

MODULE

9

THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

This section builds upon previous modules that provided a closer look at the spectrum of sexual violence. Now that participants have an understanding of the spectrum, this module will look at: the factors that influence a person's response to sexual trauma; the impact of sexual violence across the lifespan and throughout the healing process; challenges survivors may encounter in accessing support; and the internal and external resources of survivors.

LESSON 1: Understanding factors that influence trauma

LESSON 2: Identifying factors that influence trauma

LESSON 3: The impact of trauma

LESSON 4: Challenges that survivors experience

LESSON 5: Survivors' strengths and resources



OBJECTIVES

Participants will be able to:

- Identify the factors that influence how survivors are impacted by sexual trauma
- Describe the different impacts of sexual trauma
- List challenges survivors may experience in accessing support
- Name strengths and resources survivors may have



MATERIALS

- Training agenda (if you create one)
- Flipchart paper or dry erase board and markers
- Pens/pencils and paper for each trainee
- Computer with screen, projector, internet, and audio (optional)
- Identifying Factors that Influence Trauma: Scenarios handout and Trainer's Guide (included in module)
- Spiral of Healing handout (included in module)
- Impact of Sexual Violence handout (included in module)
- Reflecting on Challenges Survivors May Experience handout and Trainer's Guide (included in module)



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.



POINTS TO CONSIDER

- **Sexual violence affects everyone differently.**

This section offers a wide view of the impact of sexual violence, highlighting the factors that shape the impact of sexual violence as well as the many ways survivors may be impacted. Trainers should work to ensure that participants have awareness that there is no singular type of survivor or survivor experience, and normalize that each survivor's needs are likely to be different.

- **Trauma is often felt over time, as is healing.**

Healing from trauma is often a long process and the impact of trauma may be felt across a person's lifespan. It is important that this section, and those that follow, are framed with this understanding, as it may help participants to have greater awareness of the wide range of survivors — from those who seek support immediately after experiencing sexual violence to those that seek support decades later. It can also help participants understand the changing needs of survivors throughout the healing process and across the lifespan.

- **Balance truth about the impact with truth about hope and possibility.**

This section may feel heavy for participants, as it explores many of the real, difficult, and potentially long-term challenges survivors face as they try to heal after sexual trauma. It's essential to provide this honest information to participants, and it's also essential to offer hope that survivors are able to heal. Advocates in training may find it useful to learn that one of the most powerful impacts on healing is how survivors are treated when they disclose what happened and seek support. This means advocates have the ability to positively shape survivors' experiences by offering non-judgmental support, compassion, and a safe space to process their feelings and thoughts.

- **Be cognizant of this section's impact on participants who are survivors.**

This section explores some of the difficult and often longstanding impacts of sexual violence across a survivor's healing process and lifespan. This may be new or otherwise impactful information for participants who are also survivors or participants who are loved ones of survivors. It is possible that they could have questions or reactions to this information. Just as in all sections of the training, be sure to have support available for participants who need additional time or one-on-one time to process information or get support.

LESSON 1: UNDERSTANDING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA

LECTURE

Using the following talking points, provide an overview of the factors that influence a survivor's experience of sexual violence. Consider using flipchart paper or a dry erase board to outline key points, such as pre-, peri-, and post-trauma factors.

Talking points: What we mean when we say “trauma”

As we learned in the previous section, sexual violence can include many things. We use this as an umbrella term to describe any sexual act that is imposed on another person without their consent. We sometimes interchange this term with “sexual trauma,” especially when focusing on the traumatic impact of the experience of sexual violence.

“Sexual trauma” can be described as a one-time event or an ongoing experience and does not have to be physically violent. When we say “trauma,” the reference can be specific to the incident itself, as well as in reference to one's response to the act of sexual violence. Most important to note is that the traumatic effects of sexual violence are not limited to the event itself, but often felt for a long period after.

Survivors' experiences of sexual trauma are shaped by a variety factors related to their lived experience, the traumatic event/s, and the support they receive in the aftermath. Sometimes these are referred to as pre-, peri-, and post- trauma factors, or before, during, and after. A closer look at these factors helps us see that no two survivors' experiences are alike, because everyone has different factors that influence our experience of life, our resources, and challenges.

