

CREATING TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES: TIPSHEET SERIES

Tips for Making Connections with Survivors Experiencing Psychiatric Disabilities

When a domestic violence survivor's way of communicating or interacting is familiar to us, it is not hard to apply all the skills and knowledge that we have in our work with her. We feel confident, and we get feedback from her that helps us know that we are doing our jobs well. In contrast, when we meet survivors whose behavior or styles of communicating and interacting have been affected by DV, trauma, or psychiatric disability in ways that are unfamiliar to us, we may feel uneasy or unsure of what to do. Understanding more about how psychiatric disability might impact the way a person interacts can enhance our ability to support survivors. It is also important to understand how culture, a survivor's past experiences, the way we organize our program environment, and the way we offer services can impact how a survivor communicates with us.

1. Understand the reasons why a survivor might not easily connect with you.

In most of our interactions, we expect to have our smiles returned; to have someone acknowledge us when we greet them; to hear please, thank you, excuse me, and so forth. There may be many reasons why this does not happen. For example, a survivor's symptoms of mental illness can be very distracting, keeping her attention focused elsewhere. She may have to concentrate very hard to keep track of what you are saying to her and may respond more slowly to you. For others, symptoms may interfere with being able to read facial expressions, to feel safe in the world, or to recognize the warmth that you intend to convey. It may take all of a survivor's energy just to stay physically and emotionally present in the room. In these situations, a survivor may not acknowledge how hard you are working to reach out to her, she may not trust anyone enough to respond openly to an offer of help, or she may not know how to respond.

"How you are is as important as what you do." - Jeree Pawl

2. Stay on track.

It can be easy to get distracted from your purpose by the fact that a survivor does not return your smile or acknowledge your offer of connection. We may become judgmental, frustrated, blame the survivor, distance ourselves, or become critical. Staying on track means continuing to use the skills, caring, and commitment that you offer to any survivor, regardless of the symptoms or struggles that a survivor is

experiencing. It is easier for advocates to do this when we (and our supervisors) clearly understand that the survivor's response should not be taken personally.

3. Give information transparently.

Remember that you should not promise more than you can actually deliver. Avoid secrets and surprises. Being transparent about our work means telling people what we are going to do, how our program operates, and who makes decisions in our organization. The more that you can give a survivor information consistently and clearly, the easier it is for her to make the best use she can of the support and services in your program. We don't want any survivor to have to guess what is going on.

4. Offer a connection.

When we offer services to survivors, the way we are is as important as what we do. It is our role to offer a connection that is genuine and warm without taking it personally if the survivor is not able to respond in a similar way.

Some of the ways we can offer a connection to a survivor are to:

- Acknowledge that she has already survived.
- Be willing to hear her story.
- Make sure that you say your name, perhaps writing it down in case she has trouble remembering it.
- Don't be afraid to bring up difficult topics.
- Affirm each person's uniqueness and worth.
- Speak clearly and be sure to check to make sure that you are saying things in a way that makes sense to her. Some people may be embarrassed to admit that they don't understand all that you've said. Saying something like: "I hope I said that clearly. Was there anything that didn't quite make sense?" can ease that embarrassment.
- Don't require a survivor to meet us where **we** are. It's our responsibility as advocates to offer our support and information in ways that survivors can use.

5. Collaborate to meet survivors' needs.

Ask about the kinds of services and supports that have been helpful to a survivor in the past. Safety and confidentiality may make it impossible for us to connect with a prior therapist or case manager who has been helpful, but we can help a survivor to reach out to people who have helped her or to brainstorm who may be helpful in the future.

Create liaison plans or collaboration agreements with local mental health providers, offer job shadowing and cross-training, or provide co-location of services to more

fully respond to the needs of survivors who have psychiatric disabilities. These kinds of collaborative efforts can help to ensure that no single person is trying to do everything, which helps us to avoid burnout. It can be reassuring to survivors to know that the domestic violence advocates and mental health providers in a community are knowledgeable about each other's services and that linkage agreements are already in place.

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).