Voice and Verbal Messages

Voice messages include how we talk, for example the volume, tone and speed, use of silence.

Verbal messages are what we say, or the content of the conversation. We can use active listening skills, effective questioning, validate and normalize a survivor’s feelings, use healing statements, following the survivor’s pace, using the same language as the survivor and simple explanations. It is also good to develop a comfort level to use silence when appropriate.

Active Listening Skills
- Use open-ended questions to really understand how the survivor is thinking and feeling.
- Paraphrase and summarize (“Let me see if I understand what you have told me so far”).
- Clarify when necessary (“When you say he was threatening, can you tell me more about what he was doing?”)
- Reflect content and/or feeling (“It sounds like you were very scared in the moment when he yelled and raised his fist”). When we look in a mirror, we see our reflection. Reflect how the survivor is feeling and thinking so she can see it like in a mirror. Help her to see her situation, explain and her options more clearly. Help her to survivor focus.

Validate and Normalize
- The best thing we can do is understand and acknowledge what survivors are feeling—and make it feel normal. For example, if a survivor begins to cry, we can say: You have every right to be upset and sad. It’s okay for you to cry here. I will be with you and we can talk when you are ready.
- Because we want survivors to feel better our instinct may be to tell the survivor NOT to show her emotions, or diminish her experience, such as, “Don’t be afraid,” “Don’t cry,” “It’s not as bad as it seems,” “Everything is going to be fine,” but we want to let survivors know that
they are having a normal reaction to an abnormal event. The best thing we can do is understand and acknowledge what they are feeling—and make it feel normal. This may feel uncomfortable to us—to have to sit with someone who is crying, or angry, or depressed—but being a true helper means that we allow them to feel what they need to feel. So, instead of telling survivors what NOT to feel, we should validate their feelings and normalize it.

Healing statements are things that helpers can say to a survivor immediately after she tells us what happened and throughout the helping process in order to promote her healing and recovery. Healing statements build a relationship between the helper and the survivor, build trust, allow the helper to express empathy, and reassure the survivor that what happened to her was not her fault and she is not to blame.

- “I believe you.” BUILDS TRUST AND IS REASSURING
- “I am glad that you told me.” BUILDS A RELATIONSHIP
- “I am sorry this happened to you.” EXPRESSES EMPATHY
- “This is not your fault.” NON-BLAMING AND REASSURING
- “You are very brave to talk with me and we will try to help you.” REASSURING AND EMPOWERING