The Compassionate RESPONSE

How to **Help and Empower**
the Adult Survivor of Child Sexual Abuse

2023 Edition

JOELLE CASTEIX
Author of The Well-Armored Child

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Introduction to the 2023 Edition

This little ebook, The Compassionate Response, had its humble beginnings as a chapter of my 2015 book **The Well-Armored Child**.

I thought at the time (and still do) that once people understand the dynamics of child sexual abuse, they will—whether they want to or not—become someone that survivors feel comfortable disclosing to. Survivors are keen to pick up compassion and understanding in others, and I felt it would be unfair to give readers information about protecting their children and not give them the tools to handle a situation when a survivor discloses.

Unfortunately, due to space issues, The Compassionate Response chapter was cut—but my opinion on the importance of the subject matter remained. I'm glad I stuck to my guns. The Compassionate Response, in both print and free ebook, has been by far my most popular title.

The most important changes to the book are in the *Resources Section* in *Chapter Three*. Support organizations have evolved over the years, and I wanted to make sure that I included the best of the lot. Plus, social media and virtual support have changed the game. While internet-based healing may not be everyone's cup of tea, it's important to include as many options as possible for survivors to find the healing they need.

No book like this is ever really finished or ever really completed. I will do my best to continue to keep it updated and welcome any input of resources I may have missed.

Joelle Casteix, June 2023
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Chapter One

One of the hardest things that many adult survivors of child sexual abuse will ever do is come forward and tell someone. Even if the survivor discloses decades after the crime, the pain is still fresh and the shame still stings just as badly, if not worse, than when the abuse occurred.

But for the person the survivor tells, hearing the news and knowing how to react in a compassionate, safe, and empowering way can be almost as difficult.

Since I came forward publicly with my own story of abuse in 2003, I have been trusted and approached by hundreds of other adults who were sexually abused as children. I have also been asked for guidance by dozens of friends and acquaintances who were told about abuse, but did not know how to help or what to say.

In fact, when people first began to disclose their abuse to me, I didn't know what to say or how to react. I understood, on a logical level, why these people trusted me (I had announced to the world that I was abused), but I knew that my reactions to other survivors weren't wonderful. I wasn't sure if I needed to fix their problems or hold their hands. I ended up talking way too much and observing far too little.

What I didn't understand was that I only needed to listen. Survivors didn't want me to solve their problems. They wanted me to simply hear them. Just like I had wanted people to simply hear me.

But what I also learned is that many survivors also needed a roadmap to healing. Some survivors are overwhelmed with emotions like guilt, shame, or fear. Others are wracked with depression, addiction issues, eating disorders, and health issues caused by stress, or are in the midst of other abusive relationships. So, while these men and women do need someone to listen, they also need someone to help guide them toward a path of healing and wholeness.

If you are not a survivor, you may find that being trusted with disclosure is distressing. As a trusted person, you want to do and say the right thing, but many times, you simply don't know what that right thing is. In addition, you have your own emotions to address. You may have been a friend of the survivor while the abuse was going on and had suspicions. You may know and like the abuser. You may be confused as to why the survivor chose you. You may be a family member of the accused.

You may have feelings of guilt, anger, fear, disbelief, or shock. You may not like the survivor. You may not agree with the survivor. You may be angry with the survivor for telling you.

On the other hand, you may feel like the puzzle pieces of this person's life are falling into place. You may have a whole new sense of understanding of the survivor and your relationship with him/her. Whether you are confused, angry, or sad, you need to address your feelings and take care of yourself.

Helping the survivor may require you to look inward. And a side effect may be that someone else gets help and healing: you.

The purpose of this book is not to make you a therapist or counselor. You are neither of those things—nor should you be. It's healthier for you and more helpful for the survivor if you view your role as one of a listening, supportive, and (only if necessary) helpful ear. Depending on how the survivor is doing, he or she may "run hot and cold." One week, you may hear from the survivor quite often. Then the survivor will retreat into isolation and you won't hear from him or her for months. Don't take it personally. This book will also help you set appropriate boundaries for the survivor, who may need far more than you can give.

To borrow an old cliché: you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. This book will help you lead survivors towards the path of healing. It's up to the survivor to decide if he or she wants to make the journey.

