

MODULE

7

ETHICAL COMMITMENTS FOR ADVOCATES

In this section of the training, ethical commitments are discussed and their importance explained. Participants will gain a shared understanding of their ethical responsibilities to survivors and what this means for how they provide advocacy services.

LESSON 1: Why ethics matter

LESSON 2: Exploring the organization's ethical commitments



OBJECTIVES

Participants will be able to:

- Articulate the ethics that are considered central to survivor-centered and trauma informed services.
- Describe the value of an ethical code in ensuring the safety of survivors and the quality of advocacy services.



MATERIALS

- Training agenda (if you create one)
- Flipchart paper or dry erase board and markers
- Pens/pencils and paper for each trainee
- “Ethical Commitments for Advocates” handout (at the end of this module)
- Computer with screen, projector, internet, and audio (optional)



TIPS FOR PREPARATION

- Print or otherwise obtain items listed in the Materials section of this module and make copies for participants.
- Review lesson to be comfortable with the material before the training session.
- If your agency, state/territory/tribal coalition, or other governing body has a code of ethics, review it and be prepared to discuss it.



POINTS TO CONSIDER

- **Ethical commitments support survivors and advocates.**

The ethical code of survivor advocacy is critical to services being safe and empowering for survivors, and supportive of their healing processes. The nature of survivor-centered advocacy work is that advocates don't work with scripts or formulas. Rather, advocates take the survivor's lead and strive to support them in their self-identified needs. Because advocates are likely to encounter new situations where they need to make decisions reflective of whatever they are presented with, ethical guidelines are there to help advocates provide safe and empowering services.

- **Talk about actual experiences.**

Don't be afraid to integrate stories and scenarios in this section that help to illuminate some of the topics covered. We often best learn when we can apply theory to practice. Consider dilemmas that you, as the trainer, have encountered in your advocacy work and consider sharing some of these situations with participants, redacting any information that would identify the individuals you worked with. Sharing worst-case scenarios is not the most helpful thing, but showing a diversity of stories and scenarios can enrich participants' knowledge. Exploring actual ethical dilemmas or other ways in which ethics have helped guide your work can give participants a good sense of how they can use ethical commitments to guide their advocacy services.

- **Reassure advocates in training.**

Considering potential ethical dilemmas may feel stressful to participants as they think ahead to their work with survivors. Reassure training participants that support and supervision is available to help advocates navigate through tricky areas and that advocates do not need to fear having to make decisions in isolation.

LESSON 1: WHY ETHICS MATTER

GROUP BRAINSTORM

During this session, trainer/s will invite participants to consider why ethics matter and how they help guide our work.

Invite participants to share aloud why they think ethical guidelines are important to any field of professional work.

Common examples shared might include:

- Lays out the agreed upon standards for the work
- Addresses areas where problems have arisen or might arise
- Defines the parameters of the role
- Helps demonstrate values
- Puts legal and ethical boundaries around a role
- Protects those seeking services and service providers
- Creates transparency for survivors, community, and providers
- Helps with decision-making
- Is a tool that supports accountability

Encourage the group to reflect on the range of items they named. Fill in any major points the group may have missed.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Now that the benefits of ethical guidelines across professions has been explored, it's important to think more specifically about advocacy work and the dynamics present in interactions between advocates, survivors, and others seeking advocacy services. When we better understand the different dynamics at play, we understand the importance of ethical commitments.

Invite participants to get into three small groups to reflect on potential dynamics in advocacy relationships and practices (if you have a large training class, do six or nine groups, duplicating the sub-topics). Give each group a sub-topic to explore:

1. **Power dynamics**
2. **Decision-making**
3. **Role and boundaries**

Ask each group to identify possible dynamics or ethical dilemmas that might arise based on interactions between advocates and survivors or others seeking services. After small groups have had time to discuss, ask that everyone returns to a large group and small groups report out on what they discussed.

Common examples shared might include:

- **Power dynamics**

- Survivors may think advocates are a person in authority who will tell them what to do.
- If advocate and survivor are of different cultures, backgrounds, or experiences, this could make one party feel more powerful and possibly more or less relatable than the other.
- Age and gender could impact perception of power between survivor and advocate relationship.
- Seeking help from someone puts one person in the role of needing help, and the advocate in the role of helper.
- Advocates may have more positional authority with other systems or service providers than a survivor.
- Survivor may be in vulnerable position (trauma response, emotional overload, dealing with multiple forms of oppression, decision fatigue) and feel powerless.

- **Decision-making**

- Survivors may have difficulty making decisions and may look to advocates for the answers.
- Survivors may have less knowledge about systems and options than advocates and attempt to default to an advocate's knowledge and perspective.
- Advocates and survivors may have different opinions, beliefs, and lived experiences, which may lead them to believe different options seem more viable.

