

21 sentences NOT to say to a SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR

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As a sexual abuse survivor, I've heard my share of insensitive comments. I've also talked to enough victims to be able to gather some of the most damaging words here—all for the sake of those who truly, truly want to be loving, sensitive and helpful.

My intention in writing these is not to shame those who want to help, or make them walk on eggshells. Instead it's to help friends and family members of victims best love and understand the sexual abuse recovery journey.

One. That was so long ago, why can't you just get over it?

In this case, I simply ask, "How long did it take you to 'get over' the death of a loved one?" Sexual abuse involves grief—the loss of innocence, the shame of sexual violation, the removing of living life free. I'm not sure we ever "get over it." We grow. We heal. We process. But there will always be that grief.

Two. Are you sure it happened?

Telling is the hardest thing to do for a sexual abuse victim. While there are people who make up stories, err on the side of belief. Believe me, none of us wish we had this terrible story to tell. And yes, we're sure it happened.

Three. If you talk about it so much, you'll never heal.

Processing is important. There will be times when a victim spends a lot of time talking. This is part of the process. It won't always be so. Offer your understanding. Listen. Ask questions. Making snap judgments about someone's healing journey and how long it "should" take only makes them want to quit.

Four. You know that song, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Or it makes you weaker, jumpy, more fearful, less trusting.

Five. I could never go through what you went through.

What this communicates is that, in a way, you're glad it didn't happen to you. Which is completely natural to feel. But it also makes us feel like we're marked somehow, and we're left with the very real truth that it did happen to us.

Six. That perpetrator must live with such awful regret.

Maybe. Maybe not. Sociopaths and psychopaths don't process regret or shame like others. They tend to blame society, their upbringing, and even the victim for their violations. A sexual predator is redeemable, but their pathway to health is long and excruciating. One article that truly helped me understand how many predators process "getting caught" was a recent one by Boz Tchividjian.

<http://boz.religionnews.com/2014/01/21/caught-tape-5-common-responses-sex-offenders-church/>

Seven. That's how men act. It's normal.

This is one of the most demeaning things anyone can say about a man. Men aren't enslaved to sexual desire unless they choose to be. Men can act nobly, honoring the women in their lives. They will not die without sexual release.

Eight. So and so forgave her abuser; it was easy.

While forgiveness is an important part of the healing process, it is not simple or easy. And it can take years to get to a place where you choose to forgive. Telling us how easy it was for someone else makes us feel like the path of healing we're on is the wrong one.

Nine. It's just sex.

Unwanted sexual touch is violation. It's not just sex. That's why there's a difference between consensual and non-consensual sex. One is an act of choice and love. The other is predatory and criminal.

Ten. But was it full sexual abuse? He just leered? That's it?

Dan Allender in his book *The Wounded Heart* shares that healing from sexual abuse is difficult no matter what form it takes. Don't minimize someone's journey just because it doesn't fit with your idea of violation.

Eleven. Was the perpetrator drunk? Were you?

The fact is this: one person chose to violate the will and dishonor the NO of another. This is a criminal act, regardless of the state of inebriation. If someone murdered another while drunk, that state of drunkenness does not excuse the crime.

Twelve. Well, what were you wearing?

Sexual predators prey on people, regardless of what they are wearing. I have not had this question leveled at me because it would be ridiculous. I was five years old when I was assaulted. I wore a kindergartener's dress, corduroy, with pants underneath and patent leather shoes.

Thirteen. Did you flirt? What did you expect?

Flirting is different than asking to be violated. In the case of date rape, it makes sense that flirting went on because it was a DATE. But a date is not a precursor to unwanted sexual touch.

Fourteen. Why didn't you tell me before?

This is not about you. It's about the victim. Don't place a guilt trip on someone if it's taken her a long time to tell you. Telling is a HUGE risk. Many people are violated a second time because the people they tell don't believe them, blame them, or flat out walk away.

Fifteen. Hmmm, but you look normal.

Looks can be deceiving. Inside the mind of a sexual abuse victim is all sorts of chaos, shame and worry that the secret will define them the rest of their lives. We may look "normal," but we struggle to heal, to believe we are worthy to take up space on this earth.

Sixteen. Just stop thinking about it.

Flashbacks and triggers happen when we least expect it. Many victims suffer from PTSD and cannot control the sudden thoughts that invade.

Seventeen. It could have been worse. (Insert worse sexual abuse story here).

This is not helpful. Everyone has a unique story, and no matter what level the sexual abuse, it is very real and hurtful to each individual. Don't minimize one person's story by sharing another.

Eighteen. Oh, I understand totally. (No, you don't).

Unless you've walked the sexual abuse path, don't say this. And even if you have, no two people will process their abuse or heal in the same way.

Nineteen. You sure you didn't make this up to get attention?

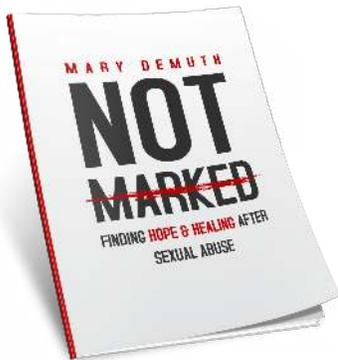
This is demeaning and utterly dismissive. Err on the side of belief and empathy rather than misinformed judgment.

Twenty. Well, why didn't you (insert thing you should have done here)?

No one can walk in the abuse victim's shoes. No one knows exactly what could or could not have been done. Looking back, I did everything I knew how to escape those neighborhood teens who sexually assaulted me for a year. Some of those things worked; most didn't. And in the middle of violation, most victims are so typically shocked and taken off guard that there's really no way to have a "right" reaction. Besides, the abuse happened, and saying there had been a way for the victim to escape is just heaping further shame.

Twenty-One. This was part of God's plan, so you'll have to make your peace with it.

I don't even know how to respond to this. I have a strong belief in the sovereignty of God, but I must be honest: I still wrestle with why He didn't protect me as a small child. I know as a parent, that if I knew my child was being exploited, I would have stepped in. So I still wrestle with God's ways, and I think I always will. I still love Him. I'm utterly grateful for the healing He has wrought. But I don't really understand why I wasn't protected.



About this Article & Not Marked

I've shared my sexual abuse story in the last few years <http://www.marydemuth.com/how-do-you-forgive-a-sexual-abuser-by-writing-a-letter> but I haven't always been so open. Initially I kept it silent for a decade, then over-shared, then went silent another decade. The healing journey hasn't been easy, but it has been good.

About a year ago, I sensed God wanted me to be bold in sharing about sexual abuse. I wrote this post: <http://deeperstory.com/the-sexy-wife-i-cant-be/> on Deeper Story, which went crazy (so many comments), followed by <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/april/im-sick-of-hearing-about-your-smoking-hot-wife.html> on Christianity Today. The overwhelming response to those two posts prompted me to write Not Marked: Finding Hope and Healing after Sexual Abuse. <http://amzn.to/1kVasi>

The book proved too risky for publishers, so I decided to crowdfund it. <http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/not-marked#share> This turned out to be an amazing success. I cannot believe that now I can hold Not Marked in my hands, and also offer it to you.

What's unique about Not Marked:

- It's written from the perspective of a survivor.
- It doesn't offer simple answers.
- It's honest.
- And my husband shared his unique journey of how to walk a loved one through their sexual abuse.