

HOW TO RESPOND TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

One of the most important facets of a victim of childhood sexual abuse's recovery is the response of family members. It can accelerate healing, complicate it immensely, or even shut down the healing process. Next to the abuse itself, the *most critical event* is the response of the family members toward the victim. The victim is extremely vulnerable, tender, and full of shame over what happened, and your response can make all the difference, for good or bad. In these situations, life and death truly rest in the power of the tongue. When the people who were supposed to protect and care for a child were unable to, the most helpful thing they can do is to care emotionally *now*. Your son, daughter, or other relative has been traumatized and desperately needs healing and comfort.

How you respond can make all the difference in how much healing the victim experiences. If the victim has to convince you, they will shut down. If they have to fight to be validated by loved ones, they will spiral further down into the tremendous self-loathing they need to overcome. If you respond poorly, you are, in essence, *re-victimizing* the person. But if you respond well, you can be a powerful healing force in your loved one's life. Try not to worry about your own guilt for not being able to protect the person. Focus instead on their needs and the hurt they experienced. If you are in some sort of denial about your own personal wounding, you may not know how to handle a victim's disclosure of abuse. Hopefully, the following suggestions will help:

RESPONSES TO AVOID:

1. Invalidation.

- "It couldn't have been THAT bad!"
- "Aren't you overreacting just a little?"
- "You just need to move on with your life. Get over it"
- "I don't see what you are making such a big deal about."

2. Disbelief. Skepticism.

- "Are you SURE?"
- "I find this difficult to believe."
- "I didn't see it happen. Maybe you just thought it did."
- "That couldn't have happened."
- "But they are such a nice person. They couldn't have done that."
- "I think this is all in your imagination."

3. Minimization.

"You're overreacting."

"You're making a bigger deal of this than necessary."

"That's not so bad."

"It could have been worse."

"Is that all?"

"That's nothing compared to what happened to _____."

"Oh."

"I see."

4. Blame.

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"How come you didn't remember this earlier?"

"If you hadn't said anything, the family wouldn't have been so disrupted."

"You've made everyone upset. You shouldn't have said anything."

"What did you do to cause them (the abuser) to do that?"

"You must have done something to encourage them."

"How come you didn't scream?"

5. Making this about YOU.

"How come you didn't tell me? That makes me feel bad."

"Are you saying I am a bad mother?"

"I must have been a terrible parent to let this happen to you."

"I am so disappointed you kept this a secret. Don't you trust me?"

6. Dismissiveness.

"What's past is past."

"Leave well enough alone."

"You ought to be over this by now."

"Oh, for crying out loud."

"Honestly!"

"How come this is still bothering you?"

7. Rejection.

"This is too much for me. Talk to somebody else."

"What do you expect *me* to do about it?"

"Ewe! You are really messed up!"

The above responses will create further wounding and are the exact opposite of what the victim of sexual abuse needs.

WHAT THE VICTIM NEEDS:

1. **A listening ear.** Do not jump in with skeptical or doubt-filled questions. Listen gently and respectfully draw them out with a few caring questions.

2. **For you to be as understanding as possible.** Your loved one has been violated in one of the worst ways possible. No matter how extensive the abuse was, any violation is significant and has tremendous psychological and emotional ramifications. There are deep feelings within the victim that create much distress for him or her: shame, guilt, confusion, anger, feelings of powerlessness, fear, mistrust, and many other strong feelings that must be sorted out and processed.

3. **To believe him or her.** They desperately need you to give them the benefit of the doubt, to assume they are telling the truth. Just because you didn't know about it or it doesn't make sense right now doesn't mean it didn't happen. Let the person share without having to worry that you disbelieve them. You are most likely in shock and perhaps feel tempted to put logic to this story. *Don't try to make sense of it.* Let the story unfold, and in time, the pieces will come together. Very rarely are stories of sexual abuse contrived. [Research indicates the rare occasions of false reports of abuse are either due to unfair tactics in a child custody battle or by suggestion while under hypnosis by an unskilled or unethical therapist.]

Untold harm comes to a person who has finally disclosed their abuse only to be forced to retract their story due to family denial, lies, and pressure from the abuser or threat of love withdrawal by a family member. This occurs far too often and is an abuse victim's worst nightmare. If you have a child who tends to be overdramatic, and this seems like just one more "drama" for attention, withhold your judgment for the time being. The tendency to be dramatic is a common symptom of a history of being abused. Some of the symptoms of a history of childhood sexual abuse are:

- a. an excessive need for attention
- b. precocious behavior
- c. trouble handling anger
- d. hostility
- e. acting out
- f. depression

- g. seductive clothes and manners
- h. covering self up with baggy clothing
- i. sudden drop in grades at school
- j. cutting on oneself
- k. extreme mistrust of others
- l. over-reactivity
- m. jumpiness
- n. nightmares
- o. a desire to grow up too fast
- p. overeating or eating disorders
- q. emotional distance from parents
- r. trouble getting along with others
- s. social withdrawal
- t. fears masked by acting very controlling

4. **Validation and Empathy.** This involves deeply caring about the person's pain and what it must have been like for them. Empathy empowers a person to want to care about themselves and get well. Sometimes, we fear that sympathy will lead to self-pity. The opposite is usually the case. A person gets mired in self-pity until they get enough validation to trust that their pain is real and valid and, therefore, worth doing something about. Some helpful phrases you can say are: "Honey, I am so sorry." "That must have felt *terrible*." "I am so grieved you had to go through that alone." "That makes sense." "You must have felt so *alone*."

5. **Protection.** Sexual abuse is incredibly violating. If you take a protective stance, it will be healing for the victim: "If I had been there, I would have stopped it." "I am sooo angry with your abuser!" "How dare they do that to you!" "I won't ever let that happen to you again!" "I am going to...(go to the police, tell that person off, file a report, remove you from the situation, get this person away from you, do all I can to protect you," "tell their parents,"etc. [whatever seems appropriate])

6. **Comfort.** Show your sorrow. Hold their hand (if they are comfortable, hold them and let them cry.) Put your arm around their shoulder. While respecting their need for safe touch, reach out to them however you can. "Oh, honey. I am so sorry." "You are so precious to me."

7. **Support.** Be willing to do whatever it takes to help your loved one recover. Pay for counseling. Join the person in counseling. Keep believing in and supporting this person in whatever steps they are willing to take to heal, even if it is inconvenient. The last thing this person needs is an environment that reinforces the natural tendency to deny the depth of their wounding. Shoving it under the rug will not make it go away. It will drive the damage further underground and come out later in far worse ways than you've already seen.