

## Handling Disclosures of Abuse

There is nothing easy about hearing a disclosure. When a disclosure of historical abuse occurs, it is imperative that one takes historical abuse as seriously as current abuse.

There are a few things that you can do to make certain people who are disclosing difficult information feel safe doing so. Thanks and acknowledgements to Jill Smialek, Manager of the Family Justice Center in Cuyahoga County for this information.

- **Focus on them** and turn off your cell phone, hold your calls, shut your door (after asking them if they feel comfortable with a closed door.) This is their time. Give them all of your attention.
- **Believe them** and do your best to not make any judgment. Often people have told someone they trusted before and were not believed or nothing was done. This act of disclosure is one of incredible courage. Be mindful of your own facial expression and body language. Lean into the conversation and make eye contact when someone is disclosing difficult information. Do not try to touch the person.
- **Thank them** for disclosing the information and validate them by telling them you know how difficult it must have been. Tell them you are sorry that they experienced this abuse. If the person is expressing guilt of any sort, remind them that it was not their fault. This is particularly important for people who are disclosing childhood abuse. Also be mindful that abuse can feel confusing to the victim; what may have started as a warm, close relationship can turn into abuse very easily. It is okay to not understand their feelings. Reassure the person that they didn't do anything wrong and that there are counselors out there who can help process these very complex feelings.
- **If you must ask further questions about the abuse, ask them in an open ended format.** A good prompt to get someone talking is, "What happened after that?" If you have to ask more specific questions about details, do it in a supportive way. I like to say things like "I know this is a really personal question and I'm sorry I have to ask it. I'm not trying to pry, but I need to fully understand what happened."
- **Sometimes the person will not speak about it in depth, and you have to respect that.**
- **Resist over-spiritualizing.** Kind and compassionate words go a long way, but steer clear of complicated theological answers. Keep it simple, like, "God didn't want you to experience this abuse. I don't know why it happened but I'm here to help you if you want help right now." Offer to pray with them, but understand if they decline.
- **Find out their current needs.** "What would you like to do next?" and "Is there any way I can help you?" Try to be the Church to someone – loving, kind, compassionate, but start as an individual. You don't know how other people who represented or even worked for the Church handled or even committed the abuse in the past.

- **Ask people if they are interested in local resources, but do not force them to take it.** If they don't want to take it, encourage them to think about a safe person they can talk to. Say something like "We've talked about a lot of difficult things today... If you go home and you need to process this, can you think of someone you can call or visit who will be there for you?"
- **Give them space, but not too much.** This person may need some space. It might be a good idea to call them a few days after the interview and check in to see how they are and if there is anything you can do to help. One exception is if this person talks about hurting themselves or someone else. In that case, call the police or local hospital for help.
- **After the survivor leaves, set aside time to reflect and pray.** Hearing this information is difficult and heartbreaking; it is important to also take care of your own spiritual and mental health needs.

### **Resources**

- Catholic Charities also has counseling facilities in each of the counties in the Diocese of Cleveland. A flyer listing contact information for counseling and treatment services will be provided. It's a good idea to have copies of this laying out in your waiting room and in your office. Often people are embarrassed to ask for resources, and being able to just pick it up without asking can help.
- For sexual abuse suffered at any age, no matter how long ago it happened, Cleveland Rape Crisis Center provides wonderfully skilled counseling. They can be reached at: (216) 619-6194 ext. 141 and their website is <https://clevelandrapecrisis.org/services/individual-counseling/>