

# CULTURALLY INFORMED TRAUMA AND GRIEF RECOVERY TOOLKIT



## Support As Healing: How To Respond When Someone Tells You They've Been Abused

*"My best friend just told me they've been abused by someone we both love and trust. What do I do? What do I say?"*

From research we know that many emotions can overwhelm us when someone tells us they've been abused, such as being beaten up or sexually assaulted. We may feel empathetic, sad, confused, fearful, anger for them, hatred towards the person(s) who abused them, and/or overcome by our own memories of being abused. An impulse can be to take control, but this approach can be harmful because it takes away their control, similar to how they weren't in control during the abuse. Research has guidance on how to compassionately listen and support.

### 1. Use body language that shows you are paying attention

- A) Do things that let them know you are listening, like nodding
- B) Keep good eye contact without staring uncomfortably at them
- C) Do not roll your eyes or raise your eyebrows in shock of their behavior
- D) Do not move your body a lot, like playing with your phone or fidgeting

### 2. Say things that show you care

- A) Allow silence, using supportive phrases like "uh-huh"
- B) Reflect back the emotions that they are feeling, like "That seems very scary and confusing" and "That part seems to make you feel really sad"
- C) Gently ask questions when you are unsure of what they mean, like "I don't know what you mean by..." and "What was that like?"
- D) Do not change the subject

### 3. Let them know you support them

- A) Validate what they're feeling, like saying "I think I'd feel the same way if that happened to me"
- B) Do share positives about them, like "You are so strong for going through that and still being the wonderful person you are"
- C) Remind them that what happened was not their fault
- D) If they and the perpetrator(s) are all from marginalized communities (i.e., communities of color, LGBT community):
  - » If requested, can help them think through the pros and cons of telling what happened to formal sources, like school officials and police

- » Can remind them that what happened is not a negative reflection on their entire community
  - » Let them know that they are not responsible for protecting the perpetrator(s) and the community from discrimination because of the perpetrator(s)' abusive behavior
  - » Share that pride and solidarity in their community does not mean putting up with abusive behavior
- E) Do not try to reassure them through minimizing what they've experienced; don't say things like "That happened so long ago, I'm sure you're fine"
- F) Do not negatively judge or shame them for what they did during or after being abused. Avoid saying things like, "Why didn't you do \_\_\_ instead?"

Research shows us supportive responses to someone who's telling you they've been abused plays such an important role in their healing AND healing across our communities. For more information on interpersonal trauma, violence, and abuse, see [here](#). To learn about collective trauma, see [this](#). To learn more about how to heal and thrive, go to [here](#).