Some pre-trauma factors include:

- The identities we hold and how they influence our interactions with the world
- Past experiences of trauma (prior sexual victimization, experiencing other forms of oppression, family violence, historical trauma, intergenerational trauma)
- Pre-existing supports and resources
- Resilience and coping skills

Some peri- (or during) trauma factors include:

- The form of trauma
- The duration
- The severity
- The location

Post-trauma factors include:

- Response to disclosure
- Support by family and friends
- Access to healing and supportive resources
- Experience with systems

Allow time for any questions that participants have about these factors before moving into Lesson 2, which will be a time for participants to practice identifying the factors.

LESSON 2: IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA

SMALL GROUP SCENARIOS

Ask participants to get into small groups or pairs. Pass out the “Identifying Factors that Influence Trauma: Scenarios” handout. Assign a scenario to each group or pair. Ask them to read through and respond to the questions together. Participants will have a chance to come together to discuss as a large group once completing the activity in small groups.

Trainers should refer to the “Identifying Factors that Influence Trauma Scenarios Trainer’s Guide” handout for guiding the group discussion.

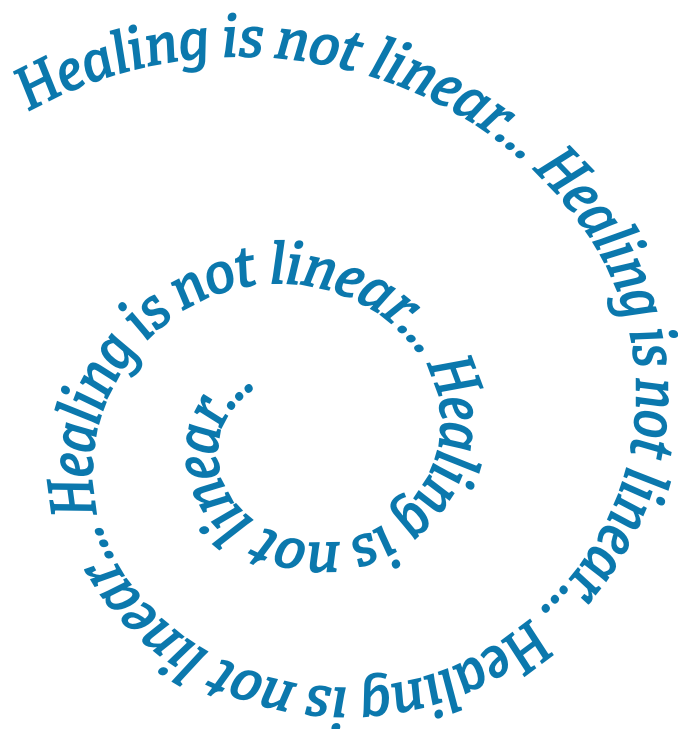
Once small groups have had a chance to discuss their scenario, bring everyone back together as a large group and ask that each group share about their discussion. Using the Trainer’s Guide, as well as responding to participant questions as they arise, help participants to identify the many factors that shape survivors’ experiences. Allow adequate time for processing.

LESSON 3: THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

LECTURE AND DISCUSSION

Transition into this section by sharing with participants that with a strong foundation in understanding the factors that influence trauma, we can now take a closer look the impact of trauma.

Draw a large spiral on flipchart paper or the board. See the Spiral of Healing handout for reference. You may also consider providing this handout to participants. Explain to participants that one way to think about the impact of sexual trauma and the healing process is to envision a spiral. Healing is not linear, meaning; survivors rarely go from experiencing sexual violence to feeling completely “healed” or unaffected by its impact. Rather, survivors are likely to feel different impacts over time, with some impacts feeling lesser or greater at different times. The spiral represents the process, where survivors are likely to discover internal and external resources, feel challenged by the impact in different ways, and continue moving through the process.



Next, bring participants’ attention to the Impact of Sexual Violence handout and using the talking points below, review the material on the handout. Make time for questions and group discussion.

