

Dealing with Disclosures *about sexual abuse or violence*



Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Resource

The following resource is primarily aimed at those who work with or support young people in youth settings.

When delivering prevention programmes, there might be a concern that some elements might trigger disclosures of abuse or unwanted sexual experiences.

The concept of how to contain any disclosures in a careful and managed way can be introduced at a **pre-programme session**. The facilitator can raise the point that some young people may be affected by some of the themes within the programme, but that it is not a good idea to talk about personal experiences in a group, in order to respect their own privacy and the privacy of others.

Ensure that the group know that you are available after the session if they need to discuss anything and that they are given a list of external supports available. If a young person tries to make a disclosure within the group, you can use safe interrupting to hold the disclosure until after the group, where you can follow up with the student.

It's recommended that other staff in the organisation are made aware when a programme around sexual violence prevention is taking place, so that they can respond if support is needed for any young person afterwards.

When a victim of sexual violence discloses any part of their experience, they may be very fearful of your reaction, that they will be blamed, rejected or not believed, and of the consequences of telling. Your initial reaction is very important.

Think about the qualities they would look for in the person they would approach, and try to present with those qualities.

Be aware of the role in which you are relating to the person, and of its limits and boundaries, and always act in accordance with your organisation's **Child Protection guidelines** in line with **Children's First** guidance.

The following guidelines cover recommended actions should a young person make a disclosure of sexual violence:

- ▶ Try to ensure the disclosure happens in a private, comfortable place with no disturbance, or move to such a space as early as possible. If the disclosure is happening in a group, consider whether this is an appropriate space and be prepared to contain the disclosure where this is more appropriate.
- ▶ Don't promise to keep it secret. Explain to the young person, as early as possible, that if their safety or that of another person is at stake, you must pass the information on. If they tell you, believing you will keep it secret, and you then pass it on, they will feel their trust has been betrayed - again.
- ▶ Promise to keep it confidential. Only those who really need to be told will know.
- ▶ Let the young person know that you believe them. This can be conveyed as much by the caring and respectful attention you show to them as by actually saying you believe them. Remember, false disclosures are very rare. The person may test by talking about 'a friend'. If you respond well to this, they may then feel able to acknowledge that it is they themselves who have the problem.
- ▶ Listen to what they are telling you. Show you are listening by being attentive, by nodding, maintaining eye contact, reflecting back what they are telling you.
- ▶ Avoid asking a lot of questions, keeping those you do ask to open questions. Be careful of asking leading questions, allow them to tell at their own pace, without pressure.
- ▶ A sense that you are calm is reassuring. You have been approached because you are trusted and appear to be someone who will listen and care. Awareness of the limits of your role and expertise, and trust in your skills and ability within those limits, will help you to remain calm.
- ▶ Affirm the young person, showing that your feelings towards them haven't been negatively affected and reassure them that they have done the right thing in telling.
- ▶ Be aware of how difficult telling is. They may feel ashamed, guilty and dirty. Let them know you appreciate the difficulty of telling, and the degree of courage needed.

- ▶ Be careful that you do not, in your desire to help, make commitments you cannot keep. This will be seen as a breach of trust. Think before you promise anything.
- ▶ Do not express judgements about the perpetrator, only about the abusive behaviour. The victim often has mixed feelings towards the abuser.
- ▶ When ending: Reassure them again and give them information on resources available to them.
- ▶ If appropriate, arrange to see them in the near future.
- ▶ Consider any immediate steps which might help protect the person. If there is an immediate threat to them, the Gardaí may need to be notified.
- ▶ Afterwards: If appropriate to your role, record and date the encounter in writing. Keep the account factual. Follow your organisation's Child Protection procedures with the support of your organisation's Designated Liaison Person. Consider any emergency action or follow up you need to take.

Be aware of the impact on you of hearing such a disclosure. It's important for your own self-care that you deal with how you feel, having heard the disclosure. If supports are available to you within the organisation or externally, engage with them to support your well-being. DRCC has information on its website on secondary or vicarious trauma that can help you to understand this better.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is there for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those supporting others. You can call the [National 24-hour Helpline](tel:1800778888) 1800 77 8888 for confidential, non-judgemental information & support.

DRCC also offers [specialised training](#) on issues like secondary/vicarious trauma and sexual consent & healthy relationships – contact our Education Department for more at etadmin@rcc.ie or 01-661 4911 or check out www.drcc.ie.

Disclaimer: This resource is information on how best to meet a disclosure of sexual violence in a trauma-informed way. For young people under 18 and those disclosing abuse retrospectively to when they were a child, Children's First Guidelines must always be followed.

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