Why are so many survivors coming forward these days? Until recently, survivors of child sexual abuse were forced into the shadows. Child sexual abuse was misunderstood and never discussed in polite company, let alone in the media or on primetime television. As a result, survivors had to grapple with shame, fear, self-loathing, and isolation. Predators, who are cunning, gregarious, and charismatic, were able to win over supporters and "groom" entire communities. ("Grooming" is a term used to explain how a child predator uses flattery, lies, manipulation, charisma, gifts, attention, and power to create compliant child victims and supportive adult communities.) Victims were blamed for their own abuse and society preferred to remain ignorant about the problem.

The landscape has changed. In the past two decades, there has been a sea change in public opinion and support for victims of child sex crimes. As more and more survivors have gained the strength to come forward publicly (thanks to media attention to the Catholic clergy abuse crisis, USA Gymnastics, and other survivors using the courts for justice); Grand Jury and Attorney General reports and investigations into child sexual abuse; and "window legislation" that gives survivors civil justice rights in states across the country, survivors who may at one time have been too scared to come forward are now finding strength to speak out. As a result, other survivors have been compelled to talk about their abuse.

Finally, when famous or religious figures are credibly accused of sexually abusing children adults (think Michael Jackson, Steven Tyler, Marilyn Manson, Nick Carter, Jared from Subway, Josh Duggar, Larry Nassar, and Bill Cosby), talking about sex crimes becomes far less taboo.

The more we can encourage survivors to come forward, the more we help survivors who are still suffering in shame and silence. And the more we talk about abuse, the more we put predators on notice that our society will not tolerate men and women who hurt children and think that they can escape justice. Simply put: the more we talk, the safer children are ... RIGHT NOW.

Chapter Two

THE DISCLOSURE

The conversation may begin innocently over coffee. It may happen in a fit of rage at the Thanksgiving table. The news may come out of the blue in waves of emotions and tears and sobs. Or … the survivor may be very cavalier and let the words flow off the tongue like he or she was talking about sports scores.

But the message will be the same: “When I was a child, I was sexually abused. And I needed to tell someone.”

With this kind of disclosure comes huge responsibility. Whether or not you want to face it, you have now become a trusted confidante. And you may just save a survivor’s life. ***It’s how you react that can make all the difference.***

So, what do you do when a survivor discloses to you that he or she has been abused?

First and foremost: if the crime is recent, a child tells you they are being or have been sexually abused, or the victim is in immediate danger, call 911. If the crime is not recent, but you suspect that children are still in danger of abuse, report to law enforcement. Refer to Chapter Three to learn more about reporting abuse.

Many times, an older survivor will come forward when he or she hears that the person who abused him or her has been accused by others. This is very important: older survivors can work with law enforcement and act as witnesses for the younger victims, to help put their abuser behind bars.

Tell the survivor you believe him or her. This may be surprising to you, but you will probably be the first person to respond to the survivor in a mature and compassionate manner. Many survivors—in fact, a large majority—are met with doubt, skepticism, or told outright, “You’re making this up for attention. I don’t believe you.” Even well-meaning people can say or do the wrong thing. They may have tried to minimalize the abuse (“Oh, it happens everywhere these days. You’ll be fine”). Others may have just clammed up or instantly changed the subject after the survivor disclosed. Some of the most painful reactions are the ones that instantly shift the blame to the victim (Why didn’t you run away? Why didn’t you tell your parents or call the police? You must have liked it if you did nothing to stop it.).

Your job is this: listen to, validate, and empower the survivor. When you engage in the simple act of listening, you are giving the survivor a tremendous gift. Then, when you validate the survivor's trust by saying that you believe him or her, you are empowering the survivor to start or continue the healing process. Much of the pain that survivors suffer is generated when people deny survivors their truth, minimize their experience, and invalidate the suffering they still endure.

Tell the survivor you are very sorry that such a horrible thing happened. Tell him or her that the abuse was the fault of the predator, not the child. Like most victims of crime, adult survivors of child sexual abuse want very simple things: empathy, accountability, and compassion. Unfortunately, most people are uncomfortable talking about abuse. People can become physically upset and don't want to listen to survivors' stories. Other people react with righteous anger or confusion. No matter what you feel, it's important that the survivor knows that you care and that you understand what happened was wrong. By saying you're sorry and that abuse is NEVER the fault of the child victim, you can help ease the burden of guilt and shame that some survivors carry. As I explained before, even well-meaning people will continue to blame child victims and question survivors as to why it took them so long to disclose. When they do that, they imply the survivor is lying or has ulterior motives. They also show a complete misunderstanding of the dynamic of grooming and abuse. Always reiterate that abuse is never the child's fault.

