
Responding to Adults Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet for everyone in the community

Disclosure is rarely a single event but rather a process which unfolds over time. Most children don't disclose at the time of their abuse. This is for lots of reasons e.g. overwhelming feelings of shame, having been threatened or the fear of not being believed. When an adult discloses their childhood sexual abuse for the first time, they will have kept the secret for a long time, often for decades.

The way you respond to a person disclosing their child sexual abuse for the first time is really important. Being empathic and understanding and showing that you believe the person and are there to support them can make all the difference.

The following guidelines may help:

- Be supportive. Reassure the person and validate their feelings. This can help reduce the feelings of shame and self-blame many survivors take on.
- Accept the person's experience without judging them. Show the person that you believe them. Many survivors judge themselves harshly already.
- Make it clear that being sexually abused as a child is never the child's fault.
- Recognise and acknowledge the strength it takes to survive, alongside the strength it takes for the person to share their experiences or part of them with you.

- Listen and be attentive. Respond to the person's verbal and non-verbal language. Be aware of your own non-verbal responses e.g. your posture, facial expressions and the tone of your voice.
- Stay calm, engaged and connected with what the person is saying. Don't get distracted or change the subject. Hearing about another person being abused is not easy but talking about it is really hard.
- While acknowledging the person's experiences, try to gently steer them away from going into too many graphic details of their trauma. This is different to speaking about their trauma.
- Go at the person's pace and provide as much space as you can for them – it is up to each survivor to decide how much or little to say. Check in to see if the person wants to take a break. They may prefer to stop and speak again at another time.
- Try to find a confidential space to hear the person's disclosure as this will help support the person's safety. Treat the disclosure with absolute confidentiality.
- Monitor your own stress levels as well as those of the person disclosing. Do what you can to manage your own stress while supporting the person to ground and regulate theirs.
- If the person discloses to you, they are trusting you to listen to, hear them and support them to feel safe. Honour that trust.
- This can be with yourself, a family member, friend, a service, support person or counsellor who ideally has the expertise and experience in supporting people who have experienced child sexual abuse.

The following words may help support you when a person discloses to you.

It can be hard to know what to say, and especially when the disclosure comes unexpectedly. Gentle words of acknowledgement, encouragement and concern can be helpful.

Be empathic

- "I'm so sorry that you experienced this."
- "I'm glad that you could share this with me."
- "I imagine this must be really difficult to speak about."

Check in to see what support the person wants in the moment.

- "Is there anything you need from me right now?"
- "Is there anything you would like me to do?"
- "What can I do to support you right now?"
- "Is there anyone you would like me to call?"

Starting to remove feelings of self-blame

- "What happened to you was not your fault."
- "Child sexual abuse is never the child's fault. You deserved to be looked after and protected."

Reassurance

- "Thank you for sharing this with me."
- "It can be very difficult to talk about these things and I am here for you."