



# Responding to disclosure of **Sexual Assault for Service Provider Staff**

# What is the **Ready to Listen Project?**

**An estimated 50 sexual assaults take place in residential aged care in Australia every week. Older people also experience sexual assault in their own homes. The trauma they experience is compounded by the lack of education for service providers. With limited knowledge about sexual assault, service providers do not fully understand the power they have to prevent sexual assault.**

Following the disclosure of sexual assault, it's crucial to provide immediate and appropriate support to the older person.

Trauma-informed care is the best practice in supporting victims/survivors of sexual assault.

Here you will find helpful tips for ensuring a victim/survivor is heard, believed, and validated.

This resource was developed for the #ReadyToListen Project, which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and is led by the Older Persons Advocacy Network, in partnership with Celebrate Ageing Ltd and the Older Women's Network, New South Wales.

Find more #ReadyToListen resources at:

**<https://opan.org.au/support/support-for-professionals/ready-to-listen>**



# WE DO...

- Practise active listening
  - displaying positive body language and asking open ended questions
- Provide acknowledgement and validation
- Safety plan with the victim/survivor
- Exercise patience
- Ask them what they need and ask if there is a support person you can contact for them
- Offer the victim/survivor access to an independent advocate
- Offer the person information about sexual assault services
- Ask the resident if they feel safe – and if they do not feel safe, ask what they need to feel safe and ensure those needs are met where possible and appropriate
- Check in on how they are going e.g. 'Is this ok?'
- Where capable of directing their care – respond to the needs articulated by the resident, rather than their family
- Wherever possible give the resident choices about their care and daily life – check what they want
- Knock and wait for permission before entering a resident's room
- Ask permission to assist a resident with activities of daily living e.g. for assistance with showering
- Ask for permission to assist them
- Update them as you progress e.g. 'Now I am going to wash your back' etc.
- Ask permission to change or check a continence pad or bedding before you do it, and always wait to ensure the resident has heard you before starting the change/check
- If a victim/survivor is unable to communicate verbally it is still important to let them know what you are doing, before you do it
- If you are undertaking intimate care at night, turn the light on first to ensure the resident knows you are there and knows what you are doing

- Ask the resident how they are feeling and what they need; and wherever possible and appropriate, meet the need
  - Respect the resident's right to privacy; do not discuss their care needs with other residents or families without their permission
  - Give residents the option to nominate a female staff member for intimate and other care
  - Give residents the option to have a family member present for complex care if they wish
  - Treat the victim/survivor with dignity and respect at all times.
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## WE DO NOT...

- Minimise or downplay any disclosure of sexual assault
- 'Redirect' the victim/survivor to another conversation topic or activity
- Belittle or judge the victim/survivor
- Disclose the sexual assault to anyone unless you are required or requested to
- Encourage gossip amongst the staff, other residents or visitors
- Ignore future indicators of sexual assault
- Ignore pleas for additional support or help
- Stay silent when you know information related to any incident of abuse or sexual assault.

### Phrases for staff to say

- 'I believe you'
- 'You are not alone'
- 'I can hear this is really hard for you'
- 'Thank you for sharing this with me, that took a lot of courage'
- 'I am here to listen and help in any way I can'
- 'It's not your fault and you didn't do anything to deserve this'
- 'Do you currently feel safe?'
- 'What would make you feel safer?'
- 'What can we do to help you feel safer?'

# Community Impact of Sexual Assault

When responding to disclosure of sexual assault in residential aged care the priority is the victim/survivor who should be provided immediate support.

However, the traumatic impact of sexual assault on the person's community should not be ignored. Support needs to be provided to others within the facility including other residents, family and staff.

## Supporting other residents

- Identify whether other residents are aware of the sexual assault
- Reassure residents they are safe; let them know your steps for safety
- If appropriate, facilitate a resident meeting to discuss safety measures (this can be done without breaching privacy of the victim/survivor and alleged harming person)
- Encourage all staff to check in with individual residents, for example, ask residents: 'Did you go to the resident meeting – are you ok, is there anything you need?'
- If appropriate, contact families to reassure them of the steps being taken to prevent sexual assault (this is particularly important if families express concerns about safety) – without breaching privacy of victim/survivor and the harming person
- Thank any residents who have reported sexual assault of another resident
- Ensure messages of support for residents are not a 'one off'. Host a second resident meeting if necessary to reassure residents they are safe.

## Supporting the team

- Support for staff needs to include the whole team – and the messages need to be tailored to each group e.g.:
  - personal care assistants/carers
  - occupational therapy staff
  - clinical staff
  - management
  - receptionists and administration staff
  - catering, domestic and laundry
  - volunteers (where appropriate)
- Organise and facilitate a staff debriefing meeting(s)
- Schedule regular group or one-to-one catch ups with staff to offer support
- Remind staff they have access to the organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) should they wish to speak to someone confidentially
- Request feedback from staff about their interactions with residents, and particularly the victim/survivor and their family
- Acknowledge and validate how staff are feeling.

**NOTE:** Some victims/survivors may not want to talk about their sexual assault. Provide reassurance that they do not have to, but can if they want to.

Let them know what you will do with any information they disclose if they do choose to talk to you later on and what you may be able to do to help them (e.g. explore safety options).

# Safety Planning

To empower a victim/survivor to regain their power and control following a sexual assault it is crucial to support them and their wants/needs every step of the way.

The first step in the process is to ensure their psychological and physical safety is protected.

## Potential strategies

- Option to move rooms, units or wings
- Providing the option for female only staff
- Providing two staff for intimate care
- Asking permission if you are going to touch someone's body
- Providing information about accessing sexual assault services
- Requesting the alleged perpetrator be prevented from having any access to the victim/survivor
- Providing a personal alarm to the victim/survivor
- Implementing regular safety check-ins by trusted staff
- Moving facilities.

## Follow-up strategies

- Ensure all appropriate strategies are documented in a safety plan
- Effectively communicate that a safety plan has been developed and implemented with all relevant staff
- With consent, conduct regular check-ins to monitor the safety and wellbeing of the person
- Regularly review the safety plan to ascertain whether the plan continues to meet the goals and needs of the victim/survivor
- Immediately address any concerns if they are still feeling unsafe and/or the plan has not been adequately followed.

## Who is Advocare?

Advocare is a leader in addressing the rights of older people and elder abuse.

For close to 30 years, we have proudly helped older Western Australians access the right supports, information and protections available to them.

We are a not-for-profit organisation, completely independent from aged care providers.

Advocare is also the custodian of WA's Seniors Peak Body to amplify the voice of older people.



# Advocare

Empowering older people in WA

📞 Aged Care Advocacy Line: **1800 700 600**  
WA Elder Abuse Helpline: **1300 724 679**

✉ [rights@advocare.org.au](mailto:rights@advocare.org.au)

🌐 [www.advocare.org.au](http://www.advocare.org.au)