

Survivor Centric Best Practices

What does survivor centric mean?

A survivor-centered approach is defined by the United Nations as one which seeks to empower the survivor by prioritizing their rights, needs, and wishes. This includes ensuring that survivors have access to appropriate, accessible, and quality services.

Yolanda Dyantyi and Ciko Sidzumo write that “ A survivor-centred approach recognises that survivors are not a homogenous group but reflect *a wide range of experiences* that are shaped by different identities and realities, spanning class, race, caste, age, sexual orientation, geography, relationship status and related areas.”

Survivors of sexual/gender-based violence may react and respond very differently when they seek support from you.

You may see signs of clear distress, anxiousness, fear, anger, or you may see someone who looks “zoned out” or is numb.

All reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal event that has happened to them.

Survivors who experience violence often experience re-traumatization when sharing their stories or truths. This can look like the survivor experiencing triggers or activation.

If you see someone who may be triggered remember (remember privately you do not want to draw unnecessary attention or cause the person more distress):

- Practice empathy in the tone of your voice and body language (facial expressions)
- Ask them how they are feeling? Ask them what would help at this moment?
- Ask them if they need to take a minute and leave
- Ask them if they need water or a blanket
- Ask them if they want to call a friend for support while they disclose or ask you questions
- Do not try to physically touch the person, even if it is a friend or loved one. Make sure you ask first and wait for a response before you initiative touch.

Important Reminder:

- A survivor centred practice prioritizes the needs of the person who has experienced violence. It gives them a voice at every stage of the prevention and response process. It also recognizes that a person can experience violence, abuse, or harm even if the person who committed the act did it unintentionally. **It recognizes that the impact of an action is more important than the intent of the person who caused abuse, harm or violence.**
- Survivor centric practices ‘flip the script’ and equalize dangerous power dynamics, especially for women and feminized folks.
- Survivor-centered approaches should encourage the survivor to make decisions about the processes that influence and affect them, including the extent to which they want to be involved after reporting or disclosing — if at all. Justice looks different for everyone.
- **And finally, it provides empowerment and resources to the survivor, first and foremost.**

What are some pillars for survivor centric practices?

(6) pillars for Survivor Centric Practices/Services/Approaches/Policies:

1. Acknowledgement

This can look and sound like using the script for receiving survivor disclosures. It can sound like, I believe you, I am here to listen to you, I am here to support you.

2. Safety

Safety means confidentiality, the survivor’s story should only be kept between you two until the survivor notifies you otherwise. We will cover duty to report in the reporting section. Safety also means mirroring the survivors chosen language, do not rephrase things or correct a survivor when they are disclosing, they are the expert in their experience. Finally, ensure you are comfortable with safety planning and checking in with the survivor around their physical and mental safety.

3. Trustworthiness

It takes a lot of strength or sometimes despair for someone to disclose or report a sexual assault or gender-based violence. Make sure you approach all people with non-judgement or bias. You have the power to work on your individual biases or beliefs, you can set boundaries around these and make sure you are honest with yourself if you need to pass the disclosure or support request

off to someone else. Building trust starts with telling the truth and giving the survivor the information they need to make an informed decision.

4. Agency

Informed Consent plays a huge role in making sure survivors feel control and agency. Often survivors are disempowered by gender-based violence and the lack of control and autonomy survivors experience. You have the power to share the power, make sure a survivor has all the information they need to make an informed decision. They should understand their legal rights, their rights as a student or staff and their options for support or justice.

5. Empowerment

This looks like many things; empowerment comes from a focus on the survivor themselves and their innate resiliency and connection to community. Moving survivors out of isolation provides greater opportunities for ongoing care, collaboration, and support. Providing the survivor with opportunities to share their voice, their needs and wants is vital.

6. Collaboration

Means having a voice in decision-making, regaining control and power over the processes and procedures. This can be the most challenging to ensure a survivor receives, especially if they are choosing to report formally. You can still empower the survivor with information, legal supports, community supports so that they have many advocating for their voice to be heard through the processes that are often silencing for survivors who come forward to report sexual violence.

Example #1

Not Survivor Centric: “Darlene, I know that you did not get those bruises from falling, tell me what is happening I am really concerned about you.”

Survivor Centric: “Darlene, if you ever need someone to talk to, I’m here for you. Want to go for a distanced walk and chat today at lunch?”

Example #2

Not survivor centric: “I believe you Jo, **but** I am going to have to ask a few co-workers or “witnesses” before we make a formal complaint or report....”

Survivor Centric: “I believe you Jo **and** thank you for telling me, this sounds like it not only is hurting you but causing a toxic work environment, do you know what your options are for reporting this?”

Example #3

Not Survivor Centric “You have to report this to the police for it to be taken seriously.”

Survivor Centric: “Do you know what your options are and what you would want to do to feel safer?”

Example #4

Not Survivor Centric: “I didn’t know men could get assaulted.”

Survivor Centric: “ Thank you for telling me, I believe you.”

What is informed consent and why is it so important?



Remember:

Your workplace AHL or lead staff/supervisor responsible for policy development and receiving disclosures should be trained in survivor-centric or trauma-informed gender-equitable peer support. They should be confident in receiving disclosures, documenting the disclosure, supporting the complainant through the process in an informed and empowering way.