By visiting the CAASHA website, you have already made a very important step in supporting your friend. It can be hard to know how to respond when a friend shares something of this magnitude with us, and sometimes our gut reactions can cause more harm than good. Here are some important tips for supporting a friend.

Your friend may go through a variety of emotions and responses. These changes may occur over the course of a day, a year, or even longer, and may be triggered by events, locations, conversations, or even songs. Remember that whatever your friend is feeling is valid. Tell them that, and show them that you mean it by validating what they say and the decisions they make. Don’t try to take control of the situation by forcing them to do anything that may make them uncomfortable. Familiarize yourself with the resources available, and present them as options, but ultimately your friend should be the one to decide if, when, where, and how he or she would like to take action.

When talking with your friend, be extra aware of the implications of the words you choose. Phrases like “I’m sorry” put your friend in the position of then having to comfort you by saying “no, it’s ok.” It’s not ok.

Your instinct might be to comfort your friend with hugs and hand-holding, which, depending on the person, might be exactly what they want. Make sure to ask though, because this can also feel like another invasion of their body or personal space. Asking what your friend wants and is comfortable with is another way of showing that you care about and respect them. Give your friend choices and ask what they would like from you.

Another common response to hearing that someone has harmed your friend is to want to confront, or even hurt, that person. However, keep in mind that your friend has already experienced violence and pain--having a friend become angrily violent can only hurt more. Even if you don’t intend on acting on it, saying in front of your friend that you want “to get back at them” can put your friend in the position of feeling the need to defend someone who has harmed them. More often than not, sexual assault happens between acquaintances, close friends, or significant others, and is not perpetrated by a stranger. This shared history does not excuse the behavior or diminish the survivor’s experience, but can often cause further confusion or frustration.

By reading the other sections of this website and educating yourself of the resources available, you may be able to inform your friend of the choices available to them. If you feel comfortable doing so, you may also be able to offer your friend other forms of support. A safety plan may
make your friend feel more comfortable, and, depending on the specific experience and needs of
the survivor at that time, may include brainstorming answers to questions like, "Who can you
call when you feel unsafe?" “Are you comfortable seeing the other individual?” And if not,
“What can you do to avoid encountering them or to feel more comfortable in situations where
you may be together?” “Are there routes, pathways or buildings you feel safer in?” “Would you
like a friend or campus security to walk with you or go ahead of you?” “Would carrying a
whistle or other defense help you feel safe?” Etcetera. Thinking about situations that may arise
may make your friend feel more prepared and equipped to safely respond, but is not necessarily a
conversation a survivor will be ready to have right away.

Pay attention to the way in which you are handling the situation as well, with special notice to
your own emotional, physical and mental health. Know that there are many different ways of
obtaining support, and that networks are often stronger than single individuals. All of the
resources listed in the "Ongoing Resources" section are available to you as well and it is healthy
for you to consider the support you may need or want. No one needs to go through this alone.