

Seven Simple Tips to Improve Your Trauma Informed Communication

It's not uncommon to feel unprepared or out of your depth when working with a survivor of recent sexual assault. Survivors can be experiencing any kind of trauma response and it's important to understand some amelioration basics so you can meet them wherever they are without flooding yourself.

- 1 Know what you take in the room with you.** Do your own healing and bias awareness work. This helps you understand how your gender, age, family, work experiences, trauma history, and assumptions can shape your encounter. Check in on your energy and frustration levels. Know your current capacity.
- 2 Drop into your body.** Grounding and maintaining awareness of how you're feeling in your body gives you a solid place to stand when you're working with someone who may be dysregulated. Take a moment before you begin and occasionally throughout your encounter to feel your feet on the ground or your breathing in your belly or nose. Focusing awareness like this brings you into the present moment and gives you information about how you're doing with ever thing that's going on. Attending to your own needs ensures that you have attention to give to the survivor you're working with.
- 3 Offer options instead of assumptions.** Just because someone shows up in an exam room doesn't mean they want to talk with the police or have evidence collected. Remember that each survivor knows their situation better than you do. Your agenda is yours, not theirs. Be aware that being an authority creates a power dynamic that can prevent questions. Offer the things you and your team can provide like a menu – medical care, help reporting, evidence collection exam, and none of the above. That last one creates a comfortable way out for people who aren't interested or ready to engage. Elicit and answer questions about each option.
- 4 Use conditional language.** Speculating with the survivor on what could happen rather than dictating leaves room for them to consider what they really want. Ask things like 'would you like to...', 'might you be interested in...', 'what do you think about...?' This is a great way to level down the authority you bring with you and engage the person you're working with as a partner in their own care.
- 5 What to do when someone says no.** Celebrate! It's great that you built enough rapport that someone feels ok saying no to you. There are noncoercive ways you can check in to understand what may be behind a no so you can address things like missing information. Consider following up with something like 'help me understand how you landed here so I can fill in any informational gaps there might be.' Avoid asking why because it can put people on the defensive.
- 6 Use a four-part informed consent model.** 1. 'Here's what I'd like to do next.' 2. 'Here's how we do it.' 3. 'Here's why we offer this.' 4. 'Would that be ok with you?' Or 'what do you think about that?', depending on the level of choice that's appropriate to the situation. Seek consent for each part of your encounter, not just at the beginning.
- 7 Clean up when you say something that falls flat.** Everybody says something at some point that's taken badly or misunderstood. Don't let cues of discomfort pass by without acknowledgement. Try being authentic and ask for a redo. Don't make it about you. A simple 'I think that came out the wrong way and I'd like to start over' is sufficient. If you're not sure where a discomfort cue came from, inquire. 'It seems like you're uncomfortable' or 'I think I saw something pass across your face. Can you tell me what just happened for you?' Consider the power dynamic in the room – you are the expert and it's your responsibility to keep things moving along as smoothly as possible.

Experiment with these seven tips and see how they affect the encounters you have with survivors. It will take some practice to translate the principles into your own words. When you begin to feel adept with these, try them with the people you supervise or your colleagues. They're universally applicable.