Best Practices for Publicly Engaging Survivors of Trauma

Tips For a Person-Centered and Trauma-Informed Event or Interview

Hearing first-hand from a survivor can be impactful. But it can also be very hard – on both the speaker and the listener. Use these tips to prevent "re-traumatization" and limit further harm to the survivor and the audience.

Creating a Trauma Informed Environment

- **Know the security protocol.** Will there be metal detectors, dogs, uniformed police? Make sure guests know whether there will be security in advance.
- **Make it accessible.** Are spaces clear for wheelchairs and walkers? Is signage posted in the language of the audience? Are there language or ASL interpreters available? Are the restrooms clearly marked?
- **Consider the sensory experience.** Are the lighting and noise levels appropriate?
- **Prioritize safety.** Are the exits clearly marked?
- **Promote comfort.** Do you have helpful items like tissues and water readily available?

Before the Interview or Speaking Engagement

- **Determine the objectives of the interview.** What are you looking to accomplish with this interview? This should be relayed to your speaker/interviewee. Ask whether there are any sensitivities we should be aware of or topics to avoid entirely.
- **Ask the survivor what questions they would want to be asked.** Send the survivor the questions in advance.

- **Identify a social worker, advocate, friend, or relative that the survivor trusts to be present for the interview.** This will make the survivor feel more comfortable and enable the person to debrief with the survivor after.
- **Ask about the survivor's role or connection with the social service agency, if there is one.** How would the survivor describe it? Do not identify anyone as a "client" or as "receiving services" if this is not how the survivor describes the relationship.
- **Identify a meeting time and place that is convenient and accessible for the survivor.** Help the survivor plan for transportation and help alleviate other barriers as needed.
- **Manage expectations.** Tell the survivor who will be at the event, how many people will be present, what will the interview process will look like, how long will it last?
- **Vet audience questions ahead of time.** If the discussion opens to an audience, it might be helpful to know what will be asked so the survivor can be prepared and not caught off-guard.
- **Offer a disclaimer to the audience.** Inform the audience if the presentation contains potentially triggering content, such as abuse or sexual violence. Allow guests to leave the room if they need to during this time and offer support resources.
- **Have a backup plan**. In case the survivor cannot get on stage or speak to the reporter due to their trauma, even at the last minute, be prepared to feature a different speaker.

During the Interview or Presentation

- **Show gratitude.** If you meet in person, bring flowers or a small gift to give to the survivor.
- **Offer choices on the physical space.** If in-person, give the survivor choices of where to sit in the room, and allow them to guide whether the door is open or closed. If a survivor has a walker or other assistive device, ask where they would like it to be located.
- **Create an equal playing field.** If virtual, have your Zoom camera on if the survivor has their Zoom camera on.
- **Inform the survivor if the interview will be recorded.** Ask if it's okay to record the interview or presentation and tell the survivor how the recording may be used.
- **Speak directly to the survivor rather than to their caregiver, social worker, or advocate.** This will help the survivor feel seen and heard.
- **Promote conversation.** Ask open-ended questions, not leading questions. Let the survivor lead the tone and content.
- **Allow extra time.** Understand that complex stories are difficult to convey in a short period of time. Experiences may not come out in a linear way. Allow time to let the survivor finish their train of thought.

- **Anticipate breaks.** Inform the survivor that it is okay to take a break whenever they want. Give voice and choice whenever possible.
- **Wrap things up on a hopeful note and give an opportunity for final thoughts.** Example: "What do you want the audience to take away from your story today?", "What do you hope will happen in the future of *x,y,z*?" People are more than their trauma, and survivors of trauma can teach us all about resilience.

Troubleshooting Difficult Conversations

- **Use caution around sensitive topics.** Only ask about details of the traumatic experience(s) if discussed previously.
- **Remember the goals of the conversation.** If the conversation veers into an emotionally difficult direction, steer back to the objectives of the interview.
- **Try not to "empathize" by saying "that makes me feel terrible" or "I understand."** Redirect the conversation back to their experience, "that must have been difficult *for you*."
- **Take a break.** Ask if the survivor would like to take a break or get some water.

After the Interview or Presentation

- **Thank the survivor for their time.** Consider writing a handwritten letter or card.
- **In any publications (i.e. articles, newsletters, social media posts), describe the survivor's relationship with the social service agency the way the survivor describes it.** If the survivor does not describe their relationship with the social service agency, please say that they are "active with" the organization. Due to confidentiality and privacy policies, we don't identify anyone as a "client" or as "receiving services" unless that is the survivor's preference.
- **Share and thank them again.** Always send the final product, article, or recording of the event to the survivor.

Protect Your Own Mental Health

It is common to feel impacted by hearing about a traumatic event or experience. This is called Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) or Vicarious Trauma (VT) and the negative effects can be significant. It is important to recognize the potential or onset of STS/VT so that it can be addressed. Here are some resources to support the interviewer or audience:

- https://www.brainline.org/article/secondary-ptsd-or-secondary-traumatic-stress-should-not-be-underestimated
- https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/secondary-traumatic-stress