

## Someone wants to talk to me about abuse, how can I help?

If somebody talks to you about their experience of sexual abuse and asks for your support, you might be concerned about saying the wrong thing or making things worse. Here are some simple suggestions that you may find helpful:

- **Respect and Believe**

Remember that people often find it difficult to talk about their experience of sexual abuse and that talking to you may have taken a lot of courage – respect this courage by believing what they tell you. It is important to avoid:

- **Suspicion:** you may have heard stories of people making false allegations but remember that these are extremely rare and that the overwhelming likelihood is that the person is telling you the truth – believe them.
- **Myths and stereotypes:** there are many myths about abuse (see the Hurt By Abuse section of the website) – get to know what they are so that you don't fall into the trap of believing them.
- **Pathologising:** in some settings many labels may be used to describe someone's behaviour or to diagnose their distress. Many people who've experienced abuse say that they believe that they are bad or that there is something fundamentally wrong with them – these labels might confirm those beliefs. However, all of the difficulties arising from the impact of abuse are manifestations of the way in which someone has survived, and the more that you know about someone's experience, the more their feelings, thoughts and behaviours make sense within that context.

- **Be trustworthy**

Someone has chosen to trust you with their story, either because they believe you are trustworthy, or because they are taking a leap of faith with you. Respect this trust and maintain confidentiality within Safeguarding limits. Breach of trust is a major theme in sexual abuse.

- **Avoid objectification**

Even though the person may seem upset or vulnerable when they talk to you, it is important to see them as a whole person and not just through the lens of abuse. If we treat people who have experienced abuse as if that is all there is to know about them, we risk objectifying them and creating a power dynamic in which we are the powerful one and they are the weak one – this is not accurate and can be hurtful, as it can re-create the power dynamic in the abuse relationship. Acknowledge and be respectful of the part of them that is in distress and feels vulnerable, but also be open to the part of them that is strong, even if that is difficult to see.

- **Keep the responsibility for the abuse firmly with the abuser**

Sexual abuse is NEVER the child's responsibility. Avoid questions such as, "Why didn't you tell someone?" as this can give the impression that somehow it was the child's responsibility to tell and that they are somehow to blame if they didn't. Self-blame is a major theme in sexual abuse and we don't want to add to it.

- **Avoid blaming the person for the way that they were able to survive the abuse**

In order to cope with what happened, each child will have needed to find a range of strategies to keep themselves as physically and emotionally safe as possible. Sometimes this can involve behaviours or personality traits that you may not like or may not approve of e.g. substance abuse, aggression, irritability, seeming disconnected or uncaring, submissiveness, sexual promiscuity. Rather than disapproving, honour the unique and creative way that the person managed to survive their experience

– each child did the best they could in the circumstances they found themselves in.

- **Stay calm and demonstrate empathy and care**

Empathy is different to sympathy; when we empathise we are setting aside our own way of looking at the world and striving to see how the other person sees the world and understands their experience.

- **Focus on listening not doing**

You may feel that “just listening” is not enough but when we listen empathically this can be very powerful and healing.

- **Be clear about confidentiality**

Do you understand Safeguarding Policies and the limits of the confidentiality that you can offer? Let the person know what these limits are as soon as possible, so that they can make an informed choice about how much to tell you.

- **Go at the person’s pace**

Do not probe for details of the abuse or push for other information. You may think that you would be able to help more effectively if you knew the details of what happened, but this is to assume the role of expert and the person may become overwhelmed or re-traumatised if you push for information before they are ready to give it. Remember that in the abuse relationship, the child had no authentic choice about what happened, so make sure they have a choice now. They will tell you what they feel able or feel safe enough to tell you.

- **Avoid rescuing**

Each person has inner resources that got them this far, support these, don’t undermine them. Give support but don’t take away autonomy.

- **Make a referral if you need to**

Sometimes you may feel it necessary to refer the person to another service or to someone with more knowledge or experience; talk to the person about this and be open about your reasons, but keep the choice and control with the person whenever possible.

- **Look after yourself and get support if you need it**

Listening to another person’s experience of abuse can have an impact on you, especially if you listen often. Notice how you feel afterwards, or if anything changes about the way that you see yourself, others or the world. Ask for help and don’t think that this means that you are weak – it is normal for listeners to need to debrief or receive support.

- **Don’t offer what you can’t deliver**

You may feel tremendously compassionate and want to do anything that you can. Resist saying things like, “Call me anytime” or, “I’m always here for you.” These offers of support are unrealistic and if the person believes you and takes you up on your offer, you may find yourself resenting or avoiding them, which can lead to them re-experiencing the abandonment or betrayal that they experienced in the abuse; or you may find yourself becoming burnt out from overstressing yourself, which can leave the other person feeling as though they have hurt you. It is much better to offer what you can manage and to be consistent.

## **Disclosing sexual abuse is a process, rather than a single event**

Someone may talk to you about their experience once, and then not mention it again for quite a while or perhaps never again. Someone may tell you about their experience in manageable pieces over a period of time or tell different people different parts at different times.

Sometimes a person may take back their story and say that it didn't really happen. There can be many reasons for this; e.g.

- Pressure from friends, family or the community:

Remember that people are most often abused by someone close to them, so therefore others will be close to the abuser too, and this can be extremely difficult for everyone involved.

- Distressing symptoms

Anxiety and range of symptoms arising from traumatic memories resurfacing, can lead someone to want "put it all back in the box"

- Anxiety about consequences

E.g. fears that others will be told, that the police may be told, that they may have to repeat their story to others or even go to court.

- Isolation from usual support mechanisms

In some cases, disclosure may divide a family or community, leaving the person cut off from support.

- Strong cultural taboos

Sexual abuse may be viewed in different ways and have different consequences across different cultures. Try to be aware of your own culture and be open to these differences.

For further information, please see the Resources List on the Hurt by Abuse page.

"Many survivors criticize themselves for the ways they coped. You may not want to admit some of the things you had to do to survive. But coping is nothing to be ashamed of. You survived, and it's important to honor your resourcefulness." (Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, 1988)