

# In This Together

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Supporting Survivors  
of Sexual Violence



ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITIES AGAINST ABUSE



# In This Together

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Supporting Survivors  
of Sexual Violence



 1 (866) 807-3558

 [info@acaahelps.ca](mailto:info@acaahelps.ca)

[acaahelps.ca](http://acaahelps.ca)



For immediate assistance, please call, text or chat with trained and specialized sexual violence service providers on **Alberta's One Line: 1-866-403-8000**

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This service offers supportive listening and information about sexual violence, tools for coping with the impacts of trauma and provides resources and options. You will never have to talk about anything you don't want to.

*We always do our best to ensure that conversations on the support and information lines are confidential, but there are some circumstances in which we may have to break this confidentiality. If it is known or suspected that anyone under the age of 18 is being hurt, Albertans are legally obligated to make a report to Children's Services. Additionally, if we suspect someone might harm themselves or others we may be required to reach out to authorities. In both of these instances contacting authorities is our last resort; we value and work to preserve the confidentiality of our calls.*

*When I listened to her, I understood: You have to hold out to see how your life unfolds, because it is most likely beyond what you can imagine. It is not a question of if you will survive this, but what beautiful things await you when you do. I had to believe her, because she was living proof. Then she said, good and bad things come from the universe holding hands. Wait for the good to come.*

Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*



This booklet is dedicated to those who seek to support survivors of sexual violence. No one can heal alone, and in moments of **sheer vulnerability**, you are positioned to do **so much good**. With you, there is hope.

And in case you needed a reminder, **you already have what it takes** to be an incredible and life changing support to someone who has been sexually violated.



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When the Rug  
Gets Pulled Out  
From Under You...

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When you learn that someone close to you has been harmed by someone else, your sense of security and stability can be shaken to its core, and you might not even have words for the immense and overwhelming emotions and thoughts you are experiencing.

Supporting a survivor of sexual abuse or assault can be an incredible privilege, as you are trusted with their very personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It can also be very challenging to witness a loved one feel immense pain, knowing you can't just 'fix it', and that the only person who could have stopped this, was the person who chose to cause harm.

This is all compounded if you have experiences of your own that make supporting them challenging.

As you move through this booklet, please remember that while you may feel helpless, knowing that you cannot take away the pain of the person who has been harmed, your presence, compassion, patience and connection is exactly what is needed to support healing.

# About consent

Sexual consent is when people engage in sexual activity, online or in person, that they want and are comfortable with. This can change during sexual activity, or over time.

## Practicing consent means that:

Each person feels free to say yes, no, or to change their mind at any point.

if someone doesn't feel safe to say no or change their mind, they likely aren't consenting

There are times when people can't consent (even if they say yes), because they can't freely choose. This could be if they are:

- Heavily affected by drugs, alcohol or medication
- Sleeping or unconscious
- Manipulated or threatened into participating
- In a power difference, such as age or authority (teacher, coach, employer, landlord)

A person has to do or say something to clearly communicate that they want the sexual activity.

- You can't assume someone is consenting because they don't say no.
- Just because they agree to one sexual activity, does not mean they consent to another.

# sexual x violence

When consent is not practiced by everyone involved in a sexual activity, it is called sexual violence. Sexual violence is a term to describe any act, in person or online, that uses sex or sexuality to degrade, humiliate, or take control away from another person.

**Sexual violence can be in person or online, and can include:**

Comments, jokes or speculation about one's sex life, history or sexuality.

Sharing someone's sexual or intimate images with others without consent.

Sexual activity that is gained through pressure, threats, or where someone feels like they need to 'give in'.

Sexual activity when someone isn't of clear mind. They may be drunk, high, sleeping or on heavy medication and be unable to make a decision based on their needs and desires in that moment.

Sexual activity or relationships where one person has more power than the other due to position (coach, tutor, teacher, parent/guardian, landlord) or age.



# How do we practice consent?

✓ Check in!

“Is this ok?”

✓ Normalize refusing or changing our minds and being ok with it.

“I’m not into this right now  
Maybe later.”