Talking points

Sexual violence impacts a person’s whole being and its effects can be longstanding. It may be easier to understand the impact of sexual violence by looking at the different aspects of a person that are impacted. In dominant US culture, we commonly reference overlapping physical, emotional, sexual, social, and spiritual aspects of a person’s being. However, it’s important to note that our concepts of our bodies and selves are intimately tied to our cultural beliefs. People may use different language and systems of meaning

to describe the impacts of sexual violence in their lives that may or may not correspond to how we ourselves conceptualize them.

The model represented in the handout, for our purposes, is more to help with learning than to suggest rigid categories of impact. Regardless of culture, each person is different and may or may not experience various forms of impact, for different durations, and at different stages in healing.

When we think about healing from sexual violence as a process, symbolized by the spiral, we can see that trauma can be felt at different times in different ways. The spiral represents the idea that an adult survivor of child sexual abuse, for example, may have experienced various impacts from sexual abuse at a younger age — perhaps fear, mistrust, physical injury, difficulty in school, among other impacts. As the child gets older, they are likely to experience manifestations of the trauma in additional ways, perhaps some similar to those felt in childhood, and also some that are different. This process is shaped by a survivor's supports, environment, and internal resources.

The handout provided is to get a big picture understanding of the impact of sexual violence. With the image of the spiral in mind consider these impacts and how they may show up for survivors along their healing journey and across their lifespan.

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

What do you notice about the impact of sexual violence?

Possible responses include:

- It is widespread and not solely an “emotional” or “physical” experience
- If survivors are experiencing a lot of these things, it could be overwhelming
- Survivors might not know that what they’re experiencing is related to sexual violence
- The way these things may impact survivors is likely to be subjective. For example, what fear looks like for one survivor may look really different for another
- To really help survivors, we need to be aware that they are impacted in lots of ways
- As an advocate, it may be helpful to have good partnerships and referrals to other agencies that can help survivors with things they are struggling with that are outside of the scope of advocacy

How do you imagine overlap between the spheres mentioned?

Possible responses include:

- Everything is interconnected; for example, stress or fear can cause a physiological response like making someone physically ill — and mistrust in general might lead to mistrust in social spheres or related to someone’s spirituality or faith
- If survivors’ whole selves are impacted, they need support that spans the scope of the impact

Invite participants to ask any remaining questions they have about the impact of sexual violence before transitioning into the next section.

LESSON 4: REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS MAY EXPERIENCE

DISCUSSION

Using the handout “Reflecting on Challenges Survivors may Experience” and corresponding trainer’s guide, facilitate a large group discussion about common challenges survivors face when thinking about seeking support after sexual violence. Explain to participants that for many reasons, some personal, some familial, some societal, survivors often encounter internal and external challenges to accessing help. The handout lists seven common experiences and asks that participants reflect on questions related to each experience. Invite the group to together work through each question, capturing notes on the flipchart or board.

After completing the activity, invite participants to think of any other challenges they imagine survivors might face. Wrap up this discussion by asking if participants have any remaining questions.

LESSON 5: SURVIVORS' STRENGTHS AND RESOURCES

DISCUSSION

Share with participants that just as important as understanding the factors that influence trauma and the looking broadly at the holistic impact of trauma is to understand that survivors all have unique resources that can support their healing. Survivors have both internal and external resources and these are specific to each person. Survivors' resources are part of the pre-, peri-, and post-trauma factors. An advocate's work is to help bring awareness of survivors' resources so they can use them and continue to build new resources as they heal.

As a large group, ask participants to reflect on the different strengths and resources survivors may have. Participants may find it useful to look back to the scenarios used earlier in this module to identify strengths and resources described in the scenarios.

Start with survivors' external resources. Write participants' responses on a flipchart or board.

Possible responses include:

- Supportive family
- Supportive friends
- Being believed
- Financial means to access support that costs money (for example, therapy, wellness care, legal resources)
- Supportive spiritual or faith community
- Supportive significant other
- Being part of a community or culture that supports survivors
- Geographical access to supportive care
- Access to information that helps them understand it wasn't their fault
- Supportive interactions with systems/agencies (advocacy program, health care, etc.)

