



HOW WE TALK ABOUT WORKING
WITH MALE SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL
ASSAULT, HARASSMENT, AND ABUSE





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This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-TA-AX-K035 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.



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How we talk about sexual violence matters. Whether you're describing your center's services to a friend, talking with a classroom of college students about preventing sexual harassment, or writing your agency's newsletter, the words you use have an impact on how audiences understand those topics. They also have an impact on who sees themselves as eligible for your center's services.

Because you want to raise awareness in your community that men experience sexual violence, and let men know that your sexual assault center is here to help, make sure your language reflects these commitments. This resource suggests how you can communicate about sexual violence as something that men experience and about what services are available for survivors, including men.

There is no one right way to accomplish the goal of reaching male survivors. The most important thing is to know your audience. After thinking about what your audience knows and their values, discuss these issues in ways that resonate with your audience. Addressing these topics and increasing access to trauma-informed services for men needs to be an ongoing and evolving effort. This will not be a single conversation or a checklist that you go through once. It may include multiple conversations and approaches over time. Think of the suggestions in this document as a starting place for discovering what works for you, your agency, and survivors in your service area.



Focus on the facts.

Focus on the facts and stay away from restating myths (Cook & Lewandowsky, 2012). People already know the myths. When we say them out loud or include them on our websites, we inadvertently reinforce these falsehoods (O’Neil & Morgan, 2010).

Instead, state the facts:

- Men are victims of sexual assault and harassment (Smith et al., 2018; Stemple & Meyer, 2014; Stop Street Harassment, 2018).
- Men experience unwanted sexual contact by people of any gender. Women sexually assault men (Breiding et al., 2014; Stemple & Meyer, 2014; Stop Street Harassment, 2018).
- Men experience unwanted sexual contact by people of any sexual orientation (Greathouse et al., 2015).
- Men are sexually assaulted by people they know (D’Inverno et al., 2019).
- Unwanted sexual contact causes harm to men and boys who experience it (D’Inverno et al., 2019; Stop Street Harassment, 2018).
- Men recover from sexual abuse, including abuse that happened during childhood, with the help of safe, supportive, and caring relationships and support services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; Domhardt et al., 2014; National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2019).
- Physiological responses (erections and/or orgasms) can occur during unwanted sexual contact, but this does not mean there was consent (Levin & van Berlo, 2004).
- Sexual orientation is a part of someone’s identity; people do not decide who they are attracted to (Herek et al., 2010). Experiencing sexual assault has no bearing on sexual orientation.

Go beyond characterizing men as bystanders and people who offend.

Remember that many audiences you communicate with likely include male survivors and their loved ones. To reach them, include messages that men experience unwanted sexual contact. In addition to saying what you need to say about men as bystanders and people who offend, it is vital to also acknowledge survivors who are men.

- Efforts to engage men and boys in prevention can be important parts of the movement to end sexual violence. Acknowledging that men are victims and survivors of sexual violence doesn't diminish the significance of these efforts.
- Sexual violence is a gendered issue (Dixon-Wall, 2014), and most people who commit acts of sexual violence are men (Breiding et al., 2014). Acknowledging that men are victims and survivors of sexual violence doesn't discount these understandings.

Know when to use gender-neutral language or gender-specific language.

Gender-neutral language is a good practice for many reasons (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). It helps us to be inclusive in our communication, to show we serve survivors of all genders, and to respect survivors who may use gender-neutral pronouns.

- For example, "people of all genders" or "all survivors" are gender-neutral ways to describe who your center serves.
- In many cases, language like this may be the most precise option, as in the statement, "our program offers counseling to all victims, regardless of gender."



Gender-specific language can also be helpful. Some of your services may be gender specific, and should be clear whenever a service or program is designed for a specific audience.

- To reach men in your community, it can be useful to mix in gender-specific language since many people in your community likely do not know that men are able to receive services at your center (for example, promoting a support group for survivors who are transgender men).
- Conduct targeted outreach to male survivors, in part by being present at other settings in the community where men are likely seeking services (for example, reentry organizations, LGBTQ community centers, recovery organizations).
- This strategy of creating specific messages to reach people in your community should not be limited to reaching male survivors. Adapt this strategy as one way to reach groups not currently accessing your center's services (for example, Black survivors, Indigenous survivors, survivors who have disabilities).



Everyone at your program has a role in increasing men's access to services.