✓ Show you’re totally cool with being refused.

“If you’re not into this, can we  
try something else?”

And don’t forget, we do this all the time, with all kinds of people, in all kinds of places. We’re already pros at practicing consent, so there’s no reason we can’t use these skills in sexual relationships too.

“Want to grab a pizza?”  
“Not today, maybe later?”

“I know we talked about watching a comedy, but I’m wondering if you’d be into a thriller instead?”

“I’d be down for that!”

# A Supportive Response

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How we support the people in our lives who have been sexually violated by someone else can impact how and if they continue to share their story and feelings, the level of self blame and shame they feel, and the network of support they experience, which can shape the trajectory of their experience of healing.

## Care that promotes healing:

- Gives control back to the survivor
- Reminds them they are not alone
- Offers options and resources that match their concerns and needs
- Takes the survivors' lead in timing and intensity
- Is open and transparent about limits to confidentiality and types of support
- Reassures the survivor that this information does not change how you feel about them or your relationship

If a friend were to tell you that someone had sexually assaulted them, what would you want them to...

## *Feel?*

- Cared for
- Supported
- Believed
- Heard

## *Know?*

- Their options
- Resources
- That they have control over their story and next steps
- That they can trust you with their story
- That this isn't the only time we can talk about this. This conversation can be ongoing

## *Believe?*

- They are not alone
- It was not their fault

# Messages That Support **healing**

*“ I believe you. ”*

Even though it might feel like you won't be believed.

*“ You are not alone. ”*

No one can get through this on their own, and you have their back. If there is a reason you can't continue to provide support over the long term, there are others who can and want to.

*“ You can take your time. ”*

There is no rush in telling anyone what happened, and everyone heals on their own timeline.

*“ You get to choose. ”*

If or when to seek counselling, report, get medical advice or whether you want to share this with anyone else.

*“ There is help. ”*

If you do want to do any of those things.

*“ This was not your fault. ”*

The only person who could have stopped the harm, is the person who caused it. Nothing you did brought this on, and you did not deserve for that person to hurt you.

*Trauma is the ultimate experience of helplessness. If we could have stopped it, we would have.*

Dr. Michael Barnes

There is no one right way to convey these messages. We all use different styles, language and approaches when connecting with survivors and offering support. You might use words, you might use body language, and you might simply be present.

# Great responses offer Support, Information, Choice & Control.

## Support

*When you are reaching out for help, what is it that makes you glad you did?*

When we are feeling vulnerable or are hurting, feeling seen, like someone else 'gets me' and hearing me can be the most helpful thing. Do not underestimate the value of your presence, believing them, and reinforcing that this was not their fault. Reinforce that their feelings are real, valid, and won't scare you, even if they can feel big and scary.

*Listen and allow silence. One of the best things you can do is simply listen.*

*Invite them to tell their story in their own words and at their own pace.*

The survivor chooses how much, or how little, to share. Do not press for more details than they offer. Leave it to that person to share as much or as little detail as they are comfortable with. You do not need to know every detail to offer great support.

Let the person you are supporting know that it is okay to take a break in telling their story. You can assure them that they can take as much time as they need.

**"I'm so glad you told me. That must have been hard."**

**"I'm here for you."**

**"Only share what you want to."**

**"This was never your fault. There was nothing you could have done to stop what someone else chose to do."**

**"It's totally normal to feel all those things. You can miss the person who hurt you, and also be enraged, sad and terrified."**

## Information

Clear information about options, choices and what to expect can bring about a great sense of relief after someone has experienced the helplessness of sexual violence. This might include information about community resources like counselling, medical examinations, or reporting options. Provide information based on the survivor's needs, timing, questions and concerns. If they have no interest in reporting to the police, information about this might feel like pressure. It might include information about their rights, and resources available to support them.

