When a Guest Shares Something Difficult

One of the most important things we do at Center of Hope is build relationships.

As you work with guests in the Free Choice Market, Baby Closet, or other programs, people may begin to trust you. Sometimes that means they will share things about their lives that are painful, personal, or difficult to hear.

A guest might tell you about abuse, homelessness, addiction, a family crisis, a serious financial need, violence, neglect, or even criminal activity.

When someone trusts you with difficult information, how you respond matters.

> **“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” — James 1:19**

First, Listen

You don't need to have all the answers.

Often, one of the most valuable things you can do is simply listen calmly and compassionately. Give the person your attention. Don't react with shock, judgment, or disbelief.

You can say something as simple as:

“I'm sorry you're going through that.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“I'd like to see if there's someone here who can help.”

You aren't expected to be a counselor, investigator, social worker, or law-enforcement officer. **Your responsibility is to listen, recognize when something needs additional attention, and get the appropriate person involved.**

Don't Promise Confidentiality

We respect our guests' privacy, and personal information should never become a topic of conversation among volunteers.

However, **don't promise a guest that you will keep something secret.**

There are situations involving safety, abuse, threats, or criminal activity where information may need to be shared with Center of Hope leadership or the appropriate authorities.

A better response is:

“I'll respect your privacy, but if someone is in danger, I may need to get someone who can help.”

When Someone May Be in Immediate Danger

If a guest tells you about a situation where **someone appears to be in immediate danger, a serious crime is occurring, or emergency assistance is needed**, notify a Center of Hope staff member or Team Leader immediately.

If there is an active emergency and someone is in immediate danger, **call 911.**

When possible, alert staff at the same time so they know what is happening and can assist.

Do not confront a suspected offender yourself. Don't attempt to investigate the situation. Don't put yourself, another volunteer, or a guest in danger.

Safety comes first.

When You Learn About Possible Abuse or Neglect

Information involving possible abuse or neglect — particularly involving a child, vulnerable adult, or someone who may be unable to protect themselves — needs to be taken seriously.

Immediately bring the information to a Center of Hope staff member.

Do not conduct your own investigation or repeatedly question the guest for details. Your role is to listen and accurately pass along what was shared.

Depending on the circumstances and applicable reporting requirements, staff can help determine the appropriate next step.

Important: If you personally have a legal duty to report suspected abuse because of your profession or another role, informing Center of Hope does not necessarily replace your own reporting obligation.

When There Isn't an Emergency, But Someone Needs Help

Many difficult things guests share won't require law enforcement or emergency services.

Someone may tell you that they're about to lose their housing. They may be escaping an abusive relationship. Their utilities may be getting shut off. They may not have enough diapers or food. They may be grieving, struggling with transportation, dealing with a family crisis, or simply feeling overwhelmed.

Please don't assume there's nothing we can do.

Tell your Team Leader or a Center of Hope staff member. We may have a program that can help, know about another community resource, or be able to connect the guest with someone who can talk through the situation with them.

Sometimes the most important thing a volunteer can do is recognize, **"This person needs more than what I'm able to provide right now,"** and connect them with someone who may be able to help.

> **"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." — Galatians 6:2**

Don't Try to Solve Everything Yourself

When someone tells you something heartbreaking, the natural reaction may be to immediately try to fix it.

Be careful about making promises.

Don't promise money, housing, transportation, food, services, or exceptions to Center of Hope policies unless you have the authority to provide them. Don't give someone the impression that Center of Hope can solve a problem before you've spoken with the appropriate staff member.

Instead, say:

"Let me talk with someone and see what options might be available."

Compassion doesn't require having an immediate solution.

Protect the Guest's Dignity

What a guest tells you should not become volunteer conversation later.

Even when names aren't used, enough details can sometimes make someone's identity obvious.

Share sensitive information **only with the people who need to know in order to respond appropriately.** Don't tell other volunteers because the story is surprising, upsetting, or interesting.

> **"A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret." — Proverbs 11:13**

There is an important difference between **gossiping about someone's situation and appropriately sharing information because someone needs help or may be in danger.**

After a Difficult Conversation

Some stories are hard to hear.

If an interaction with a guest leaves you upset or unsure about what happened, talk privately with your Team Leader or a Center of Hope staff member. You don't need to carry something difficult by yourself.

It is also perfectly appropriate to pray for someone who has shared a difficult situation with you.

Remember Your Role

When a guest shares something difficult:

Listen calmly. Show compassion. Don't investigate. Don't make promises you can't keep. Don't promise absolute confidentiality. Protect the guest's privacy. Get a Team Leader or staff member involved when appropriate. If there is an immediate threat to someone's safety or an active emergency, call 911.

Most importantly, remember that the person talking to you has trusted you with something that may be deeply painful.

Treat that trust carefully.

> **“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” — Romans 12:15**

We may not always be able to fix what someone is facing. But we can listen, respond wisely, connect them with appropriate help, and make sure that every person who shares their story with us is treated with compassion and dignity.