



The Language of Support

Finding the right words

When it comes to supporting a person after a sexual assault or other kinds of abuse, the first rule of thumb is validating their experience. This may seem obvious, but most invalidating language is accidental. We hope this guide can help you choose the right words when providing compassionate, validating, and non-judgmental support.

Instead of...	Use...
<p>“Are you saying _____?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implies doubt. ▪ You are interpreting their feelings for them. 	<p>“I’m hearing you say _____. Is that correct?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensures you’re hearing them correctly while letting them define their own experience.
<p>“I understand what you’re going through.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unless you’ve been through an identical experience and felt the exact same way about it, chances are you don’t. Their experience is unique. 	<p>“That sounds really [hard/terrifying/etc].”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Affirms their feelings are valid and worthy of being listened to. ▪ You don’t have to have been in the same situation to be a great support person.
<p>“This happens to a lot of people.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implies their experience is generic and unworthy of being heard. ▪ Suggests what happened is “no big deal.” 	<p>“You are not alone.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reminds them that this happens to other people without reducing the validity of this specific incident.
<p>“It wasn’t your fault,” if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They haven’t suggested they feel at fault. ▪ May plant the seed of feeling at fault, or imply that others may see it that way. 	<p>“It wasn’t your fault,” if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They say something to imply they feel at fault, i.e., “I shouldn’t have been drinking,” “I can’t believe I let them into my tent,” etc.
<p>“Have you thought about calling the police?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Few survivors haven’t thought of filing a report. There are a number of reasons someone might not want to do so. 	<p>“You have options for how to handle this. Let me know if you need information on any of them.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reminds them that the decision to talk to law enforcement is theirs and theirs alone. ▪ They know you available to help them decide on what to do, if needed.
<p>“What do you need from me?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They may feel put on the spot, or that your support has time limits. 	<p>“I’m here for you if you need anything.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Allows them to ask for specific support on their own terms, if and when they need it.
<p>“What are you thinking about right now?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They may feel pressured to disclose more details than they want to share. ▪ Many survivors aren’t ready to verbalize what happened right away. This can take time. 	<p>Nothing at all. Be present. Be available. Listen to every detail they feel comfortable sharing, and don’t ask for anything more.</p>

The 11th Principle exists to promote consensual interaction in the burn world and beyond. We seek to prevent non-consensual encounters through education, advocacy, and demonstration. Contact us at 11thPrinciple@transformus.com for additional information or guidance.