**“There are some amazing counsellors who can help you understand and process these feelings. If you're interested, I can give you some information about how to reach out.”**

**“If you are interested in getting a medical exam or Sexual Assault Examination Kit completed, we can look into where to go, what to expect and what your options would be there.”**

Or they might not be looking for information at all.  
**They might have just wanted to tell you.**

# Choice

Sexual violence is an act of perpetration that removes any sense of choice from the person who was harmed. Restoring the right to make choices around how to move forward can make strides toward healing. The choices we offer might be open or might contain 2-3 options. If too many choices are overwhelming for your loved one, consider offering a couple to start with, and give time to decide which one feels better or aligns with their goals and values.

**“What do you need to feel supported?”**

**“Is there anyone else you would like to talk to about this?”**

**“You can tell me as much or as little as you want”**

**“Do you want me to connect with you about this later this week? Would you rather contact me?”**

**“Do you want to know more about the process moving forward, or do you feel like you have enough information for now?”**

**“Would you like me to come with you to this appointment, or would you rather be alone?”**

**“You can report to police now, later, or never. I'll support you no matter what your choice is.”**

**“If you go to the doctor, you get to decide what they examine, and can change your mind at any time.”**

## Control

Once choices are offered, the next step is letting the survivor make these choices for themselves. This can be challenging for some supporters, as we might have our own ideas about what choices are best. This can be dis-intuitive, as we sometimes believe that when someone is coming to us for help, they want guidance or for us to make the decisions. Someone who has been sexually violated has had all of their control removed from them, and as supporters we are in the unique and privileged position to help them regain it. Letting the survivor make all the decisions, with clear information about their choices can be incredibly empowering for them. This is especially important when making decisions related to others knowing, including friends, family, police, and medical professionals. We don't need to understand WHY a survivor makes particular choices. We just need to have their back while they do.

**“We can find the information you need to make a decision, but you know yourself best and will choose the right thing for you”**

**“I can't tell you what I would do, because I'm not you. This is something you get to choose, for you”**

**“Whatever you choose, I'm here for you.”**

**“You don't need to decide today.”**

Once someone has told you that someone has hurt them, you may not need to do anything except **hold space and be present**. They may not want to do anything beyond telling you.

# Things *NOT* To Do

## **DO NOT**

Ask for details or information about the sexual violence. This can be re-traumatizing for the survivor and can give them the impression that you don't believe them or are looking for evidence to support their story. It is not your job to investigate, and the most important role you can play is in offering compassionate support, choices and information.

## **DO NOT**

Give advice. While we might want to help by offering suggestions, giving advice can lead the survivor to feel like you don't trust their decisions, or that someone else knows what's better for them than they do.

## **DO NOT**

Tell anyone else without the survivor's permission. This is their story, and it is critical that they control how or if it is shared. There are limits to confidentiality when the survivor is under 18 years old, or there are institutional policies that require further disclosure. Ensure the survivor is aware of these policies and offer as much choice and control as possible.

## **DO NOT**

Make promises you can't keep. Only take on what you can handle, and if you are unsure about something like whether you have to share information with someone else, let the survivor know.

# After They Share

Once someone has shared a personal and vulnerable experience of sexual violence, they may feel exposed and unsure about how you feel about them or where their story will go. They may also be concerned about your wellbeing, after hearing it.

## During or after the conversation:

- Let the survivor know that this does not change how you feel about them
- Reassure them that you can handle what they've shared, and that you have ways to take care of yourself and will be ok
- Let them know that their information is private, and you will not share it with anyone. If you are obligated to share it with someone else, be clear about this and offer choice in how this is done
- Ask the survivor how or if they would like to talk about this again. Validate that it can be hard to bring up and ask if it's ok for you to check in again, if they would rather bring it up in their own time, or if they're ok for now

**“You are not alone”**

**“I am so glad you told me”**

**“What someone else did to you was not your fault”**

**“I’m with you”**

# Privacy

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When we are going through something personal or upsetting, we might prefer to take time to digest it, understand it and share it when we are ready. Sometimes we just need to talk about it with someone, even if it's just to get it out. Regardless of the survivors' style, it is critical that they have ownership of their story. This means that they get to decide who they share it with, how, when, and even if they share it with anyone else.

As someone who is supporting them, you might want them to report it to the police, go talk to a counsellor, or tell someone else who might be able to help.

