

HOW YOU CAN HELP Survivors of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is prevalent in Maine. Nearly one in five adult Maine residents report that they have been the victim of rape or attempted rape during their lifetime.¹

Sexual violence is devastating to victims and can have long-lasting effects which may include depression, drug and alcohol problems, eating disorders, an increased risk for attempting suicide, and other medical and psychological problems.

It is important that you routinely assess all patients for sexual assault. It's important to ask each year, because sexual assault can happen at any point in someone's life. It also will show your patients that you understand that their answer may change over their lifetime. Many victims want to tell their health care providers about the sexual violence they have experienced and discuss how that experience may impact their ability to receive health care.

Some helpful ways to open the conversation:

"Many of the patients I see have experienced sexual assault or abuse so I have started asking about it routinely."

"By asking you about your sexual experiences, both wanted and unwanted, I can have a better understanding about your overall health and how to provide the best care."

It's best to ask simple, direct questions and avoid medical or technical jargon.

"Have you ever been made to engage in sexual activity against your will or without your consent?"

"Has anyone ever forced you to engage in sexual activity that you did not want to engage in?"

"Do you feel you have control over your sexual relationships and will be listened to if you say "no" to sexual activity?"

1. Dumont, R & Shaler, G. (2015). Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine.

Be supportive and avoid victim-blaming language. Say things such as:

"What happened to you is not your fault. No one deserves to be sexually assaulted."

"Thank you for sharing this with me. I understand it must be difficult for you to talk about."

"You are not alone and there are people who can help you. I can give you a phone number for confidential services."

"Sexual violence can be devastating. Do you want to talk about how the experience may have affected you? Would you like to discuss the support resources that are available to you?"

Regarding physical exams, you might say: "I know that sometimes a person who has been sexually assaulted may have some difficulty with routine healthcare practices, and may have discomfort with being touched. I'm wondering if you have any of those concerns and what we can do together to help make that more comfortable for you?"

Referrals can be helpful. Encourage your patient to contact the statewide sexual assault crisis and support line.

Let him or her know this number is available to anyone, regardless of when they were victimized. Inform your patient that this number is free and confidential. Let him or her know the number is available 24-hours a day.

The number: 1-800-871-7741 (or TTY: 1-888-458-5599).

Ask your patient if he/she would like any information about sexual violence. Offer brochures provided by your local sexual assault support center or the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA), as well as any other informational material you may have.

Make sure that your patient is currently safe at home and in his or her relationship. Document findings and schedule a follow-up appointment if necessary.

Questions? Contact MECASA at 207-626-0034 or visit mecasa.org.

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