Remember this when a survivor discloses: Your feelings are secondary. No matter what you feel at the moment of disclosure—put the survivor's needs and feelings first. You have plenty of time to process later.

Even if the survivor dismisses your empathy by saying, "It's all right. I'm over it," the survivor heard you and knows that you care. The survivor may not embrace your words openly, but he or she does relish your empathy.

Compassion is never wasted on a survivor. Even when survivors are hurt or angry, they hear you. Your words do make a difference.

Do not tell a survivor to forgive the abuser. Survivors, especially those abused in religious organizations, are often encouraged to "forgive and move on." According to FBI veteran and author Joe Navarro in a 2014 blog post on the Psychology Today website, this is exactly why many predators are attracted to the clergy. He says:

"When a survivor is encouraged to 'forgive and forget' the abuse, it gives a predator a 'free pass' under the guise of Christianity. What's worse is when the 'forgiven' predator goes on to abuse more children. The survivor who is bullied into forgetting the abuse is likely to blame him- or herself for the later crimes. No survivor should have to carry that burden."

Note: Forgiveness can be important, but only after there has been justice and the harm to the survivor has been repaired. Forgiveness also never implies that a predator should escape accountability.

Many religious organizations preach forgiveness, even for felonies. For predators, this is truly a godsend. This means that if they get caught, they can ask for and be granted forgiveness by the people who are entrusted with child safety. Instead of keeping kids safe, many religious groups choose to forgive or "look past" a predator's actions in a pious but naïve effort to help the lawbreaker "learn from his mistakes." Unfortunately, the predator sees this as an opportunity to sharpen his skills and to commit the crime again, perhaps this time more carefully.

Tell the survivor that he or she is brave for coming forward and that you admire that courage. I know of men and women who did not disclose their abuse until they were in their 60s and 70s. They spent a lifetime wracked with shame, self-hatred, fear, and guilt. Other survivors waited for their parents to die because they didn't want to be the one to tell that a beloved priest, friend, sister, or uncle was an abuser. Affirm openly that the survivor is a good person and that you are happy he or she is talking.

Reinforce that the survivor is not helpless and that by speaking out, he or she can break the cycle of abuse. It may sound clichéd, but every time a survivor speaks out, more and more people become aware of abuse. When older survivors speak out, they also implicitly tell younger victims that it is safe and right to speak out and get justice. The more we all talk, the easier it is to put predators behind bars.

Do not try and rationalize what happened or impose adult sensitivity or logic on something that happened to a child. Examples are asking things like:

"Why didn't you tell earlier?"

"You WERE 16. Shouldn't you have known better?"

"Where were your parents?"

"But you were a boy and she was a woman. Isn't that every boy's dream?"

"Why didn't you fight/say no?"

“But you DID have a crush on the teacher/coach/priest, didn’t you?”

"Aren’t you just after the big payout?”

“Why come forward now? Can’t you just put it behind you?”

“You’re not really a victim because you were a teenager, weren’t you?”

“You seduced [the adult] and sinned.”

These questions make survivors believe that the abuse was their fault and that they should not report. These are questions that predators WANT you to ask, because these kinds of questions shame and silence survivors.

If you have questions or do not understand the dynamics of abuse, predatory grooming, and the effects of child sexual abuse, then educate yourself. The more you know, the more you will be able to identify abuse and predatory behaviors.

Don’t get angry. Why would you get angry? It’s easy. You may know the perpetrator. The alleged predator could be a beloved teacher, a family member, a community leader, or someone you really like and respect. The alleged perpetrator could be your friend.

You may be angry because you love the survivor and didn’t want them to be hurt. You may be angry because the abuse happened “under your watch.” You may be angry that the survivor didn’t tell you sooner.

Resist the urge to say, “I could kill [the perpetrator],” “How could [the perpetrator] do this to us?” “Why didn’t you tell me?” or “Why did you tell so-and-so before you told me? I thought you trusted me.” Survivors disclose when they feel safe, and you may not have been there at a safe moment. All that matters is that you are there now. If you show anger, the survivor may retreat and never get the help he or she needs.

It’s easy to instantly rebuff the survivor and tell him or her that she is lying or may be mistaken about the predator’s motives. You may be inclined to tell the survivor that he or she just misunderstood simple affection. Don’t let anger or judgment get in the way of compassion.

When a survivor comes forward, it is not your job to play judge and jury. Do your best to listen without judgment. Save the anger for later and address it in a healthy way.