**This reaction as a support person is completely normal, because you may:**

- Feel overwhelmed with the thought of being the only person who knows
- Want the person who caused the harm to be held accountable
- Want to make stop the person from harming someone else

However, if a survivor wants to share their story with others, they will do so. Quietly acknowledging your own wishes and recognizing that they are grounded in a desire for justice and healing can help to validate your own experience as a supporter.

Sharing someone else's story of sexual violence without their permission can stop them from trusting others (including you), bring about further feelings of helplessness, and expose them to consequences they aren't ready for.

Additionally, if someone tells you that they are transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit, etc., it is important to keep that information confidential.

## *Limits To Privacy*

There are times when sexual abuse or assault cannot be kept private.

### **Children's Services must be notified if:**

- If a child or youth under the age of 18 is or has been harmed by their parent or guardian.
- If a child or youth under the age of 18 has been harmed and their parent or guardian is unable or unwilling to take measures to keep them safe.
- If the sexual abuse involves an exchange of goods (money, phone, housing).
- If the person who is accused of sexually abusing the child or youth has other children in their care.

Need more support or have questions? Contact:

**ACAA: 1-866-807-3558**

**Alberta's One Line: 1-866-403-8000**

Some organizations or institutions have policies that require sexual violence be disclosed if it becomes known. This can be challenging for the survivor if they were not aware of these policies when they told someone and do not want it shared. It can also be challenging for the person supporting them, to offer the survivor support, choice and control while following the policies.

If you receive a disclosure of sexual violence within the context of an organisation that requires you to share, continue to offer **support**, **information**, **choice** and **control**.

## Support

- Ensure the survivor feels heard, believed, accepted and is aware of the scope of your support.

## Information

- What are the survivor's rights within the organisation? To privacy, safety, and involvement in the process.
- Be clear and transparent about the policies and reporting obligations that require you to share.
- Find the details of the policy and reporting obligations and ensure the survivor has as much information as possible about them.

## Choice

- The survivor may have choice related to how it is shared, with whom, how it is documented, and what happens next.

## Control

- Where there is choice, ensure the survivor gets to decide
- This might include timing, location and people involved in the report, and next steps.

ACAA will support any survivor of sexual violence by providing information about the reporting process, what to expect, and working with local law enforcement to answer any questions.

For questions about the Criminal Legal System, and information about how to report, what to expect, and support with any aspect of it, please contact **ACAA's Specialized Criminal Justice Navigation Program** at 1-866-807-3558

# Options

Each survivor has their own priorities, concerns and needs, and their healing journeys are all unique. If they are interested in exploring options, it can be helpful to talk them through. They get to choose whether any of these options are right for them and have the right to change their mind at any time.

## Medical Care

Survivors may contact their local physician, urgent care centre or hospital emergency department for medical care, STI testing / treatment, pregnancy testing at any point. Medical care is also an option provided by the Sexual Assault Response Teams (SART) in Edmonton or Red Deer.

## Sexual Assault Examination Kit

The Sexual Assault Response Team can offer a sexual assault examination kit to take evidence from the survivor's body. This evidence can be stored for one year while they decide whether to report to the police (this is called the Third Option) or be used by police as part of the investigation immediately, if the survivor knows they want to report.

## Reporting to Police

Survivors have the right to decide whether they want to report to the police or RCMP about the violence perpetrated against them. There is no Statute of Limitations in Canada for reporting sexual abuse or assault. This means sexual violence can be reporting immediately, in a week, in 10 years, or you may choose never to engage the criminal legal system.

# All The Feelings

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The deep impact of sexual violence can result in a wide range of feelings, thoughts, and ways of understanding the world. There may be some days when survivors feel 'normal', and others when they don't recognize themselves. Multiple feelings can emerge at once, like anxiety and joy, excitement, and sadness, or even anger and hope. All feelings are welcome. Many of these feelings that seem good or bad will surface and that is okay. **Remember all feelings deserve to be recognized, acknowledged and respected.**

## Trauma

**Trauma is a normal response to a threat.**

- A single event, such as an assault
- Ongoing acts of violence, abuse, and harassment
- Ongoing systemic oppression such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism and xenophobia, etc

Sexual violence is one of the most common events that causes someone to be traumatized. Whether a person is traumatized by something depends on how they personally experience the event, and the trauma can be caused by a real or perceived threat.

