



## Addressing and Preventing Sexual Abuse in Relationships and in your Community

April is [National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month](#). This month, and throughout the year, the Department of Defense stands with victims through a commitment to holistic services that respond to sexual assault and abuse and comprise an ongoing investment in prevention. Our goal is to realize a military culture based on respect and free from sexual assault and abuse.

Sexual assault is one form of abusive and other harmful behaviors that lie on a continuum of sexual violence, including, but not limited to, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contact, and sexual abuse by an intimate partner. Unfortunately, in both [the military](#) and [civilian](#) communities, sexual assault is more common than most people realize. Experiencing sexual assault or abuse is often associated with both immediate and long-term physical, mental and emotional [health issues](#), including substance misuse, heart disease, depression, and [economic losses](#), such as the inability to work. The Department of Defense has emphasized preventing and responding to sexual assault amongst military members including between intimate partners.

**If you have experienced sexual abuse or any other form of physical violence, or threat of violence from your spouse or partner, this can be a [red flag](#) for ongoing serious harm and risk to you, and your children, if you have any.**

In a relationship, sexual assault can include a range of harmful, coercive behaviors. These may take the form of pressure from a partner to engage in sexual acts that make the other feel afraid, unsafe or uncomfortable; rape, including one partner being forced to penetrate the other; and reproductive coercion—in which one partner intentionally tampers with the other's preferred use of contraception, for example, by hiding birth control pills, refusing to wear a condom during intercourse, or unilaterally forcing a decision on whether to become parents. Sexual coercion may also happen when one partner controls the other's medication used to manage other health conditions.

Because physical intimacy is a natural part of most romantic relationships, some affected individuals may not know that feeling unsafe or even upset by a sexual encounter with their spouse or partner can constitute abuse. Furthermore, their feelings may be dismissed or minimized due to social, religious or other pressures to please their partner, at all costs. However, everyone deserves trust and mutual respect in their relationships. If something doesn't feel right, victims need to know that help is available. A first step can be calling the installation's [Family Advocacy Program \(FAP\)](#), to speak with a victim advocate who will listen to concerns and help determine next steps, like whether to [make a report](#) of the abuse, how to access medical care, including counseling services, or a sexual assault forensic exam, and how to make a plan for immediate emotional and physical safety. A FAP victim advocate can also help identify community-based, civilian assistance if the person wishes to seek alternatives to military-based resources.



FAP is the designated military provider for prevention and response to domestic and intimate partner abuse and works in coordination with the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) to ensure victims receive the protections to which they are entitled, and support through an integrated network of care, including access to the [Safe Helpline](#), a hotline for members of the DoD community affected by sexual assault. Safe Helpline is a completely anonymous, confidential, specialized service providing one-on-one help and information to members of the military community, as well as their friends, adult family members, and intimate partners, 24 hours a day, and 7 days a week—wherever they may be. Safe Helpline will refer sexual assault or abuse that occurs within the context of a romantic relationship or that involves a child to a FAP victim advocate or civilian domestic violence program.

The good news is that sexual violence is preventable. There are things that do to help create and sustain a military community where everyone's personal boundaries and safety is respected. DoD's approach to [prevent sexual assault](#) and domestic and intimate partner abuse, along with a range of violent and harmful behaviors, is based on [proven approaches](#) that apply to all kinds of relationships in military life. This includes promoting attitudes and beliefs across our military culture that discourage the use of violence in relationships and promote positive, healthy behaviors and relationships. Many people view prevention as stopping a sexual assault in the moment [by stepping in as a bystander](#). However, there are other impactful ways to discourage violence in our everyday interactions. You can also help by [modeling healthy relationships](#) that set expectations for caring, respectful, and non-violent behaviors, and encourage your peers to do the same. Parents can support their children to learn healthy relationship and life skills by exploring the [Dating Matters toolkit](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Finally, our interactions with co-workers should also reflect dignity, respect, and inclusion.

The Department of Defense is committed to supporting everyone in the military community -Service members and their families, and civilian personnel— to maintain safe, stable and supportive relationships free from sexual violence. The recent national emergency spurred by COVID-19 is no exception. FAP has compile additional [safety tips and resources](#) for navigating relationship safety during COVID-19 Pandemic. Our work as a Total Force to both to prevent and respond to violent, abusive and harmful behaviors is fundamental to promoting a military culture based on respect. Together, we can prevent sexual violence and ensure that all people get the services and support they need.

*If you, or someone you know, is feeling unsafe or unsure from a sexual experience with an intimate partner or spouse, or is seeking help for a sexual assault, you can call your installation FAP to [speak with a victim advocate](#), or contact an advocate through the [DoD Safe Helpline](#) at 877-995-5247. Civilian options for support through the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#), or the [National Sexual Assault Hotline](#), are also available.*

*If you are a military leader or prevention professional, visit [SAPR Connect](#), an online platform to collaborate and share ideas, research, insights from experts, and news from the field. This collaborative community of practice is critical to ensuring DoD has dynamic and proactive sexual assault prevention efforts. Join our community and help us spark conversation and prevention action.*

