

Responding to Campus Sexual Harassment & Abuse

Suggestions for FAMILIES

Why we're sharing this now

In recent weeks, national news coverage of an alleged sexual assault at Cornell University, including a lawsuit filed by a former student, a reopened criminal investigation, and an independent review of the university's response has sparked conversations on campuses across the country, including ours. Coverage like this can raise hard questions for families: Is my student safe? Would they tell me if something happened? How would the school respond? Whether or not your student has been personally affected, this guide offers ways to stay connected, respond with care, and point them toward support at William & Mary.

What to KNOW. . .

Common reactions may include	<i>Shock, fear, anxiety, anger, shame, self-blame, numbness, confusion, trouble sleeping or concentrating, pulling away from others, or difficulty trusting people.</i>
High-profile news can affect any student	<i>Cases like Cornell's can stir up fear, anger, or memories of past experiences, even for students with no direct connection to the event.</i>
Harassment and abuse take many forms	<i>Unwanted comments or messages, stalking, coercion, dating or relationship abuse, and sexual assault. Survivors deserve to be believed and supported.</i>
Most students know the person who caused harm	<i>Harm often involves a peer, partner, or friend, which can make it harder to name what happened or to tell anyone.</i>
Your student may or may not want to talk	<i>Many students first confide in a friend or wait a long time before telling family. Be sensitive to their pace.</i>
Your student is in control of their choices	<i>Survivors decide whether, when, and how to report. Pressure, even when well-meant, can take control away again.</i>
Confidential and reporting options are different	<i>The Haven is confidential: talking to that office does not create a report, and staff can help your student explore emotional, academic, housing, and safety supports. The Office of Compliance & Equity receives formal Title IX reports and coordinates university responses. William & Mary Police investigate crimes and can offer civil protections.</i>
Healing is not linear	<i>Effects can surface weeks or months later, around anniversaries, or when similar stories return to the news.</i>
It is important to stay informed	<i>Rely on university communications and reputable reporting rather than social media speculation.</i>

What to DO & SAY. . .

Believe them	<i>"I believe you. Thank you for trusting me with this."</i>
Remind them it is not their fault	<i>"Nothing you did caused this. It is not your fault."</i>
Listen without judgment	<i>Avoid "why" questions about drinking, clothing, or choices. Even gentle ones can sound like blame.</i>
Let them lead	<i>"What would feel most helpful for you right now?"</i>
Respect their decisions	<i>Support their choices about reporting and next steps, even if you would choose differently.</i>
Manage your own reactions	<i>Your anger, fear, or grief is valid. Lean on someone else for support so your student doesn't feel responsible for you.</i>
Open the door, even if nothing has happened	<i>"Have you been following the Cornell news? How are you feeling about it?"</i>
Share resources, don't force them	<i>"The Haven is confidential. Want me to help you find their information?"</i>
Stay in touch over time	<i>"I'm still thinking about you. How are you doing this week?"</i>
You don't need all the answers	<i>"I don't know exactly what to say, but I love you and I'm here."</i>
Know when to get more help	<i>Big changes in sleep, eating, grades, or substance use, or any mention of self-harm, are signs to connect your student with the Counseling Center or call 911 in an emergency.</i>

The Haven (Confidential) - Confidential support for anyone impacted by sexual violence, harassment, relationship abuse, or stalking. No report is made. (757) 221-2449 | Sadler Center, Suite 146P | wm.edu/offices/thehaven

Office of Compliance & Equity (Title IX Reporting) - Receives reports of sexual harassment and misconduct and coordinates supportive measures and formal processes. (757) 221-2743 | James Blair Hall, Suite 101-116 | wm.edu/report

Emergency: 911 or W&M Police (757) 221-4596 | **W&M Counseling Center** (757)221-3620 | **24/7 confidential advocacy:** Avalon (757) 258-5051