The brain reacts to trauma with a fight, flight, or freeze response. These are automatic responses that have been hardwired into our brains to help us survive.

**Understanding trauma responses also helps us understand why:**

- Why most people don't run or yell in the face of threat
- Memories are disjointed or missing
- They didn't react in the way they expected to
- They were unable to move or were spaced out

Additionally, if and how someone is traumatized can be influenced by the presence of pre-existing trauma, including historic trauma. Historic or intergenerational trauma is felt across generations.

These forms of trauma are experienced by many Indigenous people due to the historic and ongoing impacts of colonization, cultural genocide, racism, and displacement.

It is important to recognize how survivors are impacted by forms of systemic oppression such as sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia and classism, and these experiences can intersect with the trauma of the sexual violence.

Individuals of different identities, backgrounds, and experiences may require different forms of support and accommodations. Survivors have a right to access support of their choosing, including support tailored to their identities and experiences.

# Triggers

The impacts of trauma can feel like spontaneous time travel. Memories can be incoherent, and can feel like the hurt is happening right now.

A “trigger” is a trauma reminder. It can be a feeling, smell, place, topic, or anything that engages our nervous system and causes a survival response. It is a surprise emotion, a memory that our body holds, one that may feel like it comes out of nowhere....

A trigger tells our body that danger—or something we perceive as dangerous—is close or here. Sometimes it actually is; however, we can also be triggered when we are perfectly safe. Our body just may not know that, even if we know that nothing bad is happening.

Triggers can cause us to go into flight or fight mode, with our heart racing, stress, energy, and can bring up feelings of anger or the sudden need to leave a space. They can also cause us to go into freeze mode, where we feel checked out, low energy, and we may even feel like we’re not in our own bodies.

All of these reactions are our bodies trying to protect us. Any reminder of something bad that has happened to us calls our nervous system into action. The nervous system is literally programmed to keep us safe. Framing it in this way can help us feel less shame (which just triggers more survival responses) and helps us understand why our bodies are reacting how they are, which ultimately helps us feel more in control.

*Information adapted from [#metoo](#) and [Andrea Glik, LMSW](#)*



# Follow Up

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Supporting a survivor of sexual violence is both tremendously important and difficult. You might have trouble fully understanding what they're going through, and feel unsure of how to best respond, or you might have personal experiences of your own that make supporting them challenging.

As a supporter of survivors of sexual violence, it is critical to care for yourself to have the energy to care for others thoughtfully and intentionally. It can be hard to set aside time for ourselves when someone we care for is in crisis or in pain. It can also be difficult to maintain boundaries when the people we are supporting are friends, family, or community members. **It's okay to feel conflicted.**

## **For your own sake, and the sake of those you support, give yourself permission to:**

- Pace yourself and maintain your boundaries. Say no when you need to. This takes care of you, and lets the survivor know that you will only give what you can. Some people don't ask for help because they don't want to feel like a burden. When you can model boundaries, it lets others know they can do the same.
- Be mindful of what kind of support you offer. Offer only what you can sustain. You don't want to make the survivor feel like they are too much or regret the fact that they disclosed to you at all.
- Healing is a long, non-linear journey. Be patient with yourself and others.
- Your feelings matter too. Noticing your own emotions, thoughts and bodily reactions can reveal important cues about your own reactions and needs. You might feel discomfort, tightness, or an outpouring of emotion.

# Debriefing With Others

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While it is important not to share someone else's story of sexual violence, you may benefit from using your own support network. Learning about sexual violence perpetrated against someone close to you can shift your worldview and expose you to violence and trauma when you least expect it. Healing happens in connection with others, and this applies to you too. You can share your own experiences and feelings, without sharing detailed or identifiable information about the survivor. This will allow you to process your own experiences, while respecting the rights and confidentiality of the person you are supporting.

