

CREATING TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES: TIPSHEET SERIES

Tips for Enhancing Emotional Safety

As DV advocates, we are skilled at attending to physical safety in our programs. *Emotional* safety may seem more difficult to achieve because it is harder to measure. One definition of emotional safety is “a feeling that your inner most thoughts, feelings and experience are, and will be, honored as one honors themselves. You need not prove, nor impress; you just simply are. When it is present you feel open, even, at ease, and fluid with the spontaneity of a healthy child.”* There are several steps that we can take to increase emotional safety in our programs.

1. Understand emotional safety.

“We want you to know that whatever you are thinking and feeling, you are welcome here.”

Emotional safety means feeling accepted; it is the sense that one is safe from emotional attack or harm. Most survivors have probably felt emotionally unsafe or had their sense of “being all right” taken away. Many survivors tell us that the ongoing and unrelenting attacks on their sense of well-being are more painful than a beating. When a survivor has been traumatized, she may not be able to find her way back to a day-to-day sense of calm and safety even after she and her children are physically safe and cared for.

Being sensitive to the feelings of survivors is a key aspect of what we do.

2. Help survivors manage feelings.

“For many women, this can all be overwhelming. We don’t have to solve every problem right away. Let’s take the time to sort things out together and then decide which thing you want to work on first.”

Trauma may affect a person’s ability to find emotional balance. Survivors may experience a flood of feelings and worries that make it difficult to make decisions, follow plans, and tend to responsibilities. Providing for the emotional safety of survivors is an important part of our work as DV advocates.

*Jeanne King, PhD, *Emotional Abuse: The Lack of Emotional Safety as an Internal Indicator in Abusive Relationships*, http://www.preventabusiverelationships.com/articles/emotional_safety.php.

Our work is not only to reassure and comfort survivors but also to activate and engage the thinking processes that can lead to greater safety and control. This may mean offering a caring and calming presence, helping with tasks that are overwhelming, working to identify achievable goals, offering frequent breaks, and tailoring program expectations to the individual survivor.

3. Provide a soothing place.

"You may just want to sit and relax for a bit. This room is set up for that and open whenever you need to use it."

When we provide a calming space, we are telling each survivor that we care about how she feels and that we are interested in what happens to her emotionally as well as physically.

A soothing space may be nothing more than a corner of a quiet room, set aside for survivors to use to care for their feelings or to help restore a feeling of calmness. It can be as simple as a comfortable chair, a soft afghan, low lights, a door that can be closed or kept open, a source of quiet music. Or it could be a more elaborate room with plants or flowers, videos of beautiful scenery, stuffed animals to hold, a radio or CD player, and space for writing, praying, or exercising. Different things will be soothing at different times and to different survivors.

4. Provide information about trauma.

"Many people have trouble turning their minds away from frightening experiences. Sometimes people feel anxious, worrying about how to make things turn out better."

Trauma can disrupt a person's sense of well-being. It can also have direct effects on the brain, changing how the person experiences the world and how she perceives danger. Some survivors find it helpful to hear that trauma responses are real and that they "make sense." Learning about trauma triggers can help survivors understand and manage their feelings and can increase a survivor's sense of control and autonomy. Advocates can provide this information through conversations, exercises, classes, posters, handouts, and videos.

5. Provide clear information and avoid surprises.

"A lot of us live and work together in the small space here. That's why we meet twice a week to talk about how things are going for each of us and what we each

need to be as comfortable as possible. We ask all the community members who live or work in the shelter to be present."

When a person feels emotionally unsafe, it may feel hard to not know what the people who have power, authority, and information are going to do. Providing clear and accurate information about policies, procedures, rules, plans, and activities helps support emotional safety. If our programs let survivors know how we do things and how decisions are made, if we are clear about the rules that the staff follow, and if we actually do what we say we are going to do, we avoid surprises.

6. Help survivors feel comforted and in control.

"We want you and your children to feel safe and welcome. If something doesn't seem right to you, please do let us know and we'll work on it with you."

Each survivor has her own pattern of needs related to emotional safety. For example, one survivor may find it reassuring to have clear directions or information from staff who speak with authority and expertise. For someone else, being able to withdraw from external stresses to explore her own thoughts and feelings will be the jump start she needs to plan for her future. An important aspect of helping survivors feel comforted and in control is ensuring that survivors know that they can ask for what they need and express their opinions and wishes, even if they are different than what the program is offering or what other survivors are doing.

7. Support emotional safety for staff as well.

"All of us are affected by the work we do. Everyone's emotional safety is important."

DV program staff need to feel emotionally safe themselves in order to support survivors' emotional safety. Every tip on this sheet applies to staff as well as survivors. Program leaders should understand how doing DV work affects staff members' feelings, energy, and worldview. Clear policies, honest communication about our plans and processes, ongoing training, and supportive supervision are important aspects of emotionally safe environments for staff and allow staff to offer their best to survivors.

For more information or for technical assistance, please contact the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health at info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org or 312-726-7020(P) or 312-726-4110(TTY).