

# A Compassionate Witness: The Active Listener

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# Communication Tools

Signal

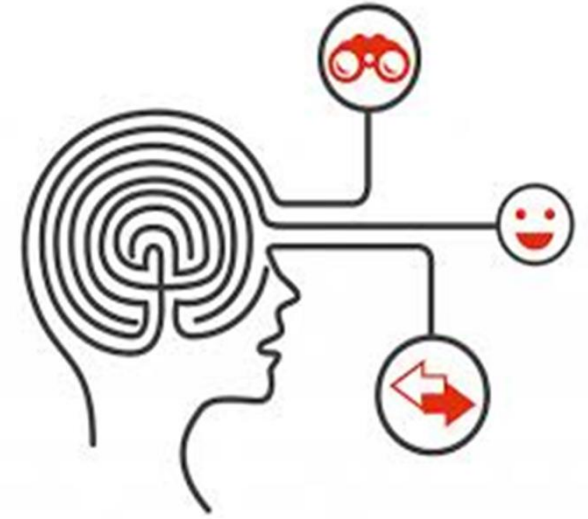
Bike Rack



access



# *Suggested Guidelines*



- Use “I” statements
- Believe others’ experiences
- Challenge yourself and take risks
- Notice your positionality/ world view
- Move up, move back
- This is ongoing work
- All oppression is linked
- Watch for common reactions
- Self Care is encouraged

# Looking at Our Current Models...

- “ Mainstream models
- “ Concrete vs. Emotional support
- “ Evidence based practices
- “ “The way we’ve always done it...”
- “ Survivor centered models

**What are our strengths and challenges in supporting/serving survivors?**

# A COMPASSIONATE WITNESS

- In our roles as advocates and helpers we can reasonably assume that the people we serve are survivors of many forms of trauma
- Trauma informed advocacy begins with this assumption—and a shift in our *thinking*
- It is a philosophy of skills



# The Context of Sexual and Domestic Violence

- Trauma and abuse do not occur in a vacuum—it occurs within the personal, social and political context of the person
- Who, what, where, when, how...
- In the context of their identities: race, class, dis/ability, gender, language, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, tribal affiliation, body size, first language, etc.



# What is the context?

- “ Services in underserved communities
- “ Historical context of dual/multi-service agencies
- “ Mental health services and trauma resources
- “ Our own beliefs, identities
- “ The positionality of the survivor





# Trauma Informed Services

ARE:

**Survivor-centered, anti-oppression,  
focused on creating a context for  
healing**

Be AWARE of pitfalls such as:

- Funder-centered services
- Alliances with colleagues (vs. survivor)
- Trauma mining/exploitation
- An agenda of “concrete”/tangible goals only

# What is Trauma Informed Advocacy?

Trauma-informed advocacy or service is an approach to engaging people with histories of trauma that recognizes the presence of trauma responses (often called “symptoms”) and acknowledges the role that trauma plays in their choices, emotional well being, behaviors, and lives.



# A Compassionate Witness

- “ TIC calls us to offer engagement
- “ It is an INVITATION
- “ Prioritize based on survivors needs
- “ Listening/being present is helping
- “ Exploration is helping



# Trauma Informed Advocacy

- “ Survivor is the expert on her/his/their own experience
- “ Look at survivor’s ways of coping/survival with compassionate curiosity, rather than judgment

“Rather than standing *in judgment* of the survivor in front of me and how they carry their burdens...I must stand in awe of **what** they carry”

-Father Boyle



# Trauma Informed Advocacy is:

- “ Collaborative, supportive and skill-building
- “ Promotes empowerment for the survivor
- “ Creates safety, consistency and choice for the survivor
- “ Avoids re-traumatization of survivor
- “ Provides an individualistic response, based on that survivor's identity, circumstance and needs



The diagram features a central light orange rounded rectangle divided into two vertical sections. The left section is labeled 'TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE' and the right section is labeled 'COPING MECHANISM'. Above and below this central rectangle are two solid orange rectangular bars. To the right of the central rectangle is a larger orange rectangle containing a white arrow pointing left towards the 'COPING MECHANISM' section, and the text 'We often focus on the coping mechanism'.

TRAUMATIC  
EXPERIENCE

COPING  
MECHANISM

We often  
focus on  
the coping  
mechanism

# Understanding Trauma

Trauma: A Natural Response  
to Crisis



# Trauma Experiences

- “ Includes intense fear, horror and helplessness
- “ The brain is equipped to respond intensely to these dangerous situations and experiences





# Trauma Response

- “ Brain response
- “ A NATURAL Response to an EXTREME amount of stress.
- “ Chronic arousal (stress)
- “ Consistent, prolonged trauma responses
- “ Impacts concentration and focus
- “ Avoidance, survival are key



# Trauma Response

**FIGHT  
FLIGHT  
FREEZE**



- ▶ Accommodate, placate, adapt...
- ▶ Chemical and physiological basis for trauma response
- ▶ All animals respond

# Trauma Informed Support

1. Building Safety—importance of trust and checking for safety
2. Normalize and Validate feelings, reactions
3. Explaining trauma and dynamics of SA/DV
4. Empowerment statements—hope and reducing self blame
5. Psychoeducation-debunk myths and give facts
6. Healthy coping strategies—build skills
7. Resources and information-give options



# Building Safety

- “ Establishing rapport and trust
- “ Checking for physical/emotional safety
- “ Immediate needs?



