

Tips for Responding

It is important for people to be able to say whatever they want to say about the abuse.

Listen

Just listen. Do not feel that you have to give advice or solve things. Do not judge how the person has managed this difficult experience as a child or as an adult. Understand that whatever the individual wants to say is important.

Child sexual abuse is often a huge thing for people to speak about because people have often been persuaded to keep the abuse a secret or encouraged to think that others won't believe them. They may also believe they are responsible for what was done to them. For this and other reasons, people need to feel that they are being listened to, are taken seriously and are not being blamed.

Be prepared

Be prepared to hear about things that are hard to hear about and may be outside anything you have experienced or heard of before. It is unnecessary to ask questions which "check the facts". If this is the person's first time talking about it, they simply need to be heard and have a caring and understanding response.

Be understanding

Listen for ways people have managed and got to the point they are at now. The individual may find it helpful when you let them know that you understand the ways they're already managing.

Take what they say seriously and don't minimize their feelings. The experience of child sexual abuse is one in which the child's experience of events is frequently minimised, ignored, belittled, degraded and not taken seriously. To take what is being said seriously is to offer people a different experience in relation to the abuse.

Avoid judgement

Avoid judging the person. Instead, listen to them carefully. They will begin to talk more when they feel they are being listened to and feel accepted. Listening and not judging provides people with an experience of safety. This helps them to trust that the environment and this person is suitable for talking about this significant concern.

Other tips

Our counsellors share these key reminders which help them when responding to someone who is disclosing that they were sexually abused as a child. Most often, if people are speaking for the first time about past abuse, they will have thought carefully many times about what this might be like to put their own words to what they have been subjected to as a child – and remind yourself that they have sought **you** out to hear about these significant experiences.

Remember, it's not about questions that are “fact checking”, rather it's about questions that demonstrate support and validation:

- What has helped them decide to talk about this now?
- Why is it important to talk about this and not keep it secret any longer?
- Who are the people who would support them in this?

Other important things to keep front of mind when speaking with a survivor include:

- Understanding that the person I am speaking to best knows about their life
- Show respect by listening carefully, and not making interpretations
- Show that I understand it is different for every person
- Ask from a place of wanting to know about their life
- Do not tell people how they should be or act
- Tell people that there is no expectation that they talk about the details. They don't need to talk about anything they're not comfortable with.