

COPING WITH REACTIONS TO CHILD ABUSE & FAMILY VIOLENCE

Hearing a child tell of abuse is difficult and painful. A wide range of emotions and reactions are normal when faced with abusive behaviour toward children, and include:

- shock
- disbelief
- doubt
- denial
- anger
- fear
- anxiety
- disgust
- discomfort
- guilt
- curiosity
- desire for revenge
- empathy
- concern
- sadness

These reactions must be dealt with in order to be effective and appropriate in responding to the child and family.

When staff are aware of their personal reactions or responses to child abuse and family violence, their emotions can be managed or channeled. Staff are then in a better position to be supportive to the child, to remain objective, and to be effective in their contacts with the family, colleagues, a child protection agency, and other authorities.

When staff are aware of their emotional responses and can deal with them effectively, they are more likely to:

- *remain calm;*
- *be able to listen actively to the child's disclosure;*
- *be attuned to children's behaviours and identifying those at risk;*
- *feel confident in documenting and reporting suspicions of abuse;*
- *be sensitive to and supportive of the child and his/her family;*
- *experience positive outcomes in dealing with personal issues; and*
- *remain objective.*

COPING STRATEGIES

The following is a list of strategies that staff could consider pursuing in an effort to address and resolve emotional reactions and responses to suspicions of child abuse and family violence.

- Recognize your own reactions to distress (e.g., headaches, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, nausea, sweating, trouble breathing, difficulty concentrating and/or making decisions).
- Talk about your feelings with a supportive and nonjudgmental listener (e.g., your immediate supervisor, a trusted colleague, a child protection worker), remembering to respect confidentiality.
- Recognize that your own memories of abuse may be triggered and this may be the time to seek professional help.
- Try not to isolate yourself from friends and family, being left alone with your thoughts and feelings.
- Calm yourself by doing deep breathing exercises, connecting with nature, listening to music, meditation or releasing strong emotions via exercise.
- Participate in something pleasurable that you may not have had a chance to do lately (e.g., watch a movie, have dinner with a friend, a massage, a bubble bath, creative expression).
- Continue with regular personal eating, resting and relaxation routines – be aware of the tendency to indulge in “comfort food” (e.g., chocolate, ice-cream and sugary foods) and the overuse of alcohol, caffeine, drugs and cigarettes to ease tension.
- Know and respect your own limits – recognize if the situation is too intense or emotionally distressing, and ask the supervisor or another colleague to work with the child and family until your feelings are resolved.
- Recognize that if the emotional fallout is too overwhelming, it may be appropriate to take a break from your job.
- Limit exposure to movies, news reports, etc. that contain abusive, violent or other disturbing content.
- Seek professional help to make sense of the situation (e.g., dealing with the guilt of not being able to protect the child from harm, or the feeling of helplessness at not being able to change/control the situation).
- Understand that you may question your faith in people and your cultural or spiritual beliefs, and guidance from a spiritual advisor or elder may be helpful.
- Obtain more information on child abuse and family violence to further understand the issues to be able to help yourself, other staff, the children and their families.