



## Words and Actions that **Hurt** Survivors:

- **“You need to move on”**
  - This is extremely hurtful and very unhelpful to survivors. A survivor is doing just that: trying to survive and cope with the abuse they’ve experienced. It is something that will live with them for the rest of their lives, and it’s not something a person can simply “move on from” whenever they would like. Healing is a lifelong process.
- **“Forgive and Forget”**
  - When a survivor forgives their perpetrator is between them and the Lord. While the Bible encourages us to forgive as God commands us, it’s never okay to push someone to forgive their perpetrator. It will take time and healing in their personal relationship with God.
- **“It could have been worse”**
  - If a survivor has endured sexual abuse, they have endured one of the worst traumas a person can live through. Never say, “it could have been worse”. Survivors need validation, support, and people who believe them, not someone minimizing their pain.
- **“I don’t want to get involved” / “I don’t want to pick a side”**
  - By choosing “not to get involved”, you are choosing a side by default, and it is the side that is against the victim. Even if the victim and perpetrator were previously in a relationship together, someone being sexually assaulted is not the same as a couple breaking up. A victim needs and advocate and someone to be their voice. A victim needs you to pick a side; the side that pursues truth and justice.
- **Don’t interrogate victims**
  - If a victim has chosen to confide in you about something as personal and painful as sexual abuse, do not interrogate them. If they chose to share information with you, do not badger them for details. Allow them to tell you

as much as they are comfortable with and respect their space. If you feel you must ask a question to clarify information or understand the survivor, ask it in a way that is respectful, kind, and non-invasive.

- Avoid language like, “there are two sides to every story”, “maybe you misunderstood” or “There’s no way that actually happened”
- **Don’t bring up the perpetrator**
  - In some cases, the victim doesn’t know their perpetrator. The majority of victims, however, do know their perpetrator, and it was someone close to them [i.e. father, brother, husband, boyfriend, friend etc.] In any case, unless the survivor specifically asks to talk about the perpetrator, do not bring them up. It can be extremely difficult and very painful for a survivor to talk about their abuser, especially if the abuser has denied the assault or lied about the details.
- **Avoid making jokes**
  - Your heart may be in the right place when a survivor tells you their story and you try to lighten their mood with humor, but that is not an appropriate space to resort to jokes. Sexual abuse is a dark, painful topic, and there is no humor about it. Joking can make a victim feel embarrassed and non-validated.
- **Don’t use Bible verses, Christian phrases, and spiritual quotes to blame victims**
  - God is extremely clear about how He feels about sexual assault in His word: It’s a violation of His children and it solely the fault of the sexual perpetrator. There is no circumstance in which a victim should be blamed, even if you may not agree with their behaviors at the time of the assault or after the assault.
- **When a survivor tells you their story, that is not the time for the purity talk.** That is a time to listen and validate the survivor. Sexual assault is a crime of power and taking advantage of vulnerability, not a crime of sexual desire or passion.
- **Avoid phrases like "Everything happens for a reason" or "If God puts you to it He'll get you through it"**
- **Don’t criticize a victim**
  - When a survivor tells you their story, this is not the time to give them advice on what you think they should have done or how you may disagree with their choices. A survivor may be feeling guilty or ashamed, and it’s important to remind them that as a victim, they have nothing to feel guilty or ashamed of. Criticizing them may only worsen their feelings and cause them more pain and harm.

- **Don't gossip about the victim or their situation.**
- **Don't ask, "do you want to press charges?"**
  - Pressing charges or not pressing charges is not up to the victim. Law enforcement will collect information for a police report, and if a prosecutor believes they can prove a suspect is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, they can file formal charges. A prosecutor will decide what criminal charges they should file. A case may go to a preliminary hearing where the judge decided if there is enough evidence to move forward with.

## Words and Actions that **Help** Survivors:

- **"I believe you"**
  - It's important to applaud survivors for their bravery, validate them, and thank them for their willingness to share the truth
- **"This was not your fault"**
  - This is extremely important for survivors to hear. Our culture teaches so many myths about sexual abuse that are rooted in lies that only benefit the perpetrator. Survivors need to be reminded that they did nothing wrong and it is never a victim's fault.
- **"You are brave for sharing"**
- **"I'm so sorry this happened to you"**
- **"I am here if you need someone to listen"**
  - The majority of the time a person who has endured trauma is telling their story, they aren't looking for advice but rather someone who will listen.
- **"You're safe here, now"**
  - Be comforting and remind the survivor that they are safe with you. It may not be wise to say, "you're safe now, it's over" because in their situation, they may not be safe.
- **"I will do whatever I can to help you:"**
  - If you say this, be sure to follow through and keep your commitment to the survivor.