

Module 5, Appendix A

Tips for Handling Disclosures of Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment

- Relax, stay calm. Even if the survivor is in crisis, you are not.
- Be patient. Allow the survivor time to speak. Do not jump straight to giving directions, asking questions, or offering solutions. These things do not work until the person has had a chance to tell their story, express feelings or fears, and make sense of what happened.
- Convey simple messages, as appropriate to your conversation:
 - “I’m so sorry this happened to you.”
 - “I am glad you are telling me this now.”
 - “You didn’t deserve this. You have a right to be safe here.”
 - “You can heal from abuse. There are people who can help you.”
 - “We take this very seriously here. Let’s get you to a safe place first.”
- Avoid words like “paranoid” or “depressed” that may be a diagnosis of a mental illness. Instead, use words that describe the feeling behind what you hear, like “scared” or “sad.”
- Gather information in a supportive, affirming manner. Do not ask for specifics or step into an investigative role unless you are an investigator. If you ask a question, make sure your reason for asking is to help the survivor and get just the information you need to do your job, not your own curiosity.
- Avoid making a judgment about whether or not you believe the survivor. The purpose of the investigation is to determine what happened. Do not try to look for holes in the survivor’s account. Crime victims will pick up on it if the staff do not believe them and will shut down.
- Share information about sexual abuse and sexual harassment and the facility’s response protocol to help the survivor to understand what to expect.
- Share information about common reactions to sexual abuse and sexual harassment to help the survivor put their feelings and thoughts into context.
- When giving instructions to the survivor, use simple, clear language and check for understanding. Remember that the person has just been through a traumatic event and may be overwhelmed. Explain the reason for your decisions so that the survivor knows you are acting with his or her well-being and safety in mind.
- Express your concern for her/his safety and take all threats, reports of threats or retaliation, and violence seriously. Directly assess and address any threats of or hints at suicide.
- Be clear about your reporting responsibilities and how you can help. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
- Communicate professionally with other staff and with outside service providers. Be discreet in what information you discuss and with whom you discuss it. Think carefully about who needs to know and what they need to know.

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