Next ask about survivors' internal resources. Write participants' responses on a flipchart or board.

Possible responses include:

- Strong sense of self-worth and self-esteem
- A felt sense of connection to others
- Coping skills
- Resilience or belief that they will get through this
- Spirituality or faith
- Practices or rituals that support wellbeing
- Having experienced something difficult before and knowledge that they were able to get through it
- Trust of self and others
- Knowledge about sexual violence and supports; awareness it wasn't their fault
- Having access to language and concepts to describe how they feel and what they need

Name any additional resources that participants may not mention during these activities. Let participants know that upcoming sections will build on this material and that this foundational understanding of impact and resources will be helpful as participants continue to learn about advocacy for survivors.

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS

AURELIA

- Aurelia is a 24-year-old Mexican American trans woman who was referred to your advocacy program by a local homeless shelter. Upon meeting with Aurelia, you learn that she was assaulted by someone at a place she was staying. She told her friend who owns the apartment, but he said he didn't want any drama and brushed her off. Aurelia left as soon as she could pack her things and has been homeless since. Aurelia does not seem interested in talking much about what happened and appears mostly worried about finding a new place to stay. She briefly mentions an unstable childhood and that she left home at sixteen. She shares that she's struggled with addiction for as long as she can remember and is worried she might get kicked out of the shelter soon. She also mentions that a friend has been taking care of her dog since she's been at the shelter, but she needs to get him back soon. She lights up when talking about her dog and mentions missing him a lot. Aurelia doesn't have any family in the area, and not many friends she feels like she can count on.
 - *What are some things in Aurelia's life that might affect how she feels and how she thinks about what happened?*

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS

REGGIE

- Reggie is a 12-year-old Black boy who was referred to your program by his school counselor after Reggie told his teacher that his football coach was touching him in ways that made him feel uncomfortable. Reggie and his parents meet with you together. Everyone seems overwhelmed by what has happened, but Reggie appears to feel supported by his parents. Reggie's parents are both social workers and confide in you that they are so disappointed in themselves that they didn't see signs sooner. Reggie explains the abuse has been happening for about six months. He expresses concern about getting the coach in trouble and wants to know if he can still play football with his friends. Reggie's parents describe having a good support system at their church and lots of close family in the area. They ask for referrals for a good family therapist and want to learn more about how they can best support Reggie moving forward.
 - *What are some things in Reggie's life that might affect how he feels and how he thinks about what happened?*

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS

MELINDA

- Melinda is a 47-year-old white woman who contacts your helpline after learning that her 17-year-old daughter is pregnant. She describes being scared for her daughter and angry that she “let this happen.” Her daughter’s former boyfriend is no longer in the picture and her daughter is worried having to raise the child on her own. After you talk with Melinda for a little while, Melinda shares that when she was around her daughter’s age she was raped and became pregnant. She ended up having an abortion. Aside from her own mother, she never told anyone else about it. To this day, Melinda and her mother do not speak of Melinda’s assault or the abortion. Melinda has been having severe anxiety since she found out about her daughter’s pregnancy and she has been missing work. She describes knowing she needs to talk to someone, but is afraid her wife will feel betrayed because she hasn’t told her sooner. Melinda does not want to add any pressure to her daughter, but is afraid she doesn’t know how to support her.
 - *What are some things in Melinda’s life that might affect how she feels and how she thinks about what happened?*

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS TRAINERS' GUIDE

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What are some things in Aurelia's life that might affect how she feels and how she thinks about what happened?

Some responses might include:

- Unstable childhood
- Unstable housing situation
- Addiction issues
- Chronic lack of family support
- Little to no current support network
- Possible increased vulnerability and exposure to violence and other forms of trauma because of gender and ethnic identities and homelessness
- Sexual violence that occurred where living

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS TRAINERS' GUIDE

What are the things that support Aurelia? Consider those things that are strengths in her life.

Some responses might include:

- Aurelia has managed to survive through years of adversity
- Aurelia feels a strong connection with her dog
- The homeless shelter may be a continued resource
- Aurelia has awareness of her addiction issues

When reading a scenario, it's not uncommon to make some assumptions or fill in missing information to try to help guide how you might respond. While it's normal to do that, it's important that we reflect on our biases and assumptions in our advocacy. What assumptions might you have made based on this scenario?