- **Role and boundaries**

- Advocates may deeply empathize with survivors and want to do whatever they can to help them.
- Advocates, especially with crisis and on-call responsibilities or who work outside of typical 9–5 hours, may have a vague sense of when their work starts and ends.
- Advocates may notice other service providers or systems having varying degrees of competence and helpfulness to survivors and seek to remedy this.
- Advocates may strive to be as accessible as possible to survivors, potentially placing them in an “always available” position.
- Survivors may become dependent on an advocacy organization or a specific advocate that they feel a connection with.
- Survivors may seek answers from an advocate that are outside of an advocate's scope of work.

DEBRIEF AND DISCUSSION

Debrief the dynamics and situations that groups discussed. Summarize and build upon the points of discussion raised during the large group brainstorming and small group discussion activities. If any difficulty understanding ethics arose during group discussions, this is a good time to provide clarification.

Remind participants:

- Most of these dynamics simply reflect that this work is often complex and working in a helping profession requires that we pay close attention to places where dilemmas may arise.
- The nature of survivor-centered advocacy work is that advocates don't work with scripts or exact formulas. Rather, advocates take the survivor's lead and strive to support them in their self-identified needs.
- Because advocates are likely to encounter new situations where advocates need to make decisions reflective of whatever they are presented with, ethical guidelines are there to help advocates.

LESSON 2: EXPLORING THE ORGANIZATION'S ETHICAL COMMITMENTS

LECTURE AND DISCUSSION

Using your agency's, state/territory/tribal coalition's, or other governing body's ethical guidelines, review the ethics that are used to guide your agency's work. Consider asking participants to take turns reading sections or bulleted points, depending on the size of your group. If you do not have ethical commitments that your agency currently upholds, use the "Ethical Commitments for Advocates" handout at the end of this module.

Invite participants to ask questions about any of the commitments that they may want more information on or have questions about. Summarize this section by reminding participants:

- Ethical guidelines support a standard of advocacy services that aspires to provide the best possible care to survivors and others seeking support, while protecting them as well as advocacy staff.
- Ethical guidelines are there to help when difficult situations arise and decisions feel unclear.
- Ethical guidelines demonstrate our values put into practice. They are one way we can embody our organizational values and beliefs about survivors and the care they deserve.

ETHICAL COMMITMENTS FOR ADVOCATES

Ethical commitments provide standards or practice for advocates working in the anti-sexual violence field.

Maintaining expertise in the field

- Demonstrate competence by completing initial training and engaging in ongoing professional development.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the root causes of sexual violence.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the nature of the trauma of sexual violence and the complexity of this effect on survivors and the healing process.
- Participate in ongoing supervision.
- Recognize both capabilities and limitations in one's own expertise.
- Understand and model the importance of personal wellness and practice self-care.

Professional integrity

- Maintain a trauma-informed and survivor-centered approach to providing services.
- Maintain and model ethical and appropriate boundaries.
- Support survivors' self-determination and self-agency as they share and disclose their experiences and examine their options.
- Listen generously and respect survivors' decision-making.
- Promote and practice mutual support in relationships with colleagues and staff.
- Respect the roles of the other disciplines you partner with in your community.

Responsibility to the highest standards of the field

- Ensure survivor privacy and confidentiality by understanding and maintaining compliance with state statutes defining privileged communication between sexual violence advocates and survivors.
- Maintain current knowledge of community resources and provide appropriate referrals.
- Maintain current knowledge of victims' rights.
- Maintain current knowledge of other disciplines' roles and responsibilities.
- Challenge harmful practices of other advocates and allied professionals.

- Clarify the role of the advocate to survivors and other professionals you work with.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to real and ascribed differences in power between advocates and those seeking services.
- Know and comply with all laws, standards, rules, and regulations that apply.

Genuine regard for all survivors

- Maintain a practice of nondiscrimination on the basis of race/ethnicity, language, nationality, sex/gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, social class, economic status, education, marital status, religious affiliation, immigration status, or HIV status.
- Actively examine one's history, belief systems, values, needs, and limitations and their effect on providing advocacy.
- Believe the survivors who seek advocacy from you.
- Maintain respectful and professional boundaries with those seeking your services during and after professional relationships.

Advocates as social change agents

- Maintain, practice, and articulate a commitment to social justice.
- Work actively towards legislative, policy, and social change.
- Practice awareness of privilege you hold and what this means for your advocacy work. Consider how your privilege can benefit others.
- Work to unlearn practices, particularly those rooted in power and privilege, that demonstrate harmful attitudes or beliefs toward others.
- Work to challenge and change harmful social norms.
- Work to challenge and change harmful system practices.
- Engage in creative and critical thinking to address systemic barriers to justice for survivors of sexual violence.