- Think about how all of your center's activities work together. Someone working in the community to teach people how to prevent sexual violence isn't only "doing prevention work" – they are also representing the agency and its mission to people who may have never heard about it before. Ultimately, people doing community education on sexual violence have a tremendous opportunity to reach male survivors, their loved ones, and other key stakeholders.
- Sometimes the point that men experience sexual violence is an afterthought. For example, when representing sexual violence issues publicly, a speaker may say "she" to

describe a victim, and occasionally add "oh and men too." In these situations, you can use gender-neutral terms like "people who have had unwanted sexual experiences," "all survivors," or "the survivor." When using scenarios, describe survivors using a mix of gendered names and pronouns like "she," "he," and "they."

- Everyone at your agency has a role in communicating to the public what sexual violence is and what services you offer. Work together as an entire staff to clarify how you talk about your services in the community, and make sure everyone is able to communicate that your services are for male survivors.

Mix in varying descriptions of your center's services.

Some of the labels common to our work may not resonate for all survivors. For men, some of the labels that may be uncomfortable include *rape*, *survivor*, *victim*, *perpetrator*, *therapy*, *sexual violence*, and even *support*. Labels related to sexual identity, like *gay*, may also create a barrier for survivors to identify their experiences.

- The word "rape" may be a barrier for men who don't associate their experiences with that concept. Consider language like "unwanted sexual experiences" or "abusive sexual experiences" (Lin6, n.d.).
- A male survivor may question whether or not an organization known as a rape crisis center fits his experience if he doesn't think of what happened as "rape" and he doesn't feel that he is in "crisis." Additionally, if the name of your program is something like, "the women's center," it's unlikely that a man or non-binary person will recognize it as a place they can get services.

- While men may be actively looking for support, the idea of having a “conversation” may help get them in the door. Labeling your work as support, group, therapy, or advocacy may not resonate with many men, but having a conversation with someone about an unwanted experience or trauma may feel better. When you’re in conversation with a man about his experience with sexual victimization, mirror the words he uses to describe those experiences.
- If appropriate, try describing aspects of the services you provide that men might be more comfortable accessing. For example, advocates working in a prison context may reach male survivors when emphasizing that they provide counseling around trauma, substance abuse, childhood abuse, and violence in the community.
- Language like this helps people access services without having to identify or label their unwanted sexual experiences. Get to know your audiences. Try different ways of describing your services to find out what works best for your communities.

Go beyond words.

Clearly, there are lots of ways to change, tweak, or supplement the words you use to talk about sexual assault and your center’s services in ways that reach male survivors. But there are other ways you can show that your center’s services are available to men in your community.

- If there are posters, newsletters, magazines, and other materials at your center, make sure there are images of men included. Similarly, think about how the physical space of your center (including artwork, posters, and bathrooms) reflects that your services are available to men.
- Make sure that your center’s outreach materials, like brochures and your website, include images of men.
- Ensure people of all ages and identities know your services are for them. One way to do this is, when you’re using images of men, to make sure to include men across the lifespan, men of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, men with various body types and abilities, and men in a variety of family structures.

If you would like more information on effective messaging about sexual violence, see the following resources.

Note that while a number of these resources specifically address prevention, the key concepts can be applied to doing outreach and talking about sexual assault services.

- **Moving Toward Prevention: A Guide for Reframing Sexual Violence** <http://nsvrc.co/MovingTowardPrevention> – (2018) This joint publication between Berkeley Media Studies Group and NSVRC provides recommendations on how to frame sexual violence, develop effective messages about prevention, and work with the media to inform and educate the public.

- **Where We're Going and Where We've Been: Making the Case for Preventing Sexual Violence** <http://nsvrc.co/WhereWereGoing> – (2018) This is a joint report between Berkley Media Studies Group and RALIANCE on reframing sexual violence.
- **Getting Attention for Prevention: Guidelines for Effective Communication about Preventing Sexual Violence** <http://nsvrc.co/GettingAttention> – (2018) This brief by NSVRC and Berkley Media Studies Group covers how to communicate clearly about sexual violence and how to frame prevention.
- **10 Principles for Effective Prevention Messaging** <http://nsvrc.co/10Principles> – (2015) This bulletin provides ten tips for advocates on effective sexual violence prevention messaging. Practical examples and a list of key resources are included for more information.
- **How You Write Is as Important as What You Say: A Guide to Trauma-Informed Writing** <http://nsvrc.co/TraumaInformedWriting> – (2014) This guide from the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health provides tips on writing clearly and concisely, tips on accessibility, using plain language, and using inclusive and non-objectifying language.

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