Some responses might include:

- Assumptions might be made about Aurelia's lived experience based on her ethnicity and gender.
- We don't know if Aurelia has had other experiences of sexual violence or other forms of violence, but know that statistically speaking, she is at heightened risk to experience violence.
- We don't know if Aurelia is currently in recovery or in active addiction and the impact that has on her.

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS TRAINERS' GUIDE

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What are some things in Reggie's life that might affect how he feels and how he thinks about what happened?

Some responses might include:

- Reggie's age
- Prolonged abuse by someone Reggie trusted
- The guilt Reggie feels related to reporting his coach

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS TRAINERS' GUIDE

What are the things that support Reggie? Consider those things that are strengths in his life.

Some responses might include:

- Reggie's family appears supportive
- Reggie was believed when he reported what happened to his school
- Reggie's family is interested in ways to help Reggie and work to heal as a family
- Reggie's family is willing to ask for help
- Reggie's family seems to have some knowledge of trauma
- Reggie and his family has support in their church community and extended family

When reading a scenario, it's not uncommon to make some assumptions or fill in missing information to try to help guide how you might respond. While it's normal to do that, it's important that we reflect on our biases and assumptions in our advocacy. What assumptions might you have made based on this scenario?

Some responses might include:

- We don't know about the ways that Reggie's race and gender influence his [or his family's] experience.
- We don't know how Reggie is processing what happened.
- We don't know if Reggie and his family are interested in pursuing legal options.
- We don't know who in the community knows about what happened and if Reggie and his family are facing any challenges because of reporting the coach.
- We don't know if Reggie could face questions about sexual orientation or experience responses rooted in homophobia.

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS TRAINERS' GUIDE

MELINDA

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What are some things in Melinda’s life that might affect how she feels and how she thinks about what happened?

Some responses might include:

- Melinda’s experience of rape in her late teens
- Becoming pregnant and having an abortion after being raped
- Melinda’s mother’s response to what happened
- Not having support or resources over the last 30 years
- Current triggering situation with daughter’s pregnancy
- Anxiety

IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRAUMA: SCENARIOS TRAINERS' GUIDE

What are the things that support Melinda? Consider those things that are strengths in her life.

Some responses might include:

- Melinda has developed coping skills that have gotten her where she is now.
- Melinda was aware of the helpline as a resource.
- Melinda's wife could be a potential support.

When reading a scenario, it's not uncommon to make some assumptions or fill in missing information to try to help guide how you might respond. While it's normal to do that, it's important that we reflect on our biases and assumptions in our advocacy. What assumptions might you have made based on this scenario?

Some responses might include:

- We don't know much about what Melinda's coping skills have been since she was assaulted.
- We don't know about Melinda's relationship with her partner and whether she anticipates she will be supportive if Melinda shares what happened and the current anxiety she is experiencing.
- We don't know what resources Melinda has access to.
- We don't know what the daughter's ex-boyfriend is like and how Melinda and her daughter feel about him.
- We don't know what Melinda believes about abortion, or whether her daughter is considering it.

Spiral of Healing



IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence impacts a person's whole being and its effects can be longstanding. It may be easier to understand the impact of sexual violence by looking at the different aspects of a person that are impacted. In dominant Western culture, we commonly reference overlapping physical, emotional, sexual, social, and spiritual aspects of a person's being. However, it's important to note that our concepts of our bodies and selves are intimately tied to our cultural beliefs. People may use different language and systems of meaning to describe the impacts of sexual violence in their lives that may or may not correspond to the impacts listed below.

These divisions, for our purposes, are more to help with learning than to suggest rigid categories of impact. Regardless of culture, each person is different and may or may not experience any combination of the items below, for different durations, and at different stages in healing. Use this information to get a big picture understanding of the impact of sexual violence.

