

# CARE GUIDE: SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse is any sexual activity (verbal, visual, or physical) that is engaged in without consent to meet the perpetrator's sexual desires. This may happen through force, intimidation, coercion, deception, or influence of authority. A person does not consent if he or she cannot reasonably accept or refuse sexual advances. The ability to consent can be limited by a victim's age, circumstances, understanding, and dependency/relationship to the offender. Sexual abuse can happen to a person of any gender or age. Sexual abuse is a sin for which the perpetrator is solely responsible. Survivors of sexual abuse need safe, trustworthy people to come alongside them who will accept and love them unconditionally. Each person's story is unique, and everyone's journey of healing will look different. Pray and ask the Lord to guide you as you care for your friend.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

- ***"Abuse is not common."*** Sexual abuse is shockingly common in our world today. If you have not experienced it yourself, it may seem uncommon because people do not often talk about their experiences. Shame, stigma, minimization, and disbelief are just a few reasons why more people do not share their experiences.
- ***"Sexual abuse only happens to women by men."*** Abuse happens to both men and women at any age. Men, who need just as much healing as women, often do not seek help or share their experience due to cultural stigma. Also, while a higher percentage of perpetrators are male, females may also pressure others into unwanted sexual activity.
- ***"There is a specific recovery process."*** There is no timeline or step-by-step process that will quickly heal a person who has suffered abuse. Healing often comes in layers, and recovery can feel like it's getting worse before it gets better. Everyone's path to recovery will look different.
- ***"The survivor could have done something to prevent the abuse."*** Too many survivors suffer in silence because they blame themselves for what happened. Sadly, this puts the burden of responsibility on the victim instead of the perpetrator. Regardless of what the victim did, looked like, or said, the perpetrator holds sole responsibility for their actions and the abuse.

## HOW TO HELP

**Listen, affirm, and pray.** When someone first opens up to you about their experience, give them space to talk, but don't ask questions. If a survivor chooses to open up to you about his or her abuse, it is a tremendous honor. Affirm them that it was not their fault. Affirm that their body is valuable and worthy of protection. Affirm them for being so brave in telling you.

**Be patient.** Your friend's story may not come out all at once. Because of the trauma they have experienced, you have to earn their trust. Be sensitive to where they are in the moment and do not force them to talk about anything they are uncomfortable with. They need to be able to choose what they share and what they don't share. This includes when and how they contact authorities.



**Come with a humble attitude.** You may end up saying the wrong thing at some point. Tell the person to tell you when you make a mistake because you want to be there for them. This helps create a safe space for them to open up. Respect their choices regarding what to share and which next steps would be best for them, and do not assume you know better.

**Don't recoil.** Survivors need people willing to hear what happened to them in detail. Even the most compassionate Christians cannot always process the horror of abuse. Do not deny the reality of this broken world and the atrocities humans are capable of. Avoid blaming them or questioning the validity of their story. After someone shares with you, be sure to follow up with them later. Tell them how you are specifically praying or share a verse that made you think of them.

**Make space for them to share—or not share—in community group.** It can be difficult for abuse survivors to trust and feel safe in a community group, and it can be extra challenging if it is a mixed-gender group. Some topics may be difficult for them to discuss and might even trigger memories or unexpected emotions. Respect their privacy and keep the information shared in the group confidential unless they give you permission to share it. It is their story to tell.

**Seeking additional help.** Regularly remind your friend that you will always be there for them, but there may come a point where you recognize that they would benefit from additional support. Ask your friend if you could help them get connected to a counselor or support group. Talking about what they went through with others who had a similar experience can aid in healing. However, do not force this on them. If they choose to visit a therapist or group, follow up with them afterwards.

#### **DO SAY**

"I am so sorry. That is so hard."  
"None of that was your fault."  
"Do you want to share any more?"  
"What is it like for you now?"  
"Thank you for sharing. You are so brave."  
"You are precious, valuable, and beautiful."  
"Is there a specific thing I can pray for you?"  
"I believe you. It's ok to have these feelings."  
"No one has the right to do that to you."  
"God weeps with you as you grieve this."

#### **DON'T SAY**

"At least..."  
"Why did (or didn't) you...?"  
"What did you do to cause this?"  
"Why didn't you say something sooner?"  
"Let me tell you about my friend..."  
"Are you sure that happened?"  
"Why do you keep saying the same things?"  
"Don't you think it's time to move on?"  
"I'm having a hard time believing you?"  
"Why are you making a big deal about it?"

#### **KEY SCRIPTURE**

*Ask the Lord to help you discern when and how to share Scripture. Many people in difficult seasons are wrestling with God, so offer verses with compassion, patience, and humility.*

Genesis 16; Psalm 10, 13, 34:17-18, 103:4-6; Proverbs 21:15; Isaiah 41:10, 43:1, 61:1-3; Luke 8:17, 12:6-7; Ephesians 2:8-10; Revelation 21:3-8

**NEXT STEPS OR WATERMARK MINISTRIES:** Courageous Hope (women) and MENd (men)