

What is sexual harm?

The foundation of sexual harm is always an abuse of power: the perpetrator uses a position of relative power over the victim to satisfy their own sexual urges with no regard for the victim's well-being. It is anything sexual that is inappropriate, unwanted and/or unpleasant. It is helpful to think of types of sexual harm along a continuum, with one end being unwanted sexual advances not involving physical contact (such as looks, words, exposure to nudity or exposure to sexual media) and the other extreme containing actions involving forced contact such as rape and trafficking. When a minor (someone under the age of 18) is involved, sexual harm is anything on that continuum that is done by an adult or by another minor.

What do I say to someone who tells me that they have been abused?

We need to keep in mind several principles that will guide what we communicate. First, we need to believe the survivor (yes, false accusations do occur, but they are very rare. We need to leave it to civil authorities to investigate the veracity of accusations). Second, we need to put the blame squarely where it belongs: on the perpetrator. The survivor did nothing that caused the sexual harm. **Third, the love and compassion of Jesus Christ is what the survivor needs at a time like this.**

When we respond according to these principles, we can put an end to the harm and help the survivor begin to heal. But if we respond poorly (which includes ignoring the situation), we will harm the survivor further. And that extra harm is even more damaging than the original harmful event.

Here are some examples of phrases that will communicate the above three principles:

- It wasn't your fault.
- Don't blame yourself.
- I believe you.
- I'm so sorry that it happened to you.
- You didn't deserve that.
- Is there anything I can do to help?

Some phrases that communicate the OPPOSITE of those three principles are:

- I told you not to go there.
- Are you sure that's what he meant?
- It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't worn such a short skirt.
- I don't want to talk about it.

For a short overview of helping trauma victims in Jesus' name: blog post by Diane Langberg, *"Listening to God's Voice to Silence Trauma"* found at <https://www.dianelangberg.com/2021/03/listening-for-gods-voice-to-silence-trauma/>

A brief blog post about the risks to children who are not believed when they disclose sexual abuse: *"PLEASE Believe a Child Who Reveals Sexual Abuse"* found at <https://e2epublishing.info/blog/2013/6/3/please-believe-a-child-who-reveals-sexual-abuse>

Several excellent websites with helpful information about child safety:

- Educate to Empower Publishing: e2epublishing.info
- Darkness to Light: d2l.org
- Bark Technologies Software: bark.us

