing this as soon as possible, as the examination must be done within 72 hours.

You can bring a support person with you, and the police can arrange for someone from the Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault to attend with you. The Victorian Police also have Aboriginal and LGBTQIA+ community liaison officers, who you may wish to speak with first.

If you decide to report, you will be able to access the [Victims Assistance Program](#) through [Victims of Crime](#). They provide a wide range of tailored assistance, which includes assistance communicating with police; assistance with personal safety and home security; organising counselling, transport, and medical services; assistance applying for financial assistance and compensation; and assistance with court. The [Victims of Crime Helpline](#) can also answer questions about the legal process and what to expect, and the support that is available to you if you need to go to court as a witness.

The Office of the Public Advocate has a program called the [Independent Third Person](#), which provides a volunteer support person to assist people with a cognitive or psychosocial disability when making a statement to Victoria Police, or during interviews with Victoria Police.

Depending on your relationship to the person who hurt you, you may also wish to pursue an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) or Personal Safety Intervention Order (PSIO), which are also called restraining orders in other parts of the country. These orders can help keep the person who hurt you away from you or stop them from interacting with you. In this case, it might be useful to speak to someone at a community legal centre (CLC). You can go to www.fclc.org.au to find a local

CLC, or you may wish to go to a community specific legal centre, such as:

- [Asylum Seeker Resource Centre](#)
- [InTouch](#) (services targeting family violence in migrant and refugee communities)
- [Justice Q](#) (run by and for LGBTQIA+ people)
- [Q+Law](#) (for LGBTQIA+SB people)
- [Southside Justice](#) (who have a sex worker legal program)
- [Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service](#)
- [Youthlaw](#)

Not reporting to police

There are lots of reasons why you might not want to go down the path of reporting to police, and that is completely fine. Disabled people, and particularly Disabled people from First Nations communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, and racially and ethnically marginalized communities, have complex histories with law enforcement. For many communities, interactions with police and state institutions can lead to further harm, rather than help. It is okay to decide that you want to minimise your interactions with the police for your own safety or comfort.

Transformative justice is a movement that offers a framework to respond to harm and hold people who use harm accountable within community, without involving the violent systems of the state.

Transformative justice 'seeks to respond to violence

without creating more violence' (Mingus, 2019). Some of the key questions that transformative justice asks us are:

- How do we build communities that are capable of responding to violence?
- How can we transform the conditions that produce violence and allow violence to occur?
- What do survivors need?
- What do people who use harm need?

There are some organisers and networks in Victoria, such as the [Transformative Justice Network](#) and previously [Undercurrent Victoria](#). If you're interested in learning more about transformative justice, this collection of notes produced at the [2017 Transformative Justice Camp](#) is a great place to start.

You have the right to decide who you share your experiences with and what you want to do about them.

References

Mingus, M. (2019). Transformative Justice: a brief description. Transform Harm, https://transformharm.org/tj_resource/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/

It helped when...

- I told a friend what happened, and they just let me talk and talk until I was done
- I read about what other people had been through because then I felt less alone
- time. just time.
- Talking about literally anything else other than who touched me
- My best friend dropped off food
- People asked me what I wanted, and did that
- Someone said, "I believe you. It's not your fault"

It didn't help when...

- Everyone wanted to know exactly what happened
- He said it was my fault
- The psychologist said if I didn't report it, it would be my fault the next time he hurt someone else
- Mum asked what I was wearing
- People kept asking if I needed anything, and I had to figure out what might help and what was okay to ask for and if they really meant it or were just saying it on my own. It was overwhelming
- People treated me like I was so fragile after

- My friends were so afraid of saying the wrong thing, they didn't say anything

Hadassah's Story

By Hadassah (she/her, fae/faer)

AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)

refers to ways of communicating other than verbal speech (e.g., text to speech, picture boards, etc.)

sometimes i talk with my mouthwords. sometimes i talk with my aac.

my aac makes sense to me. when i talk with my mouthwords sometimes they come out wrong. sometimes they come out right but they are so hard to come out at all.

my phone is my aac. it has an app and pictures. it is my voice. my aac makes sense to me. it makes sense to other people too, but only if they listen.

people do not like to listen. when mouthwords are hard and i want to use my aac voice people say i have *communication impairment*. if you don't know how to listen to aac voice i say you have *communication impairment* too.

when things happen to me people say "tell us" but they only mean with mouthwords. people think cannot speak means cannot know.

when i speak with mouthwords i know my own life.
when i go non-verbal, i know my own life still. i
should not be trusted less when i speak with aac.

my communication impairment affects me. if you only
listen and believe if we say in one kind of way, your
communication impairment affects **everyone**

Natalie's story

By Natalie (she/her)

Growing up in rural Victoria as a bisexual Aboriginal disabled kid was isolating, but I really learnt who my real friends were. Courtney was my best mate. She was the first person I came out to, and my aunties loved her, and we were the only Aboriginal kids in our class.

When we were both 17, Courtney was sexually assaulted at a party. When she told me I had no idea what to do. I tried to listen and I'd like to think I helped, but the truth is I don't even remember what I said.

She knew the guy who did it, and she was scared he'd be around again next time. But who could we tell? No one had ever talked to us about sexual assault before, so we didn't know who'd respond well.

When Courtney was younger Child Protective Services had come to investigate her family because she'd missed school a bunch that year for Sorry Business. They hadn't done anything wrong, Sorry Business is mourning, and CPS agreed eventually. But the white social worker was so disrespectful to her family, and Courtney and her parents were both scared they'd be separated.

Even years later it still stuck with her, and she didn't want to talk to any social workers. And we'd both been harassed by cops before. If people keep treating you that badly, why would you think they'd help now?

I know more about how I'd support her now, and I wish I could go back and do it over again.

I also know more about how I'd get support too. It's so important to me to be there for my friends, but I didn't realise how much it can impact you, talking about things like that and being there for someone alone.

I wish I could tell teenage me to take a break sometimes, and that it's okay not to know exactly what to say, and to find someone, even just a different friend, who could support me to support my friends.

Community care: mapping your community

Creating communities where we have people we know and trust, who we support and who support us is how we keep each other safe. Your community might be physical or digital. It might be based on who lives around you, or you might share interests or identities, or you might just be a network of friends.

Crisis can be overwhelming. When something awful happens and we're dealing with pain and fear, that's the hardest time to make decisions. It's easy, in that moment, to feel like there's nothing we can do.

Mapping your community is a way to think about what kind of support and resources are available.

You can ask yourself or each other questions like:

- Who do you know who has a car and doesn't mind giving people lifts?
- Who has at least one dish they can cook and drop off for someone who needs a meal?
- What's your nearest food bank?
- What helplines are good for your timezones? Who can call? What policies do they have?
- Who has first aid training? Is there anywhere you can get first aid training?
- What kinds of emergency or crisis do you feel

well-prepared for? What kinds would you not know where to start?

- When you need to vent, who do you think of first?
- What kinds of support are you good at offering? What's easy to give? What's hard?
- Who has a spare room or couch?
- Who do you talk to often?
- Who's great at looking up local laws and regulations, or filling out long complicated forms?
- _____ (what other kinds of support should be present in your community? What else do you know about?)