

Sexual assault of older people: Information for family and friends

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault includes any behaviour of a sexual nature which:

- makes the victim feel uncomfortable or afraid, OR
- is unwanted, OR
- occurs without their consent.

This may include

- Touching, fondling or kissing or being forced to touch someone.
- Putting a penis, object or other body part in your vagina or anus, or any contact between mouth and genitals.
- Being made to look at, or pose for, pornographic photos/videos.
- Being watched while you are made to perform sexual acts.
- Being forced to watch anyone perform sexual acts.
- Unwanted sexual talking or language suggestive of sex.

Myths about older people and sexual assault

- Older people are asexual because sexuality is only experienced in youth
- Older people do not experience sexual assault
- Older people do not require the same level of privacy and care around sensitive issues
- Older people make up stories, are confused or are demented

Signs that may indicate that an older person has been sexually assaulted

Physical evidence

- Non-specific symptoms such as abdominal pain or migraines
- Bruising or trauma of breasts, genitals, thighs or rectal area
- Semen stains
- Sexually transmitted infections: Itching, inflammation or infection

Behavioural indicators

- Extreme fear of a particular person or place or paying an unusual amount of attention to a person or place
- Extreme fear of using the bathroom, fear of medical procedures around the genital area or fear of disrobing
- Sudden increase in destructive behaviours
- Lack of interest in usual activities
- Social isolation and withdrawal
- Inability to concentrate
- Displays of new, inappropriate sexual or aggressive behaviours
- Disturbances of sleeping, eating or bathroom habits
- Indicating that they have a secret

If you suspect that an older friend or relative has been sexually assaulted

It is important to ensure that they are safe and that they receive the support they need in the aftermath of an assault.

If you believe an older person may have been assaulted, you or someone they trust should approach them with open ended questions that focus on their wellbeing rather than sexual assault.

Some useful questions to ask

- “Has anything been bothering you lately?”
- “I’ve noticed a change in _____, can you tell me how/why this has happened?”
- “Is anything making you feel unsafe or uncomfortable?”

Responding to a disclosure

Your friend or relative may disclose a recent assault or an assault that has occurred earlier in their life. It is important to be aware that the way you respond to a disclosure can have a direct impact on an older person’s ability to cope and recover in the long term.

Important tips

- Set aside enough time to address their feelings and reaffirm their trust in you
- Use open ended questions where possible
- Try to stay calm and contain your emotions to avoid making them feel that they are upsetting you
- Try to contain feelings of anger toward the alleged offender and suspend any discussion of taking further action

Deciding what to do next

You can provide your relative or friend with the support they need by contacting your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA). They can provide important counselling, options for further action and further information and advice.

Ensure that the victim survivor understands that they will not be forced to take any action, and that the primary focus is on supporting them and their decisions.

It is also extremely important that **you** receive all the support and information that you need, as this can be a very stressful and emotional time. CASAs offer confidential counselling to friends and family of victims of sexual assault, as well as providing useful advice and information on how you can support friends or family who have experienced sexual assault.

CASAs can

- Provide confidential crisis and ongoing counselling for victim survivors
- Discuss options and provide information on contacting the police and conducting forensic examinations if this is requested
- Provide legal information and support in court if required
- Provide information and counselling to **yourself** or other family or friends who require additional support

Contacting support services and further resources

- **SECASA crisis line (24 hrs):** (03) 9594 2289
- **Sexual Assault Crisis Line (SACL):** Call 1800 806 292 (Freecall Victoria) www.sacl.com.au
- **SECASA for family and friends:** www.secasa.com.au/articles/tag/family-and-friends
- **Victims of Crime Helpline:** Freecall 1800 819 817, TTY: 133 677
- **Victims Referral and Assistance Service:** Call 1800 819 817 (toll free)
- **Sexual Assault in Disability and Aged Care (SADA) Project:** www.sadaproject.org.au

South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault is a service of Southern Health
(03) 9928 8741 (administration) (03) 9594 2289 (CRISIS LINE) www.secasa.com.au