



Handling Disclosures

As a caring adult you have an important role in the life of the person you care for, whether that person is a child or an adult with an intellectual disability. Your role is irreplaceable because that person counts on you, trusts you and may one day choose you as the person to whom they tell something really important. Being a caring adult is a great privilege and a huge responsibility.

If the person you care for chooses to disclose an experience of sexual abuse to you, it may be hard to remember that you are in a privileged position. Nothing prepares us for hearing this information first hand, however much training or experience we have.

Feelings of fear, inadequacy, anger, shock, disbelief, horror can overwhelm us and can make it difficult to find the words to support, encourage, and problem solve with the person you care for.

There are a few key themes to keep in mind in the moments following a disclosure.

Let the person you care for know you believe them with simple statements such as **“I believe you”**. One of the biggest fears of people who have been sexually abused/assaulted is that no one will understand them or believe them.

Reassure the person you care about that you are not mad and that you are happy that they came to you. Say **“I am happy that you think of me as someone you can trust. I want to help you as much as I can”**. Many children and adults with intellectual disabilities are really worried about the car-

ing adults in their lives being angry with them or disappointed in them.

Be very clear that what happened to the person you care for was **NOT** their fault. They did **NOT** cause the abuse.

Emphasize that they are not alone in their experience and that this has happened to other people. You can also draw on the fact that other people have got help and been safe and eventually felt better.

Acknowledge the courage and strength it took to share their experience(s). **“I am very proud of you. It took a lot of courage to share this with me today. And I am very thankful that you did”**.

Do not make promises that you cannot keep. Let the person you care for know you will do everything you can to help and support them. Be clear that you cannot guarantee anything. **“I am not sure what will happen next. Let’s find out together and I will help you as much as I can.”**

Introduce the idea of community support. This will reduce your feelings of isolation and assist the person you care for in understanding that you are not their only source of help.

Be honest if you have a mandated responsibility to report (as is the case with all forms of child abuse and if you are working in a care setting with intellectually disabled adults). You can say **“We have to get ready to let some helpers at (name agency) know about what you told me. Let’s talk about how that is going to happen.”**

Do not make assumptions about how the child or intellectually disabled adult is feeling. Instead leave things as open as possible, try saying “**You are probably having a lot of feelings right now, would you like to talk about some of them?**” Furthermore, avoid interpreting their experiences for them. If someone says they are angry, don’t tell them you know why that would be, even if you think you have a clear sense of where it is coming from.

Use personal experiences to illustrate the ideas you are talking about. For example, if the person you care for is feeling so angry they don’t know what you can do, you can share your own story by saying “Remember when the window got broken? I was so mad I had to go scream in a pillow before I could talk to your brother about it.” Emphasize that you are ready to deal with feelings and that it is important not to bottle them up.

Avoid ‘why’ questions. Survivors of sexual violence can interpret these as victim blaming. Children sometimes interpret these questions as what you think they should have done. Instead of “why didn’t you tell me sooner?” you can say “I am so glad you told me this, even though it happened a long time ago. What can we do to make sure you always feel like you can tell me things?” Instead of “why didn’t you run away” you can say “I am so glad you handled what happened in the way you did. How are you feeling about things now? How are we going to make sure you get to a safe place if you feel in danger again?”

When introducing the topic of informing the police be extremely clear about the reasons why police need to become involved. This is especially if the person you care for is from a neighbourhood with heavy police presence. “I am so proud of you for sharing your story with me. It is my job to help you be safe and get help. The police may be able to help you too. You are not in trouble.”

People who are sexually abused can have many different emotional responses to their experience(s). These can be complex and

complicated, with layers of emotions that may seem to contradict each other.

- **Guilt** – feeling like they are responsible for what happened or will be responsible for the consequences of the perpetrator
- **Shame** – that people will think they are somehow tainted
- **Fear** – of the perpetrator, of their own consequences, or that no one will believe them
- **Sadness** – of the changes in their life or relationships
- **Confusion** – misunderstanding of love and affection or of conflicting emotions
- **Betrayal** – of lack of protection
- **Anger** – misdirecting anger or keeping it inside
- **Depression** – changes in their life and the emotions that surface
- **Obsessive thinking** – not feeling safe and worrying, anxiety building wondering when it will happen again
- **Nightmares** – fear of abuse, memories of abuse
- **Over/under achievement in school** – outlet or safer place to react or day-dream/easily distracted
- **Withdrawn** – afraid someone will find out, experiencing shame, don’t want to be noticed
- **Eating too much/eating too little** – coping with impact of abuse to feel better

Encourage them, but do not force them, to talk to others such as trusted people in their lives or counselling agencies. Create time for them to express their emotions using the following chart:

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|----------------|-----------------------|
| Journaling | Anger Releases |
| Dancing | Role play |
| Visual Art | Story telling/writing |
| Playing music | Yoga |
| Poetry | Crying |
| Playing sports | Breathing exercises |
| Exercise | Singing |
| Meditation | Outdoor recreation |

Please see www.taylorsrights.ca or phone the Sexual Assault Centre, 519.751.3471, for more information on handling disclosures and for further prevention techniques and for a suggested book list.