- Pain or injury
- Muscle tension
- Chronic illness
- Stress-related diseases
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Headaches and migraines
- Muscle aches
- Pregnancy
- Difficulty during childbirth

PHYSICAL

- Lack of support from family, friends, and significant others
- Stress from over-involvement of family, friends, and significant others
- Isolation or ostracism from family, friends, and significant others
- Strained relationships; difficulty communicating with family, friends, and significant others
- Difficulty in the workplace or school

SOCIAL

IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- Emotional fluctuations
- Fear
- Hypervigilance
- Overwhelm
- Self-doubt
- Self-blame
- Shame
- Humiliation
- Low self-esteem
- Feeling lack of safety in one's own body
- Difficulty trusting others
- Difficulty trusting self
- Nervousness
- Anxiety
- Shock
- Denial
- Confusion
- Dissociation
- Self-injury
- Distorted body image
- Eating disorders
- Dependence on drugs or alcohol
- Attempted or committed suicide

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Disinterest in sex
- Fear of sex
- Heightened interest in sex
- Dissociation during sex
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Increased interest in risky sexual behaviors

SEXUAL

- Feelings of disconnection from self
- Feelings of disconnection from others
- Feelings of disconnection from faith or belief system
- Shifted worldview
- Questioning beliefs or faith
- Feeling angry at or betrayed by a deity or higher power
- Lack of support from spiritual community or faith leaders
- Isolation or ostracism from faith community
- Pressure to forgive or mediate with person who committed sexual violence

SPIRITUAL

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REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE

1. Survivors are often sexually assaulted by someone they know.

In 8 out of 10 cases of sexual violence, the survivor knows the person who has assaulted them [Duhart, 2001].

- *What relationships might a survivor have to the person who sexually assaulted them?*
- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

2. Survivors rarely formally report (for example, to police).

Only 230 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to police. That means about 3 out of 4 go unreported. Of the 230 reported to police, only 46 lead to arrest. Of the 46, 9 are referred to prosecutors. Of the 9, 5 cases will result in felony conviction. Of the 5 cases, 4.6 people who have committed sexual violence will be incarcerated [Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2018; Morgan & Kena, 2018; Reaves, 2013].

- *What are reasons a survivor might not report?*
- *How could this lead to challenges for a survivor?*

3. Survivors who do disclose often disclose to a trusted friend or family member.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

4. Survivors may not have precise language to describe what happened to them.

There are many different situations in which a survivor might not have language to talk about what happened. Some include: a child who is pre-verbal, a child who has not been taught language that could be used to explain what happened, a person who doesn't speak the dominant language needed to talk with supportive resources, someone who doesn't have verbal capacities.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE

5. It is not uncommon for survivors to experience multiple victimizations over their lifetime.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

6. Survivors often fear not being believed or being blamed for what happened.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

7. Survivors who experience marginalization or oppression in other aspects of life may have added challenges in accessing resources.

Racism, classism, discrimination based on gender identity, ableism, and heterosexism, among other forms of oppression, affect how survivors can access resources. These experiences often result in survivors being denied validation of their experiences and access to support, or being connected with services that aren't responsive to their needs.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

References

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REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE TRAINER'S GUIDE

1. Survivors are often sexually assaulted by someone they know.

In 8 out of 10 cases of sexual violence, the survivor knows the person who has assaulted them [Duhart, 2001].

- ***What relationships might a survivor have to the person who sexually assaulted them?***

Possible responses include:

- Family member
 - Partner
 - Co-worker
 - Boss
 - Coach
 - Faith leader
 - Neighbor
 - Close friend
 - Classmate
 - An acquaintance
 - A mentor
- ***What challenges might this create for a survivor?***
- Possible responses include:**
- Confusion and grief processing what happened
 - Complex feelings about disclosing what happened because of the relationship to this person
 - Fear of consequences of telling anyone what happened because of how it might change the relationship or create consequences for the person
 - Fear of not being believed because of the status or authority of the person who committed sexual violence
 - A sense of lack of safety, especially if they are in frequent contact with the person who committed sexual violence

REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE TRAINER'S GUIDE

2. Survivors rarely formally report (for example, to police).

Only 230 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to police. That means about 3 out of 4 go unreported. Of the 230 reported to police, only 46 lead to arrest. Of the 46, 9 are referred to prosecutors. Of the 9, 5 cases will result in felony conviction. Of the 5 cases, 4.6 people who have committed sexual violence will be incarcerated. [FBI, 2018; Morgan & Kena, 2018; Reaves, 2013].