# Normalize and Validate

- “ Increases safety
  - “ Allows survivor choice to share
  - “ Avoids directive questioning
- 
- “ It sounds like you are feeling...
  - “ It is natural to experience...



# Explore the Feelings

- “ Spend the most time on this part
- “ Can't move to problem-solving without processing the crisis first
- “ You can't give good information if you don't know what is going on
- “ Why do advocates/counselors often skip this step? (time, fear, wanting to help, feels uncertain, “need information for the intake”...)



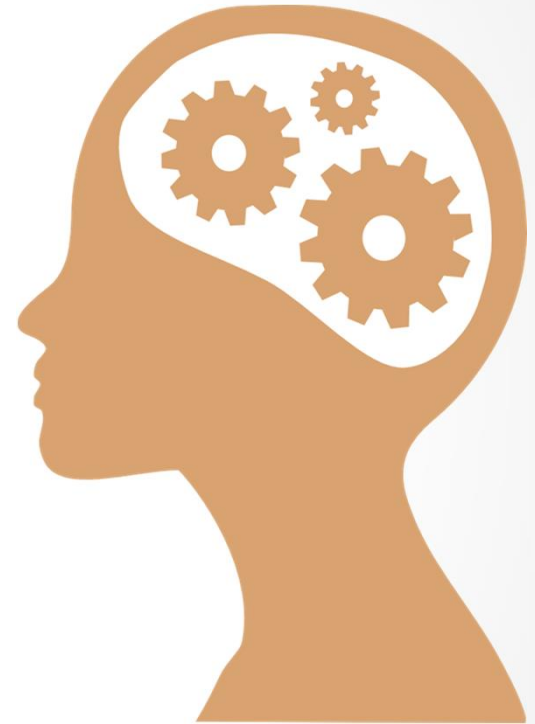
# Empowerment statements



- “ Instill hope for healing
- “ Decrease self blame
- “ Point out strengths and self protection
- “ Reframe abuser messages
- “ Give examples that model nonjudgment

# Psychoeducation

- “ Giving information that has a positive psychological effect
- “ Debunking myths
- “ Reframing societal or past disclosure blame
- “ Giving information on options or what’s coming next





# Healthy Coping Strategies

- ” Brainstorm what they have used to survive
- ” Decrease self blame for using less healthy coping
- ” See survival skills as creative, adaptive
- ” Opportunities for harm reduction
- ” Discuss options for support
- ” Encourage self-care



# Resources and Information

- “ Be careful of going directly into resources and problem solving (your agenda?)
- “ Explore options
- “ Explore pros & cons of options
- “ Validate concerns & and share information
- “ Make a plan
- “ Respect the survivor’s choices-avoid directiveness and giving “advice”



# Interactive Exercise: *Volunteers?*

Content/trigger warning

- 



# Responding to Survivors

- “ Reactions?
- “ What myths, stigma or misconceptions did you hear?
- “ Was it realistic?
- “ What do you think would happen to this survivor?



# Uncovering Layers of Stress for Survivors

- “ **Adaptation:** Survivors move straight into outward adjustment
- “ This stalls the healing process
- “ Others misinterpret as “being o.k.” “being strong” or prioritizing other responsibilities
- “ Silences the issue in the community



# Active Listening

- ” Accomplish the 2 C's
  - Maintain Connection
  - Show Concern
- Can be done one-on-one, or with a group
- Useful in \*every\* interaction with survivors



# Attending

**The goals of active listening are:**

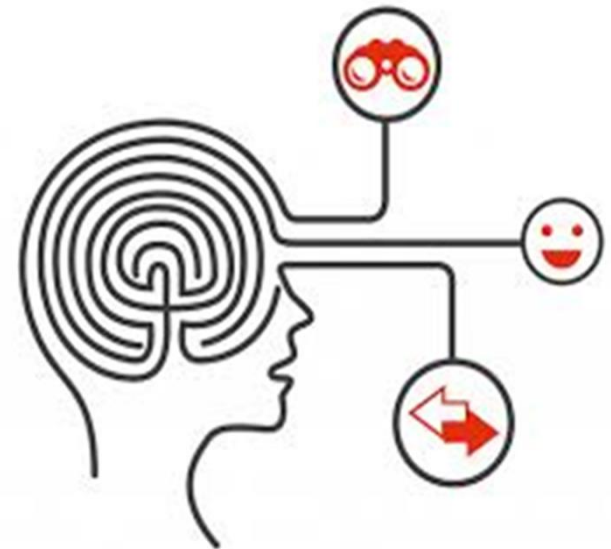
- “ SHOW the person that you're REALLY LISTENING and ACCEPTING what they are trying to communicate to you (thoughts, feelings, desires, actions)
- “ ENCOURAGE the person to share as freely, clearly, and completely as possible, as much as they feel comfortable.



