

How to receive a survivor story: the VEEEL method

The initial response to the survivor who comes forward is one of the most critical parts in the survivor's healing journey. The most important way you may be called to respond to a survivor is to hear their story, their "Sacred Story" as I refer to these narrative gifts.

The following method I have found helpful in receiving a trauma story. I utilize five basic steps with a mnemonic tool to help. The mnemonic I use is "**VEEEL**" – **Validate, Empathize, Empower, Explain, and Leave the door open.**

While there is no specific rule or best practice about following these steps in any order, I have found the first two steps to be most important. Always ending with Leave the door open helps as well.

VALIDATE – "I hear you"

The first step in receiving a survivor's story is validation of the survivor and the story. It takes tremendous courage to gather strength and inner resources to finally disclose a story of abuse to anyone. We survivors sometimes carry enormous amounts of shame, self-blame, doubt, and fear. We may have trouble trusting others. Survivors must be able to share their stories in SAFETY. The response should be a message of having heard the survivor and to realize how precious this story is. Be honest with us if this is difficult for you to hear. Sharing your own frustrations, emotions are ok so long as you don't take over the encounter. Some validating statements are:

- "Thank you for sharing your story with me."
- "You are not alone."
- "I am sorry this happened to you."
- "It was not your fault."
- "You are not to blame for this."
- "This is hard to hear, but I want to be here for you"

EMPATHIZE – "I want to understand"

Abuse isolates a survivor in many ways. Survivors may feel isolated from families, community, and friends. Abuse also disconnects us – we may become disconnected from ourselves because we can't face the truth about our abuse, disconnected from others because of fear and shame, and disconnected from our emotions because we would rather not feel the hard emotions. Words that can help a survivor not feel alone anymore are important.

- “Help me understand what you are feeling.”
- “That sounds hard/difficult.”
- “Your emotions are ok here.”
- “You are not alone.”

EMPOWER – “I admire your courage”

Abuse makes the victim powerless. If a survivor has chosen to disclose a story of abuse, your words of empowerment can give the survivor a sense of restored power. It reminds us that what we have endured is significant and disclosing is courageous. Empowering words can give us strength to continue the healing journey.

Examples of words of empowerment are:

- “You have tremendous courage.”
- “It took a lot of strength to share your story.”
- “How can I help?”
- “What part of your healing do you want to work on?”

EXPLAIN or educate– “This is what I know/don’t know”

Trust is damaged when someone is abused. Although trust can’t be achieved quickly, there are ways to help a survivor trust again. SAFETY and transparency are critical.

Be completely honest with what you will do with a survivor story. Will you have to report to someone else? Who? And then what will happen? How long will I have to wait for a response? Who do I contact if I have questions?

This is also a time to educate yourself and the survivor. If you know something about trauma, share what you know, if not, then find someone who does. If you don’t know the next step, be honest about it. Do not promise anything you can’t give.

Phrases that can help explain the next steps to survivors:

- “Here is what I will do next/here are the next steps.”
- “This is what I know/what I can do/what I cannot do.”
- “You know what I know.” (no secrets)
- “I don’t know the answer to that, but I will ask (be specific) and let you know.”

LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN – “I will be here for you.”

Healing is a process not an event. Healing is unique to each survivor. After having found the courage to disclose a story of abuse/trauma, a survivor may need time and space to heal from this very act. Sometimes a survivor may feel overwhelmed with emotions and refuse or reject offers of help. Again, give the survivor the power and freedom to step back for a while but impart them with the reassurance that you have not abandoned them. Words such as:

- “As your situation changes, I would be happy to provide additional time/support/help.”
- “You are welcome here.”
- “I will keep you in my prayers.”
- “I’m here, not going anywhere.”