

Adopting a Trauma and Violence-Informed Approach to Communication

Using a trauma and violence-informed approach means informing yourself about violence, trauma, the causes and effects of trauma, and trauma responses. It then requires integrating this understanding into your interactions and communications with survivors of violence and other traumatic events. It means taking steps to minimize the possibility of causing harm and re-traumatization and maximizing safety, control, and resilience.

How do you do this? Educating yourself about gender-based violence and the associated trauma is a good first step. The next step is to integrate this understanding into your interactions and communications with and about survivors of gender-based violence.

Remember what, when, and where you need to communicate will vary depending upon your role and responsibilities in relation to a survivor of gender-based violence. Below are general communication tips to be supportive and to help minimize the possibility of causing further harm and re-traumatization. These tips are intended to complement existing organizational policies, procedures, and practices.

Building trust, establishing safety, and embedding respect into your communications with individuals who have experienced gender-based violence is critical.

Communication Basics

- Remain calm, patient, and focused on the survivor.
- Carefully choose your words and be mindful of the tone of your voice and body language to ensure you are communicating respect and compassion, not judgment.
- Know and communicate the boundaries of what you and your organization can do.

Communicate Essentials First

- Identify who you are, what your organization does, and how you can help.
- Determine how the survivor wants to be addressed (e.g., first name or surname) and comply. For example, Amanda Simpson may want to be addressed as Mandy, so do so.
- Determine together when, where, and how to communicate.

Practice Empathetic Listening

- Empathetic listening is an active process that requires you, as the listener, to demonstrate compassion, nonjudgment, and to make a genuine attempt to understand what the survivor is sharing with you from their perspective.
- Try not to rush or interrupt the survivor and learn to be comfortable with silence. Silence creates space to process information and emotions.
- Listen carefully to what the survivor is sharing with you. Listen to understand, but do not probe. Ask questions on a need-to-know or clarification basis. Avoid using why as it implies blame and judgment. Pay careful attention to the survivor's response (verbal and nonverbal) and adapt accordingly.
- Empathetic listening involves acknowledging facts and feelings shared by the survivor when you respond. This acknowledgement demonstrates that you are listening, that you are trying to understand, and it also provides an opportunity for clarification in case you misunderstood or missed something.
- Paraphrasing what the survivor has shared with you may start with, "What I understand you are saying"
- Acknowledging and validating experiences may sound like, "That sounds like a terrible experience" or "No one deserves to be treated like that."
- Keep in mind that nonverbal communication sends a message too. Leaning slightly forward while maintaining adequate personal space and slow nodding can demonstrate attentiveness.
- Note: maintaining eye contact is often identified as a means of indicating we are being attentive. However, maintaining eye contact may not be culturally appropriate and depending on the psychological impact of the violence, a survivor may not be comfortable with eye contact, so you will need to evaluate and adapt.
- Empathetic listening does not necessarily mean that you agree with the other person. It means that you are trying to understand their perspective and experience.
- Remember that listening with genuine empathy fosters connections, trust, and respect. We want to be treated with respect: to experience fairness, dignity, and an open mind – to be seen and heard as a fellow human being without judgement.


Immediate And Long-Term Needs

- Be prepared: learn about gender-based violence services in your area while recognizing the boundaries and limitations of you and your own organization.
- During your conversation with a survivor of gender-based violence, you may become aware of immediate and/or long-term needs, such as shelter or mental health services.
- Depending upon your boundaries, you may offer to connect a survivor with relevant services. Alternatively, you may ask the survivor if they would like you to share a list of relevant service providers with them.
- Remember: do not make assumptions.

Collaborate With the Survivor

- Work with survivors by offering accurate information, creating opportunities for choice, and identifying options while they make decisions about their life.
- Why? A collaborative approach helps to ensure you do not introduce or mirror the unhealthy power and control dynamics survivors have experienced in abusive relationships and/or during gender-based violence.
- A collaborative approach supports empowerment.

Additional Tips

- Factor in the physical, psychological (cognitive and emotional), and cultural safety of survivors of gender-based violence and yourself in your communications.
 - Establishing and communicating boundaries guides expectations and provides for clarity. Boundaries also help to maintain physical and psychological health and well-being.
 - Do not assume gender identity, including one's pronouns.
 - Remember that being present, polite, and considerate goes a long way.
 - If and when possible, chose a quiet space that maximizes privacy and minimizes noise, distractions, and disruptions when communicating with a survivor.
 - Practice self-care and reach out for help when you need it.
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Additional Information

Possible signs of trauma responses to look for when communicating with survivors of gender-based violence:

- Sweating
- Change in breathing (breathing quickly or holding breath)
- Difficulty relaxing, muscle stiffness
- Flood of strong emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, hopelessness, etc.)
- Rapid heart rate
- Startle response, flinching
- Shaking
- Staring into the distance
- Becoming disconnected from present conversation, losing focus
- Inability to concentrate or respond to instructions
- Inability to speak
- May have gaps in memory

(Source: Poole, N., et al. (2013). *Trauma Informed Practice Guide*.)

Triggers Can Reactivate Trauma

Neurobiological changes caused by trauma can result in triggers. **A trigger refers to seemingly neutral instances (stimuli) that lead to re-experiencing the traumatic event.** In the moment, a trigger recreates past traumatic experiences so that potential threats are perceived as real and immediate. When triggered, even well-intentioned actions by others can result in re-traumatization. Commands, communication of blame, shame or judgement, touches, sounds, smells, or other stimuli can remind a person of early trauma and trigger an emotional or physical response of freeze, fight, or flight.