## After an emotional 'jolt' or drain:

- Talk with someone you trust within 24 hours.
- Avoid sharing identifying information about the person you were supporting.
- Choose someone who is non-judgmental, and if possible, does not know the survivor.
- Focus on your feelings, rather than the details.
- If it's still on your mind 5 days later, consider reaching out to professional supports.

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.”

Audre Lorde Black, lesbian,  
feminist writer, scholar, and activist

# For the Person You Are Supporting

While sexual violence is one of the most common forms of trauma and can have lasting impact on how survivors understand and experience relationships, reactions and the world, there are so many ways to heal...

“Recovery can only take place within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation.”

Dr. Judith Lewis Herman

## Creating Predictable Routines

Helplessness, loss of control and unpredictability are hallmarks of trauma, so establishing routine and clear expectation can help to restore a sense of safety. This can be through creating a schedule for one's day, a consistent bedtime routine, meal times, and scheduling time to be with others.

## Therapy

Trauma informed therapy provides an intentional time and space to learn more about the impact of trauma and ways of coping with it. Therapy can also provide a space to process trauma verbally or physically. Everyone needs something different from their trauma therapist, based on their own style of learning, how the trauma has impacted them and how it shows up in their thinking and their body. Learning more about trauma and listening to your own cues can be helpful for determining what kind of therapy you feel like your brain and body is asking for. Regardless of modality, therapy should be a space to learn to feel safe again, with someone loving and affirming. We heal when we feel connected and cared for. ACAA offers up to 24 free sessions of trauma therapy for survivors of sexual violence.

## *Connection With Others*

Healing from trauma happens through connecting with ourselves, others, and the natural world. Trauma is caused by the rupture of trust and connection with our own bodies, the rupture of our sense of safety with others, and can take us out of the present. The practice of sitting with ourselves and others, without judgement, can be deeply powerful in one's healing journey. This can be with friends, family, professional support people, animals, or simply with nature.

## *Movement*

Releasing stress hormones through movement or reconnecting with the body after trauma is key to trauma healing. This can be found in yoga classes, but can also be available in dance, cycling, rock climbing, walking, stretching and much more. If joining a class, it can be helpful to call the studio ahead of time and ask about potential triggers (touch, language, and philosophy or training of the instructors). Some folks find light touch healing during yoga or other practices, and others find it powerful to be able to say you don't want hands on adjustments. When we move, we process traumatic energy that may be stuck in our nervous system, and little by little, we come home to our bodies. Finding the right kind of movement and making sure it doesn't come along with any expectations, is a process. There is no wrong way to have a body, and there is no wrong way to connect or move it as well.



# About ACAA

A hummingbird with blue wings, a green body, and a red throat is flying to the right, positioned above the letters 'C' and 'A' of the acronym 'ACAA'.

ACAA is the primary sexual assault centre serving East Central Alberta. ACAA has office locations in Stettler and Camrose, with Support, Counselling and Education offered in additional communities across the region (Hanna, Oyen, Drumheller, Tofield) and online.

## ACAA offers:

### • **Counselling and Support** •

Providing specialized treatment services including crisis support, therapeutic counselling, and family support for survivors of sexual abuse, assault and other forms of trauma.

### • **Specialized Criminal Justice System Navigation** •

Empowering survivors as they navigate the Criminal Justice System by providing information, support, and advocacy from before they choose to report to the end of the process.

### • **Education and Training** •

Educating and engaging the public, students, parents, and professionals on sexual violence through inclusive and accessible training sessions.

### • **Community Coordination** •

Building leadership and skill capacity – enhancing organizational and community capacity to respond to sexual abuse and assault.

### **Alberta's One Line: 1-866-403-8000**

Additional support line options are available from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily through Alberta's One Line. For text, toll-free long distance, or support through an interpreter for languages other than English.



[acaahelps.ca](http://acaahelps.ca)

### **For more info:**

 [@aaaa\\_alberta](https://www.instagram.com/aaaa_alberta)

 1 (866) 807-3558

 [info@acaahelps.ca](mailto:info@acaahelps.ca)