You may not get the whole story right away. The survivor may seem to be holding back or the story will grow over time. This is not uncommon—survivors have a tendency to disclose abuse "piece by piece" as they decide whether their audience is safe and supportive.

It's always our first inclination as friends to start asking questions. We may think: how can I help unless the survivor tells me everything? Most survivors disclose very slowly, only giving certain details. They may not even remember (or want to remember) some of the details of the abuse. They may even be in denial about how bad the abuse was. They may feel scared because they are so damaged by the abuse. Tell the survivor that they can tell as much or as little as they want, and you are there to provide support.

The timing may be wrong. The survivor may disclose to you at a very bad time. Weddings, family parties, funerals, and holidays are very popular times for survivors to "trigger" (that is, to feel very emotional due to events, people, or memories) and need to talk about what happened to them. It's not because a survivor wants to "ruin the fun" or be the center of attention. It's because these occasions are usually full of heightened emotions, memories, and safe (or unsafe) people. The survivor may be so overwhelmed with all of the people and memories that he or she may have an emotional breakdown in the middle of a crowded room.

Think of a soldier with PTSD who reacts physically to loud noises because of trauma suffered in combat. It's very similar for survivors of child sexual abuse. Smells, conversations, people, or surroundings (being in the childhood home or surrounded by childhood friends) can trigger a survivor and push him or her to disclose. Remember, survivors often cannot choose the times they are triggered. Is it convenient? No. But do your best to understand that it usually isn't the survivor's desire to get emotional and ruin everyone's day.

The survivor disclosing to you may not be a close friend at all. You may not know the survivor well, if at all. These moments can be very uncomfortable. If an acquaintance discloses to you—and tells you that you are the only person who knows—it's usually because the survivor sees you as a "safe" person. In fact, telling a stranger is often much easier than telling a friend. On the flip side, it's often easier for you—the trusted person—to help a stranger, because you don't have the emotional investment that you would in a friend.

Chapter Three

HOW TO HELP THE SURVIVOR

You don’t need to “fix” the problem. Ask what the survivor would like you to do, if anything, to help. More often than not, the survivor will just want to you to listen. You may be the very first person this survivor has ever told. You may be the first person who has truly listened to what the survivor had to say. The fact that you took the time to listen and care can be a healing experience in itself.

Before you spring into action, take a deep breath, and remember: you are not here to “fix” anything. Ask the survivor if there is anything that you can do to help. They answer may be, “No. You have helped by listening.”

Not every survivor will want therapy. The survivor may never want to talk about it again. The important thing is to find out what the survivor wants and not to overburden him or her with advice or recommendations. The survivor may tell you that he or she needs help finding a support group or wants to go to a twelve-step meeting. The survivor may ask if you know of any therapists. The survivor may ask you about reporting to the police. Or, the survivor may say, “I don’t know what I want. I just wanted to talk.”

A great response is always, “I can help you find any resources you need, if and when you are ready. I am so happy you told me and released some of the burden you have had to bear.”

Get answers to any questions you have about reporting. *Note: if you witness abuse or a victim under the age of eighteen comes to you in distress immediately after the crime, call 911. If you suspect abuse and want to talk to a trained crisis specialist who can tell you how to report in your area, call Childhelp: the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-Child*.

If you are a mandatory reporter, follow the applicable laws in your area. Be sure to tell the survivor that you are a mandatory reporter and that you are obligated under law to report what you have been told.

When a survivor discloses to you, you are being told about a crime. Perhaps the crime happened decades ago and the abuser is long dead. Or perhaps the crime is relatively recent or the alleged abuser is still alive with access to children. Regardless, you should know how to help the survivor make a report to law enforcement.

Find out local reporting numbers in your area and read the resource list below. In some jurisdictions, police will handle these calls. Other times, a social services agency, child abuse hotline, or special center will be tasked with taking incoming reports. Take some time now—before anyone discloses to you—to find out the best numbers to call in non-emergency situations. You can find numbers using an internet search, calling your local police, or reaching out to a therapist you know.

If you determine you need to report the crime to law enforcement, tell the survivor. The survivor may respond with anger or feelings of betrayal. In that case, tell the survivor that you are reporting because you respect the gravity of the crime and that your first priority is keeping other children safe. In a non-emergency situation, empower the survivor to make the report him or herself, and ask what help is needed from you.

