

Childhood Sexual Abuse

An Empathetic Approach for Supporters of Survivors

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2013

Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) is very much in our minds at the present time due to the scandals being uncovered within religious and other institutions. Due to the immense media coverage of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry and the Royal Commission, a previous socially taboo subject seems to have entered regular daily conversation. As a result, it would seem, the dreaded silences of the past are finally being broken down. We can only hope that this will allow those who have been so savagely impacted by the consequences of CSA can take the liberty to disclose their trauma without fear of judgment, blame or shame. The breakdown of isolation and fear may enable survivors to seek the care and support that they may have often craved for in order to reach transformative thoughts and feelings that might greatly enhance their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

One of the most important factors in opening a conversation with a survivor is to be prepared to gently listen. This means giving your full attention and not ignoring but keeping in check your reactions to what they are sharing. I wish to offer some ideas about an empathetic, personal approach for someone who wishes to support survivors who have disclosed CSA.

- Say Hello

First contact with the survivor after you learn of their abuse can feel uncomfortable for you. This discomfort is not unlike that of offering first condolences to someone grieving for a loved one who has died or to a woman who has suffered a still birth. Once the initial contact has been made, subsequent interactions will not carry the same angst as that of the first. Even if time has passed since you first learned of the survivor's abuse, it is important to show your support for both yourself and the survivor. It is never too late to reach out.

- Offer your support with empathy and compassion

To avoid perpetuating an experience of victimisation you might say something like, "I felt sad to hear that you had been treated so badly." Instead of, "I feel so sorry for you." The difference between these two sentences is that the first talks about your feelings in the present and it connects you to the survivor in their journey – this is empathy that comes from the heart. The second can separate you emotionally from the survivor and depending on your tone can even result in feelings of isolation for the victim. Feelings of Isolation are what can delay a victim from becoming a survivor.

- Listen carefully

When the survivor offers some insights into their experience of past or current aspects of their abuse, listen with a knowing ear to what is being said not only by your words but also

with your body language. Being heard and understood can be very liberating not only for the survivor, but also for you and society as a whole.

- Avoid offering advice unless it is asked for by the survivor.

Even if you are a survivor yourself, offering advice when not asked for might disempower the survivor as it may give the impression that the survivor is unable to make decisions for themselves. If you are asked for advice, offer it gently from the perspective of 'I', ex: "In that situation I might" Which is very different from, "You should....." Too often survivors have heard the words "Get over it" or "Move on" when what they really want to do to do is to tell their story. Accepting their story "unconditionally" is where healing lies.

- Do not assume

Even if you are a survivor, you have not had this survivor's personal experience.

- Avoid probing questions about the abuse

There are often unconscious issues that the survivor may not yet have addressed. Asking probing questions may open a topic that the survivor is not yet emotionally ready to confront. While it is understandable that you want to know some of the detail, that bit of detail may indeed hold great emotion for the victim. To respond and say "That must have been awful" is open ended and allows the person to go into greater detail if they feel they are capable of doing so.

- Stay away from venting your anger

You may feel genuinely angry at the offender and you may briefly share that with the survivor. Avoid dumping your anger onto the lap of the survivor as they may already be carrying a heavy emotional load. Because they are sensitive to your feelings, just as you are of theirs, they may decide to protect you and perhaps not say what is important to them.

- Remember that the person you are talking to has many other aspects about themselves.

After showing your support for the survivor, offer an uplifting story about something going on in your life. Inquire about the survivor's life apart from the abuse. When you part from the survivor, rather than parting with thoughts about abuse, attempt to leave the survivor with light, happy thoughts. For example: "I hear/see that your son/daughter is playing sport in team/in a play/ growing so tall." Or "Yesterday I saw the most incredible tree/bird/sunset/football match."

- Show respect for the survivor and the survivor's loved ones.

Just like the survivor, their loved ones may not yet be emotionally ready for questions. Treat them as you would the survivor as they are, in fact, secondary survivors. Say hello and keep conversation light unless the person raises the subject of CSA themselves. You may not be aware of how loaded a question could be. For example: "How is your mother/father/daughter/ son etc.?" What can happen is that while intending to show support for the primary survivor we might inadvertently ignore the possible feelings of the

secondary survivor and may perhaps ignore them as a person in their own right. Asking such a question may open a Pandora's Box of thoughts and feelings. It may be better to just say. "HiHow are you today?" Gently listen "What have you been up to lately?" or "How are you surviving?" in a bit of an upbeat way. Again listen with a knowing ear. Once you have established something of an accepting emotional connection with the person then at that time there may be an opportunity to ask, "And how is your mother/father/daughter son etc." Once again, gently listen. It is important to bring the conversation back to subjects about the person you are speaking to so that you can show that they are also important to you. If you realize you have inadvertently been a bit clumsy or thoughtless as you speak be prepared to apologize. Saying sorry is a good way to repair such a situation.

- A first meeting with a survivor might go something like this:

"Hello....." Gently listen "I was so sorry to hear about what happened to you." Gently listen "This whole situation turns me upside down." Gently listen, listen, listen as would a compassionate neighbour "Sometimes I wonder how someone in your position copes?" Gently listen "If there is anything that I can do for you please let me know." Gently listen "Hey! Did you happen to see that sunset/football game last night?"

- Subsequent meetings

The survivor will already be aware that you are supportive and understanding of them. You might now continue your support by listening with an unconditional acceptance of their story. The survivor is more than the abuse. Similar to someone losing a loved one, other aspects of life go on and flourish. So the idea is to show compassion and empathy for the grief being experienced but avoid dwelling in that aspect of life while at the same time be willing to go to the uncomfortable places with the survivor if that is what they wish to do at this time. Sometimes survivors may wish to talk of nothing else but their experience and the impacts of CSA. This may be because after many years of suppression, the words that they are expressing might seem somewhat unreal to them. For this reason they may need to hear the words out loud to take them from suppression to reality. It may be only then that the survivor might seek the supportive help that they might need. Gently listen and be positive.

The impact Childhood Sexual Abuse, although very painful to talk about, has become a major topic of conversation in this present time and it cannot be ignored. Suppression of the thoughts and feelings surrounding this topic can be difficult for all concerned and society as a whole. Remember to approach the topic with compassion and empathy and most importantly, gently listen. Avoid expressing the natural feelings of anger, hatred and anxiety you have to the survivor about the abuser. Use your anger in constructive ways like supporting survivor groups, speaking out to the authorities concerned and standing up for those who need your support.

In short, be a compassionate neighbour listening with a knowing ear and accepting their story unconditionally. This is the way to healing over time.