




Adventist Risk Management, Inc.



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What To Do If Someone Tells Me They Have Suffered Abuse

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What would you do if a loved one, a student, a co-worker, or a fellow parishioner trusted you enough to tell you they have been abused? While there is no rigid formula or standard response, some core principles can provide guidance in many situations.

When someone tells you about this personally painful situation, they are reaching out to you as a trusted confidant. This is a trust that can be very fragile, so gentleness, empathy, and transparency are needed to effectively help the abuse victim. If they ask for you not to tell anyone, you should let them know you may not be able to do that as the law may require you to report, but that you will find them support through the process.

Listen

Start by listening to their story without judgment. Sometimes the narrative a victim shares with you is unclear or does not make sense. It is fine to ask clarifying questions, but remember you are not tasked with determining the precise truth concerning what happened.

When listening, keep in mind that trauma victims can remember events in a disjointed manner. In some instances, fear impairs the brain's ability to store contextual information or timing sequence concerning an act of abuse. For many, a trauma victim's memory may be unclear. This can lead to disbelief or harsh judgment, but it is important to not react in that manner. Understand that abuse victims may remember trauma differently than they would non-traumatic events.

Expressions of concern for safety and support are appropriate, but cross-examination is not. Listen and show care and gentle compassion. However, it is best to refrain from telling the victim what to do. Instead, ask questions about their needs and what they may think is the best way forward.

Support

If appropriate, you can also provide referrals to community resources, such as abuse prevention or assistance programs, shelters, or legal services. This may include resources for reporting abuse, finding psychiatric help, or a suicide prevention hotline. You should be willing

and prepared to remain in a supporting role as the victim steps toward the next part of his or her life. This is a fearful time, and your support is invaluable.

While it is important to listen, it is also essential to get a feel for the possibility of imminent harm the victim may be facing. Gently explore whether the violence or abuse has recently escalated or if the abuser has made threats that jeopardize the victim. This will undoubtedly impact the next steps that the victim may need to take and affect whatever assistance you may offer, either directly or indirectly.

At no point should you confront the abuser. This could result in placing the victim in more harm as the abuser may see the disclosure to you as a threat. This could result in escalating the level of abuse or violence directed at the victim. Also, you could inadvertently put yourself in harm's way.

In most instances, it is wise to be transparent and tell the victim although you will keep their confidence to the extent possible, the law may impose on you a duty to report the abuse to governmental agencies. This is generally true if the victim is a minor or a member of another vulnerable group, such as an elderly or a mentally challenged person.

If the Victim Is a Minor

In the case of a child or minor teen disclosing abuse, the same non-judgmental listening techniques apply. Also, you will need to interact with age-appropriate questions. The child or teen will likely be frightened, so you need to reassure them that disclosing the abuse was the right thing to do. Be mindful of your tone and of any remarks about the abuser, who may be the child's parent or another family member. In these cases, the child may have very mixed feelings about their abuser. You will need to evaluate their safety and be prepared to ask the child or teen about this as well as other immediate needs.

In cases of abuse of a minor or other vulnerable non-minor, you will likely have a legal obligation to report the abuse to the Department of Social Services or Child Protective Services in your state or county. Familiarize yourself with the local reporting agencies and reporting methods before you are confronted with the need to report. If a report is required, you should tell the victim that you plan to lodge one. You can continue to support him or her through the notification and other related processes with law enforcement or other state agencies. If you have, as required by law, reported to authorities, you should also notify your local conference. The Adventist Church has many resources on how to deal with abuse, some of which can be found at www.adventistrisk.org.

Unless you regularly work with abuse victims, you will likely have additional specific questions about situations or incidents. It is vital to develop a network of professionals who work with abuse victims you can call in a crisis. These professionals can assist in the proper handling of an abuse disclosure and assist in providing help to the victim while avoiding making the problem worse.

Remember, God calls us to help the helpless. Prayerfully commit to being involved, if and when the time comes, and be ready. God will bless our efforts, but we are expected to be prepared.

Reference

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