If the survivor asks for help, recommend support groups and twenty-four-hour hotlines in your area. If you are able, offer to help with additional research. Every year, more and more support groups for adult survivors of child sexual abuse are formed across the United States. Thousands of formal and informal groups exist across the US and thousands more do great work internationally. If the survivor seems open to the idea, tell him or her that you can help research a group that will meet the survivor's particular needs. Also be sure to reassure the survivor that it's okay to "shop around" for a good fit. Personalities and group dynamics change from location to location, so it's perfectly acceptable to visit a couple of groups before finding a "home."

If the survivor is open to the idea, recommend therapy or coaching. This can be a tricky thing to recommend. You don't want the survivor to think that he or she looks and acts in need of therapy, so how you phrase the question is important. Good questions are: "Have you gone to a therapist to talk about what happened to you? Did it help? Are you still going? Is it something you would consider?" Fortunately, there are many options besides traditional talk therapy, including EMDR, timeline therapy, personal coaching, virtual therapy, and other healing modalities. Survivors of child sexual abuse have many options for healing.

There are also professionals across the country who have created healing curriculums that allow survivors to create and use healing tools to grow through and beyond their abuse. Talking to therapists, family counselors, ministers, and local support organizations will help you find recommendations.

The survivor may also suffer from other issues that need to be addressed hand-in-hand with child sexual abuse. Such issues can include eating disorders, addiction issues, sexual dysfunction, relationship issues, violence, criminal behavior, depression, or mental illness. For the survivor, healing will be like peeling the layers of an onion, so the therapeutic help that the survivor needs may be extensive. But if you can point the survivor in ANY positive direction towards healing, you will be doing that person a huge service.

Encourage the survivor to report to law enforcement, even if the abuse was a long time ago. In most cases when an adult survivor of child sexual abuse comes forward, the survivor will not have rights to seek justice in the civil and criminal courts. But that does not mean that the survivor should not report to the police or that he or she should not look at their options (see the section above on reporting abuse). Laws vary from state to state. By going to the police, the survivor can find out if he or she can still press criminal charges. If the criminal statute has lapsed, filing a police report can create a “paper trail” that may help the police in case another survivor of the same predator comes forward. The survivor can become the important secondary witness that can help put a predator behind bars.

The survivor may also have rights in the civil courts to expose the abuser and any organizations that cover-up the abuse. Even if the survivor cannot put the predator behind bars, he or she may be able use the civil courts to warn communities of the danger, “out” a predator, and unearth evidence that may help other victims and aid law enforcement in prosecuting child sex crimes.

To find out if a survivor has civil rights, visit the National Crime Victims Bar Association (an affiliate of the National Center for Victims of Crime) website. Their mission is to help crime victims get justice in the civil courts. They can let you know victims’ civil rights in your state and/or the state where the crime occurred, help the survivor find a good attorney, and explain what is involved in the civil justice process. The civil justice system has done tremendous work in exposing child sexual abuse in schools, churches, and organizations across the country and should always be explored if there is a chance that the survivor has rights. **Another good resource is ChildUSA (www.childusa.org)**.

Restorative Justice Depending on the willingness of the survivor, restorative justice may also provide a healing way for the survivor to get justice. Restorative justice does NOT take the place of accountability, nor does it rely solely on the survivor forgiving the abuser.

Instead, it focuses on the needs of the survivor (repairing the harm, justice, exposure, healing), the offender (rehabilitation, institutional reorganization in the case of institutions that cover up abuse), and the community (healing, education, assurance that crime will not happen again).

Referral Services and Resources

SurvivorSpace www.survivorspace.org Formed under a partnership between Zero Abuse Project and the Department of Justice, SurvivorSpace is new technology-based resource informed by survivors, for survivors. It offers a safe space where survivors can learn about child sexual abuse; find information on new rights under the law; focus on self-care and resiliency; read survivor stories; explore civil litigation; access national resources and institutional programs; and connect with others to learn about and discuss a wide range of topics.

RAINN The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network — https://www.rainn.org/ — Offers a twenty-four-hour crisis hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE. They also offer referral and educational services, and advocacy for victims of sex crimes.

ChildHelp —https://www.childhelp.org/ —Childhelp offers the 24-hour National Child Abuse Hotline. Trained staff and volunteers will assist you in reporting known or suspected abuse, find resources in your area, and help victims and survivors who are struggling.

SNAP, The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests —www.SNAPNetwork.org. SNAP is the nation's largest, oldest, and most active support group for women and men wounded by religious and institutional authorities (priests, ministers, bishops, deacons, nuns, coaches, teachers, and others). They have in-person and virtual support groups across the US and abroad.

