

Dear Elders and Community Support People,

It can be difficult to hear that someone has been physically or sexually assaulted or has experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or sexual harassment. The violence of residential school experiences has also had an impact on both individuals and communities as a whole. The reaction of the people a survivor tells can significantly impact her/his decision to seek out help and additional resources. You have been invited to be a support person because people in the community have identified you as someone people can talk to.

Sometimes it is hard to know what to say and how to be supportive when someone tells you about the violence they have experienced. Sometimes people are angry, sometimes sad and sometimes they tell you something and laugh, as if it is unimportant. All of these responses are normal responses to violence. Below are listed some things that may be helpful and you have probably said things like this already to people.

“I’m sorry this happened.” Acknowledge their experience and how it affected their life. You can use words to show you empathize using phrases like “This must be really tough for you” and “I’m so glad you are sharing this with me.”

“It’s not your fault.” Survivors may blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind the person – maybe even more than once – that they are not to blame.

“I believe you.” It can be extremely difficult for people to come forward and share their story. They may feel ashamed or they may fear being blamed for the violence. So when someone shares their experience with you, the best thing you can do is to believe them.

“I’m here to listen.” Remind the person that you are there to listen and try to understand.

“You can trust me.” If a survivor opens up to you, it means they trust you. Reassure them that you won’t judge them and respect them by respecting their privacy.

“Are you open to getting other supports?” Your friend might need other supports, even if the violent experience happened a while ago. You can offer to connect them with formal supports in community.

Should survivors need additional resources to support them in their healing journey from violence, you can offer them the following information:

- Meaghan Fullerton, Therapist, Paqtnkek Health Centre 902-386-2048. Meaghan is in Paqtnkek Monday and Tuesday of each week and every second Wednesday
- Amanda Workman, Women’s Support Worker, Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association. 902-863-6221. Amanda is in Paqtnkek Health Centre every Tuesday.
- Cathrine Chambers and Petra Cross, Therapists, Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association. 902-863-6221. Call for an appointment.
- Adult Mental Health, Antigonish, St. Martha’s Regional Hospital 902-867-4500
- Bernadette Poirer, Family Healing Centre 902-756-3440

Please feel free to contact one of the above workers for yourself, if you notice that you can't stop thinking about what someone has told you, or if you are experiencing overwhelming feelings yourself. It is very common for the "helper" to "debrief" with other helpers following a disclosure. Take care of yourself too!