

Responding to a Disclosure of Sexual Assault

Survivors often feel shame about what has happened to them and fear that others won't believe them if they share. It takes vulnerability and courage to speak, especially when they have been voiceless for so long.

When someone opens up to you about sexual assault or harassment, here is a guide to help you in your response:

1. **Appreciate** that they are telling you.
2. **Listen** supportively and non-judgmentally.
3. **Don't play detective.** It is not your job to find out what happened exactly. Don't ask questions that could make them feel like you blame or don't believe them. Just let them tell the story the way they are ready to.
4. **Remember you can't fix this.** You can't make it right and you can't take away the pain. You don't need to have answers. You just need to support them.
5. **Empathize.** Seek to understand how the person is feeling and reflect it back to them. If you don't know what to say, you can just respond in a caring manner: "I'm so sorry this has happened to you."
6. **Don't show shock.** While you should empathize, do not pity or act shocked. Your shock will deepen their sense of shame that says: "what happened to me is so bad and makes me uniquely broken." Neither should you say things like: "I just can't believe he would do such a thing, he seems like such a nice guy!" as an expression of your shock. It can be interpreted as: "I don't believe you" or confirm their fears that no one will believe them.

7. **Center on their needs.** Don't feel the need to say a lot, but do respond as your silence can make them anxious about what you may be thinking after such a vulnerable disclosure. But don't make it about you or your anger; it's about what they need.

8. **Know available resources.** Become familiar with local resources such as qualified therapists and victim's advocates. You can ask: "Would you like to get some help?" and "Would you like me to come with you?" But if they don't want help presently, don't push them. Abuse took power away from them; you want to be patient and help them to regain their sense of power.

9. **Be a friend and offer to be there.** You could say: "If you ever need to vent, talk, or just cry, you can call me." Even if they get counseling, do not simply hand them off to the professional. The healing process is long and the survivors will need your support and friendship.

10. **Remember to treat them as a whole person.** Do not turn them into your special projects. Don't avoid the topic but also don't let it be the only thing you talk about. Just spend time with them, laugh with them, cry with them and be normal. They need to know that this doesn't change how you see them. Honor them as whole persons made in the image of God.