

“What to do when it’s bigger than you...”

How to respond when a client reports a trauma to you.

Having a client report to you that they have been traumatized can be a frequent occurrence for those of us who work in the mental health field. Hearing one of your clients disclose to you that they have been traumatized is not an easy thing to handle. Hopefully, with some of the following suggestions, a difficult situation may be a little easier to handle.

So what do you DO when your client reports to you that they have been abused?

Do...

- Listen
- Remain calm
- Reassure them that they are brave and strong
- Validate their feelings
- Reassure them that this disclosure does not change how you feel toward them
- Remind the child that you will have to repeat this information so that help can be found
- Tell your supervisor immediately
- Tell the therapist immediately
- Document what the child said
- Make a report to Kansas Department for Children and Families as soon as you can (have the number to the DCF Abuse Hotline handy at all times)

Don’t...

- Promise things that you have no control over
- Prompt the child
- Coach the child
- Take notes as they are talking
- Encourage them to speak more than they want to
- Tell them that their perpetrator is a bad person
- Show extreme reactions; try to remain as calm, caring and supportive as you can
- Ask questions that might be leading (e.g. “Did he touch you like this?”)

Trauma disclosure can be compared to a medical situation: If someone came to you with a gaping physical wound, you would clean it, bandage it as best as you can, and get emergency help as soon as possible. You would not perform surgery; you would not investigate to see what harmed the person. You simply would take care of the problem and find the person some additional help.

In a situation of trauma disclosure, you help the child to stabilize as best as you can and get them to where they need to go for further help. This can mean listening, comforting, validating, reassuring, and supporting the child.

Some Common Traps

Don’t promise that you won’t tell

One thing that you don’t want to do is promise the child that you won’t “tell.” Many times, a child will indicate a willingness to tell only “if you promise not to tell anyone else.” It is not appropriate to make this promise if you don’t know what the information to be disclosed is. A suggested response might be “It is my job to make certain that you are safe. If you tell me something that is putting you in danger, then I will have to tell.” If the child chooses not to tell you, that is okay. Reassure them that you are a safe person and that when they are

ready to talk, you will be there for them. As always, document your session.

Don't make a child talk if they don't want to

Oftentimes, a child will make reference to abuse that is occurring in an offhand, subtle way, almost “in passing.” If a child mentions to you that they’re being abused and then goes along their way without another thought, don’t push them into talking about it. Children will share what they can, when they can. It’s best to document what you were told in the manner that you were told, inform your supervisor and the therapist and keep your ears open.

Don't ignore the child

One of the worst things you can do if after trusting you enough to share their concern about abuse you ignore what they have just told you. It can be very damaging to a child to tell someone they are being abused and then have the person they trusted ignore what they have just shared. Don’t play it off as “no big deal.” If they are acting like it’s no big deal, and don’t want to talk, that’s a different story. Reassure them that they are strong, ask them if there is anything you can do, and support them. Don’t joke, or take it lightly – even if they do.

If a child discloses to you at the end of the session that they are being abused at home and that they are scared to go home what do you do? Find out what is making them feel unsafe. If seems to be a dangerous situation, contact your supervisor or therapist or your after-hours crisis line to see what you should do.

If there is no one available for you to talk this over with, call the police. Getting someone else involved for you to talk with will help you decide what your options are. You do not want to take a child home to a dangerous situation after they have just stated that they are not feeling safe.

It is perfectly okay for you to call your supervisor while the child is still with you. This gives the child the message that they are being taken seriously. This is a serious situation and your phone call demonstrates that you are trying to help them the best that you can.

Formula for Follow-up

No matter how prepared you are for trauma disclosure, it is not an easy thing to go through. Don’t forget to follow up with a self-care routine. Informing your supervisor of what steps you took will help you process and address the feelings you have about the situation. Receiving feedback from your supervisor will only help you for the next time you experience a similar situation.

Some centers have developed the following standard operating procedure: when a client or family or situation has been reported for suspected abuse, there is immediate follow-up at the next staff/supervisor meeting. Even if the situation has been addressed and processed, it never hurts to discuss it in an appropriate and confidential group setting so that others can learn from your experience.

This is especially helpful in those centers where many care givers are working with the same client and family in group settings, or on an individual basis through services such as Attendant Care, and Parent Support.

One last thing...

Although mental health disclosure does not happen every day, if you work in the children’s field long enough, chances are you will encounter a situation that calls upon your ability to think, react and refer for help. Don’t live in fear of this possibility happening to you, just be aware that if and when it does happen, you are never alone in caring for a child and that disclosure can be a positive beginning to a healthy resolution of a traumatizing situation.