Darkness to Light— http://www.d2l.org/ — Offers a twenty-four hour hotline for adult survivors of child sexual abuse at 1-866-FOR-LIGHT. They also offer educational and crisis resources and information about legislation that helps victims.

Victim Connect — https://victimconnect.org/ — The VictimConnect Resource Center is a referral helpline where crime victims can learn about their rights and options confidentially and compassionately. It is a program of the National Center for Victims of Crime. They help with mental health and counseling services, housing needs, victim compensation and restitution, national and local referrals, legal services, civil justice options, victim rights' advocacy, and crime reporting.

The National Center for Victims of Crime — http://www.victimsofcrime.org — Advocates for stronger rights and services for crime victims; provides education, training and evaluation; and serves as a trusted source of current information on victims' issues.

The National Crime Victims Bar Association — www.ncvba.org - An affiliate and program of the National Center for Victims of Crime, the NCVBA offers a civil attorney referral service for survivors of child sexual abuse, as well as many other programs for crime victims seeking help in the civil courts.

Local state coalitions against sexual assault — Do an online search for your state's coalition. Most offer free or low-cost referral and counseling services.

MaleSurvivor — www.malesurvivor.org — MaleSurvivor provides critical resources to male survivors of sexual trauma and all their partners in recovery by building communities of Hope, Healing, & Support.

Chapter Four

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

You can help, but you cannot cure. Many survivors of child sexual abuse suffer from terrible damage, whether mental, spiritual, physical, or emotional.

Because their own boundaries were violated when they were children, some lack the ability to form proper emotional boundaries as they become adults. Others suffer from depression, self-loathing, drug and alcohol issues (which are a way to self-medicate), anger, or other psychological issues. If you encounter an adult survivor who needs therapeutic or clinical help, you can help him or her find therapists, but you cannot be a therapist. If the person does not want clinical or therapeutic help, but obviously needs it, it is safe and correct for you to tell the survivor that you care about him or her very much, but you cannot help him or her—or even be a friend—unless the survivor gets professional help.

Feel free to tell the survivor that you fear being an amateur therapist because of the potential damage you may cause. Also reaffirm that you want to be a friend and a peer, but you cannot be the person's savior or knight in shining armor.

Draw boundaries and stick to them. As I stated above, many survivors have difficult times drawing boundaries because of the abuse they suffered. Others draw very strict boundaries that can become problematic in marriage or other close relationships.

When a survivor first comes forward, he or she can create a strong emotional attachment to the first person he or she tells—the first person who "made it safe" to share the secret. Chances are that his or her emotional attachment and reliance upon you will be much stronger than the attachment you have for the survivor. The survivor may call often, be emotionally vulnerable around you, or need your confidence and affirmation.

Most of the time, the survivor will be very conscientious of your needs and boundaries. But in a few cases, survivors with boundary issues may call at inappropriate times, need your help late at night, become emotionally draining, or be angry at you because you cannot provide 100% of the care the survivor needs. It is all right to tell the survivor when he or she may or may not call and to give the condition that he or she must seek professional help.

It sounds harsh, but everyone needs boundaries. If a survivor knows that he or she must work on healing before friends will be able to lend a hand, then at least the survivor has a guide or map about where his or next steps should be. Remember, before the survivor disclosed to you, he or she was swimming in a vast ocean of sadness with no guidance. By giving the survivor boundaries and sticking to them, you may be the first person in the survivor's life to give him or her a real shot at healing.

Understand that you may also need to talk to someone. Vicarious trauma (the pain you feel when you deal with others who are hurting) is real. If you find that you need to, talk to a counselor. A single session with a skilled counselor can help you understand vicarious trauma, self-care, and how to better help the survivor.

In Closing

When someone tells you that he or she is a survivor of child sexual abuse, you are not the guardian of a secret. Instead, you are the gateway to healing. The more prepared, open, honest, and compassionate you are, the easier it will be for the survivor to begin the journey towards finding wholeness. The more you are able to create an atmosphere where abuse is not shameful or embarrassing, the more you will be able to show the survivor that coming forward was the right thing to do.

This book is a launching pad. No book or website can be comprehensive, due to the complicated nature of child sexual abuse and the individuality of each survivor and each crime. But, by reading the material I have provided here and knowing how to respond compassionately to a survivor, you are better equipped to help and better equipped to stop the cycle of child sexual abuse.