



Providing a Trauma-Informed Response to Disclosures of Violence

Adapted from "A Guide to Responding to Sexual & Relationship Violence for First Responders" from Stanford University's Office of Sexual Assault & Relationship Abuse Education & Response

Based on your role here at UC San Diego, you may receive disclosures of violence or harm from staff you supervise or students you support as they navigate the impact of these experiences in their lives. It can be daunting for a survivor to share their experience; creating a warm and nonjudgmental space for them can be an encouraging first step to connecting with important resources.

CARE at SARC developed the Five Steps of Responding to Disclosures to guide campus professionals in supporting individuals impacted by sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking. By utilizing this framework, you can ensure that you are providing an trauma-informed response while fulfilling your reporting requirements as a Responsible Employee.

See below for concrete examples of phrases and actions that you can use as a part of the Five Steps of Responding to Disclosures.

Step 1: Listen & Respond Empathetically

As with any situation where someone shares a challenging personal experience, lead the conversation with empathy and seek to create a safe and supportive space.

Clarify Your Role & Establish Boundaries

- Inform the survivor of your reporting requirements before they disclose to you.
 - You can say, "Thank you for trusting me. Before you continue, I want to remind you of my reporting duties as a Responsible Employee. Depending on what you share with me, I may be required to complete an OPHD or Clery report. If you prefer to speak with a confidential resource like CARE at SARC, I am happy to connect you to their office. What would you prefer?"
 - This can help folks decide how much they'd like to share with you, gives them agency over how their story is shared more broadly, and provides clear expectations about potential next steps from your conversation.
- Establish and maintain boundaries between yourself and the survivor. Be clear about what you can and cannot provide.
 - For example, you could clarify that you are able to listen and validate them but that CARE staff provide longer-term support to walk them through healing and reporting options.

Model the Importance of Consent

- Let the survivor know that they can share what feels comfortable for them by saying, "I don't want you to have to share your story more times than you're comfortable with. Share only as much as you want or need to. If I ask a question you don't want to answer, that's okay."
- Ask the survivor before making any physical contact or entering their personal space. You can ask, "Is it okay if I sit next to you?"

- Ask/inform the survivor before telling anyone else about the disclosure or involving anyone else in the process.

Listen Actively

- Be mindful of your body language
 - Pay attention to your body language, facial expressions, vocal tone, or other forms of non-verbal communication that may suggest discomfort, disbelief, or cues that you are distracted.
 - Try to utilize open body language with arms and legs uncrossed. Face the survivor and maintain soft eye contact.
 - Minimize distractions by putting away phones and laptops.
- Demonstrate understanding
 - Use the survivor's own words and check in with them to ensure your understanding.
 - Try to mirror, reflect and paraphrase what the survivor is saying. You can do this by asking, "What I hear you saying is..." and/or "I want to summarize what I think I heard you say is most important to deal with now. Let me know if I misunderstood."

Consider the Language You Use

- Avoid labeling a survivor's experience and allow them to talk about it openly. For example, if they do not refer to sexual assault as "rape" – do not name it as such. Mirror the language they use.
- Use gender-neutral language and avoid making assumptions of the survivor's identities or the identities of the person who caused harm.
- Give the survivor options by using the word "could" instead of "should."

Avoid Investigating

- Your role is to offer support and connect the survivor to support services, not to investigate.
- Try to prioritize questions that focus on the impact and that will help you better assess what support the survivor might need.
- Avoid asking questions about the incident. You may want to "get the facts" but to the survivor, some questions may feel like blame.

Empathize & Validate

- Understand that a survivor may express anxieties or feelings of blame; instead of minimizing or disregarding them, suggest an alternate way for them to consider, like saying, "Sometimes we blame ourselves so that we can feel some control over the situation, but I want you to know that what happened is not your fault."
- Validate the survivor's concerns; try not to rule them out as irrational or tell them that they "don't have to worry" or "everything will be okay". While our intention might be to be reassuring, it could come across as dismissive or may be over-promising.
- Allow space for the survivor to express themselves instead of moving directly to problem solving.
- Focus on the survivor's experience, and try to avoid bringing up your own experiences, beliefs, and opinions about the situation. Although there may be similarities to other situations, every survivor is different and will have different needs.

Normalize Behavior

- A survivor may experience a range of emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, or uncertainty. There is not a "right way" for a survivor to respond after experiencing a traumatic event.
- The following phrases are some examples that might feel helpful to say to a survivor:

- “It makes sense to me that you feel _____ and it is common for survivors to have a variety of confusing or frustrating emotions.”
- “You have the right to feel however you do now. There are people who can help you explore your emotions and learn new ways to cope with overwhelm and stress.”

Step 2: Assess Urgency

Check for Time-Sensitive Needs

- Assess the survivor’s physical condition, safety, and needs.
- There are several situations in which it may be more urgent for the survivor to be connected with CARE at SARC.
 - Sexual assault within the past 14 days: The survivor has the option of receiving a medical forensic exam up to 5 days after an assault, and can access emergency contraceptives and prophylactic medication up to two weeks following an incident. If the survivor is interested, CARE at SARC staff can support them with this as soon as possible.
 - Medical needs or injuries: Connect the survivor to medical services or to CARE at SARC staff to discuss and coordinate options. This is especially important in the case of strangulation, as life-threatening injuries may not always be visible.
 - Fear for safety or escalation of physical violence: CARE at SARC staff can support survivors with safety planning.
 - Approaching academic deadlines: CARE at SARC staff can help survivors request academic flexibility, which is typically easier to accommodate prior to academic deadlines.

