

Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence

Talking about an experience of sexual violence can be extremely difficult for survivors and the reaction of the person they reach out to can determine how they access support going forward.

A student could approach any member of staff, at any time, to seek support, so understanding how to respond in this interaction is key in appropriately supporting students and acting in their best interests.

First response

- Remain calm and grounded – this will help the student manage their own emotions.
- Gently interrupt to ensure you do not hear too much detail. For example, *“Can I just pause you there – this sounds like an incredibly difficult experience and I am so glad you’re talking to me, but I want to make sure I can connect you with someone who is qualified to support and advise you properly. Before you go into more detail, can I share some information about the services available to you?”*. This will ensure that the student does not need to repeat their disclosure to too many people, as this can be extremely emotionally taxing. It will also protect you from hearing things that are very upsetting and which may have unintended consequences for any later legal proceedings.
- Consider immediate and urgent needs – for example, do they need an ambulance or medical treatment? Have they asked for the police to be called? Does forensic evidence need to be preserved?

Respect

- Maximise the student’s control of the situation. For example, offer them choice of how, when and where they access support without any pressure.
- Believe the student. Fear of not being believed is one of the biggest barriers survivors face when seeking support. It is not our role to judge whether someone is telling the truth.
- Remain compassionate and non-judgemental throughout. Avoid expressing shock or trying to problem solve, instead focus on listening.

- Unless there is concern about an imminent risk of serious harm or a statutory safeguarding concern, only share information with other services or individuals with the student's consent. It is best practise to explain when you can and cannot keep information to yourself prior to a conversation, to allow the student greater choice about what they tell you.
- Be mindful of the questions you ask and the language you use. Don't try to label, define or describe someone else's experience for them. People process things in different ways and at difference rates. Asking too many questions or using language that isn't the student's own may make them question, doubt or reframe their experience.

Support

Signpost the student on to the Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service. The service provides confidential, impartial emotional and practical advice and support, guiding students on their next steps. This might involve talking through reporting options, thinking about their emotional and physical health needs and supporting them to manage their safety and academics moving forward.

Referrals

Students can self-refer or be referred with your consent.

Self-referral form: www.ox.ac.uk/self-refer

Third-party referral form: <https://titanium-web.admin.ox.ac.uk/TitaniumWeb/SHVSS/third-party>

Website: Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service | University of Oxford

No-names consultations

Not sure what to do? Reach out to the Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service for a no-names consultation or debrief.

Email: supportservice@admin.ox.ac.uk

Further information is available: <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/sexual-harassment-and-violence>