- *What are reasons a survivor might not report?*

Possible responses include:

- Fear of not being believed
- Fear of police and other system response
- Uncertainty about reporting processes
- Fear of getting the person who committed sexual violence in trouble
- Fear of family or community impact if the reporting the person who committed sexual violence
- Awareness of the unlikelihood of having one's case move forward through the criminal system
- Wanting to maintain control over what happens
- Police involvement conflicts with cultural values or practices
- Belief in different recourses as more appropriate

- *How could this lead to challenges for a survivor?*

Possible responses include:

- A survivor might be interested in pursuing possible recourses, but feel conflicted with losing control over the situation and what happens
- A survivor may think reporting could help them feel safer, but be scared or uncertain about reporting
- A survivor could want to report to police, but only if they know that the person will be held responsible for what happened, and there are no guarantees of this.

REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE TRAINER'S GUIDE

3. Survivors who *do* disclose often disclose to a trusted friend or family member.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

Possible responses include:

- This could be positive for a survivor if the friend or family member is supportive.
- A survivor could be let down by the response of a friend or family member if they are not believed or feel judged.
- Depending on the relationship the person they disclose to has with the person who committed sexual violence, the survivor could experience conflicting feelings from the person they disclose to, especially if the person doesn't want to believe the other person could have committed sexual violence.

4. Survivors may not have precise language to describe what happened to them.

There are many different situations in which a survivor might not have language to talk about what happened. Some include: a child who is pre-verbal, a child who has not been taught language that could be used to explain what happened, a person who doesn't speak the dominant language needed to talk with supportive resources, someone who doesn't have verbal capacities.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

Possible responses include:

- A survivor may feel silenced because they don't have the words to talk about what happened.
- A survivor may suffer or internalize the traumatic experience because they don't know how to talk about what happened.
- A survivor may know what happened was wrong but struggle to know how to communicate what happened.

REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE TRAINER'S GUIDE

5. It is not uncommon for survivors to experience multiple victimizations over their lifetime.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

Possible responses include:

- A survivor may internalize difficult feelings about why this keeps happening to them
- A survivor may blame themselves
- A survivor may begin to believe that bad things happening to them is just their reality
- A survivor may become numb or indifferent
- A survivor may experience complex trauma responses
- Others may blame a survivor or be less likely to believe survivors who experience multiple victimizations, especially those who lack understanding about sexual assault victimization

6. Survivors often fear not being believed or being blamed for what happened.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

Possible responses include:

- A survivor may decide not to tell anyone
- A survivor may wait a long time before telling anyone
- A survivor may struggle for a long time without anyone knowing what's wrong
- A survivor may begin to self-blame
- A survivor may be reluctant to provide a full account of what happened (to police or parents, for example) for fear they could get in trouble. For example, if a survivor was drinking alcohol or using drugs when they were assaulted, they may worry this could make someone blame them for what happened.

REFLECTING ON CHALLENGES SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE TRAINER'S GUIDE

7. Survivors who experience marginalization or oppression in other aspects of life may have added challenges in accessing resources.

Racism, classism, discrimination based on gender identity, ableism, and heterosexism, among other forms of oppression, affect how survivors can access resources. These experiences often result in survivors being denied validation of their experiences and access to support, or being connected with services that aren't responsive to their needs.

- *What challenges might this create for a survivor?*

Possible responses include:

- A survivor may not disclose or report because they are apprehensive of systems and resources that don't feel designed to meet their needs
- A survivor may not disclose because they don't think they'll be believed
- A survivor may not disclose because they fear criminalization
- A survivor may not disclose because they don't trust systems or resources
- A survivor may internalize traumatic experiences and have difficulty finding outlets for support
- A survivor may have anger and resentment toward systems and resources that discriminate against them or do not adequately represent and respond to their needs

References

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