Ask Questions

- Avoid asking multiple questions at once.
- Be mindful of the types of questions you ask. Focus on the survivor’s wellbeing, rather than asking specifics about the incident. Avoid “why” questions as these may inadvertently feel like a survivor is being asked to explain their actions or behavior.
- Asking “yes/no” questions may be useful if someone is very agitated. Open-ended questions can be less effective when a person is more reluctant to speak or cannot “find the words.”
- When asking the survivor questions, provide context. You can start with, “If it’s okay, I would like to ask you a few questions. This will help me with connecting you to the resources that would be most supportive for you right now.”

Step 3: Connect with Resources

- Encourage, but don’t force the survivor to utilize CARE at SARC. You can say, “CARE is a resource that could help you right now. Would you be interested in connecting with a CARE staff member?”
- Ask the survivor what they would like to see happen next, and respect their decisions. The survivor is in the best position to determine what healing and accountability looks like for them.
- Collaborate with the survivor to create an action plan. Verbalize what will happen when you finish speaking in accordance with the survivor’s wishes and your required protocols. This could sound like, “Once we wrap up our conversation, I will call CARE at SARC for them to follow up with you. In addition, I will share what we talked about with OPHD/Clery as is required of me as a Responsible Employee. Do you have any questions about the next steps?”

- It can also be helpful to have the survivor identify individuals in their personal support system that they can reach out to when needed.

Step 4: Notify Supervisor & Fulfill Reporting Responsibilities

- Fulfill your reporting requirements by completing an OPHD and/or Clery report immediately following the disclosure. Reach out to those offices directly if you have questions about whether something is reportable or what information you need to report.
- Share information about the disclosure strictly with those who are on a “need-to-know” basis, such as your supervisor.

Step 5: Seek Support for Yourself

Supporting a survivor can be both important and challenging. Assess your well-being, practice self-care, and seek out support resources if you feel impacted. Hearing the details of an assault may arouse vicarious trauma and feelings such as anger, fear, outrage, or hopelessness in you. These incidents may also trigger memories of your own traumatic experiences, inciting a variety of physical or psychological stress responses.

- Consult with CARE at SARC. We are available to provide guidance on supporting survivors as well as offer healing resources to supporters who are personally impacted.
- Debrief with your supervisor or another trusted staff person to process without disclosing the survivor’s identity if they are not a “need-to-know” resource.
- Allow yourself the time and space to process what the survivor shared with you. Take notice of any physical or mental impacts.
- Engage in supportive coping and self-care behaviors. Allow yourself some decompression time.
- Consider accessing mental health resources if you find yourself experiencing signs of vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue.

Example Statements: Helpful Things to Say or Put in Your Own Words

If you suspect someone has been assaulted or is experiencing abuse...	
Helpful Things to Say	Try to Avoid
<p>Naming changes in demeanor or behavior framed from a place of care and concern:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I have noticed that before you were...and now you seem...is everything ok?” ● “It seems that you have been...lately, how are you doing?” 	<p>Asking invasive questions or assuming what someone experienced:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Have you experienced a traumatic event recently? You seem...” <p>Being dismissive of warning signs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “You seem..., snap out of it.”
If someone discloses to you...	
Helpful Things to Say	Try to Avoid
<p>Validating the survivor’s experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I am sorry this happened to you.” ● “Thank you for trusting me enough to come to me. It was a brave decision to talk about this, and it can be very painful and scary to do.” 	<p>Minimizing the survivor’s experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Are you sure that is what happened?” ● “I don’t think that was rape. It may have just been bad sex.” ● “If the person did not complete the assault, it wasn’t as bad.”
<p>Validating the survivor’s feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “This is a difficult experience. Allow yourself the time and patience it will take to help you cope with this.” ● “It is normal for you to feel that way. People who have been through this have had similar feelings/concerns.” ● “You have the right to feel whatever you are experiencing right now.” 	<p>Minimizing or challenging the survivor’s feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Don’t worry about that.” ● “I’d be so angry if that happened to me.” ● “You shouldn’t feel that way.” <p>Making the conversation about you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I know exactly how you feel. The same thing happened to me.”
<p>Affirming the survivor is not to blame for what happened to them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I believe you.” ● “You didn’t deserve that to happen to you.” 	<p>Questioning how the person who caused harm could have harmed the survivor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “They are such a good/nice/attractive/etc. person, I can’t believe they would do that.” ● “Why would [the person who caused harm] do that to you?” <p>Implying the survivor is to blame for what happened to them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “What were you thinking?” ● “Did you say no?”

<p>Allowing the survivor to share as much as they feel comfortable with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “You can tell me as much or as little as you would like to.” ● “You may not want to talk or deal with this right now, but let me know when you are ready and I will be here to listen.” 	<p>Attempting to investigate or asking for details about the incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Who was it?” ● “Tell me everything that happened.” <p>Asking questions that start with “Why”:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Why do you do that?” ● “Why did you go there?” ● “Why were you drinking/taking drugs/etc?”
<p>Asking the survivor what they want to see happen next and offering options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “What do you want to do?” ● “What do you need?” ● “There are people and organizations who can provide you information to help you make the choices that are best for you. “ 	<p>Telling the survivor what to do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “You should report this so that you can make sure it doesn’t happen to anyone else.” ● “You would ruin that person’s life if you reported it. You should just move on.”
<p>Asking how you can support the survivor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I am here to listen and to do what I can to help you.” ● “How can I help you best?” 	<p>Trying to be the hero or “save” the survivor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I will do anything you need me to do.” ● “I’m going to confront [the person who caused harm] for what they did to you.” <p>Making decisions for the survivor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Let’s call the police so you can report it as soon as possible.”