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10 Best Practices To Use If Someone Reports Sexual Abuse To You

“Why didn’t you tell someone!” is not the response anyone wants to hear after revealing sexual abuse. It takes victims a while to stir up the courage to tell someone and most times they do not have the words to express what has actually happened. Here are some tips on how to respond with compassion and sympathy to a victim who reveals sexual abuse.

1. Believe her/him. Making statements such as, “I believe you”, gives the victim feelings of acceptance.
2. Listen to her/his story. Begin with the statement, “Tell me what happened.”
3. Sympathize — express sympathy, acknowledge the abuse and the horrific side of it. For example, “I am so sorry this happened to you. That was a horrible crime committed against an innocent person. You should not have been treated in such an evil manner.” **DO NOT** expect victims to ‘just get over it’. Judgments and statements like this are irrational and insensitive.
4. Be careful not to subtly blame her/him. Asking questions such as, “Why didn’t you tell someone before?” or “Why didn’t you scream for help?” may cause the victim feelings of guilt and responsibility for the abuse.
5. Encourage her/him not to tolerate the abuse any longer. “You don’t have to tolerate this abuse any longer. You can forgive your abuser without feeling obligated to socialize with him/her.”
6. Encourage her/him to find someone who will help them deal with the abuse. “I really encourage you to tell someone. Seek professional help, even if your family is excusing the sexual abuse.”
7. ALWAYS stress the fact that she/he is innocent and an adult should have been protecting her/him. “You were innocent and an adult should have been protecting you. You were the child and you were not supposed to take on the adult responsibility in the family.
8. Express that she/he should not feel ashamed. “Don’t feel guilty or ashamed, this was not your fault; you were the child and had the right to be protected.”
9. Explain that if the molester has gotten to her/him then there are other victims. Do not be deceived. “This is hard, but there’s only one right thing to do and that is to protect yourself and other children from being abused by this individual. You must speak up and report him/her.”
10. Gently explain that some people may not agree with her/his decision to speak up. “Understand that some people may not understand you but sexual abuse is very, very serious. Don’t expect everyone in your family to speak up in your defense because some families will keep secrets like this — but you shouldn’t be a keeper of secrets.”