

# RESPONDING TO ABUSIVE CALLS

## A Reference Sheet for Rape Crisis Programs

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### Definition:

For the purpose of this handout, we define an abusive caller as someone who is utilizing a hotline, helpline or telephone advocacy service in a way it is not intended, usually for the purpose of humiliating or traumatizing the hotline advocate or for personal gratification beyond survivor support. Abusive behavior may be specific to the situation and individuals involved, thus may be defined differently by each advocate.

### Possible Warning Signs of Abusive Callers

- Uses vulgar language
- Speaks quietly to sound sexy
- Compliments advocate
- Asks sexually explicit questions
- Insists on telling story of sexual violence
- Requests to role play
- Is very descriptive and detailed
- May be masturbating

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## 10 Suggestions for Responding to Abusive or Angry Calls:

1. Do not tolerate an abusive call. You have the right to end a call that causes you to experience trauma.
2. Keep in mind that many abusive callers are also survivors. While you do not have to tolerate the abuse, it is important to not respond in an abusive or argumentative way yourself. Responding with anger could encourage the caller's behavior or could be re-traumatizing for them.
3. Make it clear that the behavior is unacceptable. You could say something like, "If you continue to use abusive language, I will have to end the call." If you have to end the call, do not do so angrily. Calmly say, "I am ending the call now because I am uncomfortable with how you are talking to me," and hang up.
4. If your agency does not already have a written protocol for dealing with abusive callers, suggest that an internal policy be written on the subject. OAESV is available to offer technical assistance and examples, if requested, on this topic as well as many others.
5. Know the difference between an angry caller and an abusive caller. An angry caller is someone who is upset about their situation or the services they are/are not receiving from your agency, and acts out on those emotions using anger. An abusive caller is someone who is utilizing the hotline for a reason other than its intended purpose, such as to harass or embarrass the hotline advocate or for personal gratification.
6. When dealing with an angry caller, keep a calm tone and allow time for the caller to let off steam.
7. Once an angry caller calms down, focus on their expectations and be honest about the limitations of the agency to provide for their needs or wishes.
8. Instead of trying to argue or compromise with an abusive caller, consider referring them for alternative services. Remember that the caller may be a survivor in need of help. You can remind the caller that this is a crisis hotline and offer to refer them for trauma counseling services if they need to discuss their situation in detail.
9. Follow your agency's guidelines for informing other hotline advocates of the abusive caller. Many times, abusive callers will call back at another time, in hopes of talking to a different advocate. Preparing your co-workers for a potential abusive call can help to reduce trauma.
10. Seek support after an abusive call. It can be traumatizing to receive an abusive call, especially if it is your first experience. Follow your agency's policy in regard to debriefing the call with your supervisor or a co-worker.

Some of the information contained in this document is adapted from a publication entitled *Responding to Challenging Calls*, by Sarah Hill, Head of Services at Helplines Partnership and a presentation entitled *24-Hour Crisis Line Advocacy*, by the Ohio Sexual Violence Helpline.