# A Compassionate Witness

In order to accomplish this, it is important to:

- ” Take in what is being shared and any behaviors **AT THAT MOMENT** (vs. rehearsing your response)
- ” **FULLY CONNECT** with the other person
- ” Not interrupt or give premature answers or **DIRECTIVE** responses based on **PARTIAL INFO**





# Challenges Self Reflection



- “ What are your barriers to being present?
- “ In which situations do you find it difficult to slow down and attend to the client?
- “ Are there client issues or scenarios that make it easier for you to listen and avoid frustration?
- “ What responses do you perceive in your body?
- “ What thoughts or feelings come up as you
  - interact?

# Challenges

## **PROBLEMS OCCUR because we perceive:**

- “ A possible loss of control
- “ Your expertise/story/proposal won't get attention
- “ There is a feeling that there is not enough time
- “ Listening might seem that you are giving in or agreeing (losing control)
- “ You might have to change something significant
- “ *You believe you know what's best for them*



# The Benefits

- “ Less stress and defensiveness in getting to the primary concern
- “ Clear information
- “ More trust in the relationship
- “ More collaboration in working together to address a concern or solving a problem
- “ ***It avoids retraumatizing, disempowering, or triggering the survivor***



# Active listening skills

The SKILLS involved in  
ACTIVE LISTENING are:

1. Reflecting
2. Encouraging
3. Summarizing
4. Exploring



# Reflecting

- “ Show you are interested, engaged...
- “ A **BRIEF** statement/sentence showing that you're noting what the person is sharing regarding their communication (thoughts, feelings, desires, action):



"Sounds difficult."  
"Seems frustrating."

# Encouraging

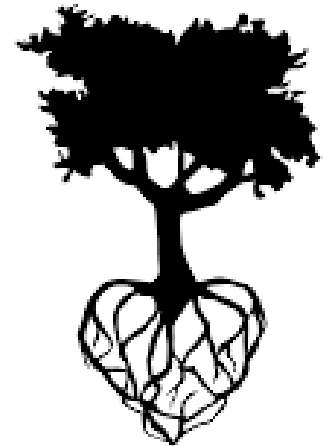
ENCOURAGING gently encourages the person to tell you more about the topic

- “I’d like to learn more about what you are going through, when you’re ready.”
- “If you feel safe, you can share more about...”
- “I am open to hearing about how you feel.”



# Summarizing and Exploring

- “ Assists in comprehension
- “ Reflects being on the “same page”— mutual understanding of what is being shared
- “ Accomplished by paraphrasing
- “ Always ask for feedback
- “ Be open to being wrong
- “ Collaborate for understanding



# Summarizing

"It's important for me to fully understand what you shared. What I got was....."

"Let me see if I understand you correctly and please correct me if I'm off. You believe that when you try to express your feelings s/he doesn't listen which then frustrates you."

"Let me know if this fits with what you were feeling...it sounds like..."





# Exploring and Venting

- “ Change and trauma necessitate talking about them MORE THAN ONCE
- “ Exploration is crucial (this is not “wallowing”)
- “ Being attended to and believed is vital to moving through an issue and creating healing and collaborative change
- “ Each time we revisit an issue, feeling,
  - memory we build courage, insight, strength •



# Exploring and Venting

- “ Use open ended questions
- “ Let the story unfold
- “ What do you “need to know” and when? Be curious.
- “ Be careful of minimizing, immediately using self disclosure and investigating



# Handling a Disclosure

- “ Thank them for trusting you and show compassion
- “ Disclose your role, limitations on confidentiality, mandated reporting information
- “ Check for safety, ask about immediate needs and any immediate danger
- “ Use open ended questions and reflection
- “ Avoid becoming an investigator, minimizing or using self disclosure



# Handling a Disclosure

- “ Provide options for further
- “ Allow survivor to make decisions about who and when or if to tell-- as much as possible
- “ Avoid being directive or giving advice
- “ Give brief info on trauma, myths and facts
- “ Avoid assuming how a survivor “should” act



# Handling Disclosures

- “ Give options for ongoing support and make a follow-up plan
- “ Be accountable for your part
- “ Validate the person’s strength
- “ Let them know you are sorry for what they are going through
- “ Let them know that interpersonal violence of any kind is NEVER the survivor’s fault



**How will I use Trauma  
Informed advocacy and  
Active Listening to  
Maintain the  
connection (not cut the  
string)?**

# Common Ground



- ▶ One thing I'm taking with me from this is...
- ▶ One thing I appreciate about the group is...
- ▶ One thing I commit to do based on what we discussed is...