

CREATING TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES: TIPSHEET SERIES

Tips for Supporting Survivors with Reduced Energy

Dealing with domestic violence often takes every bit of energy that a woman can muster to remain vigilant and keep herself and her children safe. Survivors may seem very sad, lack energy, or feel hopeless. For a survivor who is also experiencing depression or another mental health condition, the increased demands that are posed by having to manage internal distress may mean that she has very little energy for DV counseling and advocacy. This lack of energy may also reflect the impact that mental illness, head trauma, depression, and stress have on the brain's capacity to focus, sustain energy, and maintain attention. Advocates who better understand these symptoms can more effectively support survivors.

1. Take seriously a survivor's experience of reduced energy.

"I wonder if you are aware of how hard you are working, how much energy this is taking?"

If depression, mental illness, or trauma affect a person's energy level, take this experience seriously. In addition, sometimes the medicines that are prescribed to help with mental health symptoms can make a person feel "slowed down" and lacking in energy. It is important not to mistake this loss of energy or optimism as disinterest or "laziness." It can be very discouraging for a person trying as hard as she can to get through the day to be told that she is not doing enough. Instead of saying, "You aren't meeting your goals. What's wrong?" an advocate may ask, "I wonder if it is taking a great deal of energy and effort for you to work on these things," as a way to begin a conversation.

2. Ask about sleep and make accommodations around sleep.

*"When is the last time you slept comfortably?
Do you feel that you are getting enough rest these days?"*

Sleep may be the number one need of DV survivors who come to shelter,* and reduced energy can be related to a lack of sleep or disrupted sleep. As you talk with a survivor, you may hear that her partner disrupted and manipulated her sleep by, for example, keeping her awake late into the night. Even if the abuse did not directly target sleep, constant fear, worry, and the need for vigilance can make it difficult to get a good night's sleep. For survivors living with a mental illness, this

* Lowe, P., Humphreys, C., Williams, S.J. (2007). Night terrors: women's experiences of (not) sleeping where there is domestic violence. *Violence Against Women* 13(6), 549-61.

can become especially problematic since getting enough sleep may be critical for her wellness. Ask each survivor how she is sleeping and talk with her about what kinds of supports she may need.

When making accommodations for a survivor who is sleeping poorly or who needs a great deal of sleep, begin with simply understanding how sleep disruptions play a role in her life and in her response to depression, mental illness, abuse, or trauma. In addition, you can sit with a shelter resident who cannot sleep, arrange her appointments for later in the day, and provide help with waking up from sleep if she has difficulty doing so on her own. You can also include information about sleep in groups and in individual work you do with survivors.

3. Talk directly about sadness and hopelessness.

"It's common to feel like there is no point to anything. Do you want to talk about some of the things on your mind?"

Create flexible policies, schedules, and expectations to accommodate low energy.

It is important to be able to talk directly with a person whose sadness affects them day after day. It is NOT helpful to try to talk someone out of these seriously sad and hopeless feelings. Rather, acknowledge how difficult things are and be clear about the help you can offer. Be sure that you know how to discuss the possibility of self-harm or suicide and that you know what to do to help someone who is thinking about harming herself.

4. Make accommodations to program activities.

"It does not all have to be done at once. How would it be to spend just 15 minutes working on this one step?"

Don't blame a survivor or mistake reduced energy for a lack of compliance; instead, recognize her lack of energy as a symptom. Urging someone who has these feelings to "care more" or to "try harder" often has the opposite effect. Create flexible policies, schedules, and expectations to accommodate low energy. Have more breaks in a session, plan for shorter sessions, let an intake interview extend over several short sessions, or ask if a series of shorter tasks is better than one long, continuous chore. Acknowledge that there are many good reasons why she might be experiencing low energy and offer to talk with her about them. Strategize with her about supports or activities that may help her.

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).