

Dealing with Disclosure

Why Women Stay Quiet

Some of the reasons women may not disclose information about abuse they have suffered include:

- If she tells, no one will believe her.
- The abuser threatened to hurt someone she loves.
- The abuser bribed her with money, food, and/or shelter.
- She believes the abuse is punishment for some unclear behavior.
- She believes the abuse is normal and does not agree that the interactions are abusive.
- She is afraid of hurting her family.
- She has no one to tell.
- She does not trust people, is afraid of judgment, and/or it is too painful for her to talk about.

The Do's and Don'ts of Dealing with Disclosure

Note: Unless you are a certified therapist and/or have been trained to treat trauma, you should not intervene other than being prepared to offer the client resources.

Do's

- Do be prepared to witness tremendous pain.
- Do be prepared to listen to her experiences and validate her feelings.
- Do know your role and limitations (your skill level, legal parameters, etc.).
- Do let her know that you care about her.
- Do remain calm and supportive.
- Do reframe unhealthy coping strategies and risky decisions as “survival behaviors”.
- Do convey respect for her ability to survive and remain optimistic.
- Do create an environment where she has the power to make her own decisions, acknowledging that she is the expert in her own life.
- Do provide her with readily accessible resources: books, information, and services regarding interpersonal violence.
- Do help her to identify natural supports.
- Do examine your personal beliefs about victims and abuse to avoid reactions based on personal bias.
- Do support her in finding solutions to her situation. While it may be tempting to interject your opinions, this may not help her in exploring her own potential responses.
- Do be aware that what she reports may only be a small part of what she has experienced.

Don'ts

- Don't tell her she has to talk about her abuse.
- Don't blame her for the abuse.
- Don't ask for unnecessary details or judge the truthfulness of her disclosure.
- Don't assume responsibility for her trauma or attempt to "rescue" or "fix" her.
- Don't wait until after she discloses abuse to you and then tell her "By the way, I am mandated by law to report this abuse."
- Don't react with disgust, revulsion, shock, or anger at what she's been through. If you feel sorry for her and treat her like a victim, you run the risk of reinforcing her view that her life is hopeless, and that she is damaged.
- Don't be judgmental about the ways she has chosen to cope with her abuse.
- Don't offer her advice, such as forgiving her abuser or mandating treatment. However, if the court mandates treatment, allow her as much control in the process as possible.
- Don't mandate when, where, or how she should address her trauma. Many women prefer to achieve some stability and develop adaptive strategies and supports before seeking treatment.
- Don't share your own abuse history with her.
- Don't be surprised if she's very talkative and open in one session and very quiet and reserved in another.

References

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