



## How To Take Care of Yourself After Hearing a Story of Maltreatment

by Anna Westbrook

When a survivor reaches out to you and shares a story of maltreatment, you are right to focus on their needs in that moment. However, you do not have to ignore your own needs. Here's what you can do AFTER you are told an abuse story.

1. **Acknowledge** YOUR feelings and thoughts to YOURSELF. Name them individually and specifically. Do not shame yourself, even if your reactions seem "wrong." Owning those reactions is a first step. Accept them as YOUR work, not the work of the storyteller.

*Sample Sentence Structures:*

When she said she was hurt in that location, I felt afraid I might be hurt in that location one day too.

When he told me that he was attacked, I thought about how he might be lying.

When they got angry and cried, I did not know how to comfort them.

2. **Consider** consulting a THIRD PARTY. You do not need to react alone. It may help to process those feelings and reactions with a third party. Names, locations, and other identifying details should not be shared without the consent of the original storyteller. But you are allowed to separate your ownership of your feelings about a story from the rights to privacy of the story teller. If you need to talk to someone, do so. To avoid resorting to appropriation or gossip, keep the focus on YOUR feelings about the story, rather than the story itself.

*Sample Sentences Structures:*

I feel \_\_\_\_\_, because a person in my life told me about \_\_\_\_\_.

I am thinking about \_\_\_\_\_, because someone I know said \_\_\_\_\_.

3. **Manage** your FOLLOW UP commitments.  
Did you promise anything to the storyteller? Perhaps you offered to connect them to a resource or provide a specific distraction or comforting experience. Did you imply that you would reach out to them in a specific way at a specific time? Survivors expect to lose relationships. Show up. Send a post-conversation text message or call just to check in. If you expressed interest in supporting during confrontation, reporting, or moments of future crisis, consult an expert such as a therapist, counselor, or other resource WHILE maintaining a line of communication with the survivor. If you are wondering whether or not to report to the authorities, consult an **organization such as RAINN**.
4. **Maintain** your EQUILIBRIUM or establish your NEW NORMAL.  
You do not need to stay in crisis response mode. Return to your daily life. If the survivor story includes a new awareness of a character flaw within someone you know or risk of danger to someone in your community, establish a new routine that will keep you and others safe. When the story merits a change to your daily life, consult a professional such as a therapist, counselor, or spiritual advisor to help you establish your new normal. Most importantly, know your limits. You may not be able to make the problem better, but you can help the storyteller make it through the next phase of their healing.

**BONUS CONCEPT :** During your direct contact with the storyteller, you can express your intention to pursue each of these steps and establish multiple levels of consent and ownership of information, i.e. saying, "I believe you and want to honor your ownership of your story, but I will also have my own reactions to this to deal with. Do you mind if I talk to \_\_\_\_\_ about my reactions to this? It will help me."

Learn more about taking care of yourself while helping others with the song "[I Can't Make It Better](#)" from Anna Westbrook's *Isabel & The Runaway Train*.