

Appropriate Responses

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When a person comes to the place of opening up and sharing a difficult part of their story, it is important to consider the story as a gift that is given tentatively. Years of silence, harmful responses, and fear of being the cause of the abuse have kept the story buried. When a person tells their story they will often experience shame, feeling exposed, or naked. You can gently “re-clothe” them through appropriate responses. The following are some categories to use in order to cover their shame, validate their pain, and restore their dignity.

- a. Use words to move toward people in their shame. Our words can cover the shame with their true identity. Remember that our silence can often be interpreted as if they have done something wrong. This heaps more shame on the story teller. The person needs to know they have been heard.
- b. Listen for door openers: “I didn’t tell because I knew I wouldn’t be believed!” A great response to this could be, “I believe you. As you listen, look for where the pain is. Listen for feeling words like: afraid, scared, sad, etc. Speak into what you see and hear.
- c. Good responses speak to the heart of what is happening inside of the one sharing their story. To assist in formulating good responses, you can ask yourself the following questions: What does this person need from me at this point? How can I show that I still respect them? What words should they have heard at the time of the abuse?
- d. Try to connect with the story and speak from your heart to tell what you are feeling about what happened, about the wrong, or the one who harmed. If you are speechless, stunned, or overwhelmed and don’t know what to say, simply say that you are speechless, stunned, or overwhelmed and don’t know what to say. If you can relate to what they shared, you can say so, but remember to stay on their story for now. Don’t go to your own story.
- e. Your responses should make it safe for them to tell more of their story later. Be aware that there may be deeper secrets that will probably be even more difficult to talk about.
- f. Let the person know that you realize there is more to the story and you will wait for them to tell the rest so you can really know them.
- g. Things to avoid: saying too much; saying nothing; giving pat (trite) answers; asking non-clarifying questions (this takes them out of their hearts and into their heads); drawing attention to yourself or your own story at this time; processing their story or asking for more (there will be plenty of time to learn more of their

story later in their healing process); telling them how you think they should feel; getting them to stop crying.

Many who have been harmed have lived in silence all of their lives: not heard, not affirmed, and not believed. We don't want to do that now, so affirm them and communicate that you have heard them and believe them. The initial response to someone who has shared their wounds will have a big impact. Work to make it an impact for good that paves the way for them to enter their healing journey. *Adopted from Survivors of Abuse Leadership Training Seminar Manual, pp. 183-185.*