

## **Guidelines for Health Care Providers Supporting Clients Who Disclose Sexual Assault or Intimate Partner Violence**

Following are some suggestions that can be used to guide your provision of care when supporting clients who disclose experiences of sexual assault or intimate partner violence. A supportive response by a health care provider can be significant in facilitating a client's healing process.

### **Outline your role and responsibilities**

Clients need to be fully informed about your role and responsibilities. They also need to be made aware of *what confidentiality means, as well as any limitations that exist* and what is involved in the process of accessing this service. These are important aspects in supporting clients to make informed decisions about their care, and in supporting them to re-cultivate the sense of control that has been taken away from them during their experience(s) of sexual assault or intimate partner violence.

### **Discuss the importance of accessing specialized medical attention**

Clients may have physical injuries that they are unaware of. As well, they may want to report the assault or abuse to the police immediately or some time in the future. In turn, it is important to gather evidence (with sexual assault, more evidence can be collected if a person has not yet showered, urinated or cleaned themselves and or their clothes). There is also the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Anyone who has been recently assaulted can access care at a Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Care Centre in 36 locations across Ontario (find the location nearest you at [www.sadvtreatmentcentres.ca](http://www.sadvtreatmentcentres.ca)). A SA/DV Nurse can give them information, support, medical attention and/or collect forensic evidence based on what they feel is best for them. Let the client know in choosing to access a SA/DVCC, the police will not be contacted unless they request that the police be contacted.

### **Believe your client and respond to them in an empathetic, non-judgmental manner**

Many survivors/victims never report sexual or intimate partner violence or seek services because they are afraid that they will not be believed. It takes a great deal of courage to seek services and support. Let your client know that you believe them. Also, ask them what they need from you and respond accordingly. For many survivors/victims, the assault can be among the most humiliating and degrading experiences of their lives. Gathering information about their experience needs to be done in an extremely sensitive manner, as well as in a private setting.

### **Let your client know that they are not to blame**

A client may need to hear messages that they are not to blame, as self-blame is quite common and is reinforced through prevalent myths about violence within larger society. Work to break myths that blame survivors in your interaction. Reinforce that the violence is *not* their fault. *No one* asks to be assaulted or abused. The assailant is responsible for their violent behaviour, not the survivor/victim. Sexual assault and intimate partner violence represent the expression of power and control over another person.

### **Normalize what your client is going through**

Survivors experience a range of emotions and trauma impacts from the assault/abuse. How they present can vary from showing extreme distress to being quiet and subdued. Since we all deal with traumatic experiences in different ways, all responses are *normal* responses to a traumatic event. Normalize what your client is feeling and how they are responding and coping with the trauma they have experienced.

### **Remember, your client is the expert of their own life**

During a sexual assault or cycle of abuse, personal control and self-determination have been taken away, commonly leaving a person feeling powerless. So it is vital that we support clients in ways that allow them to reclaim some of their power and control. You can do so by exploring their options together, rather than telling them what to do, so they can make informed choices about what they feel is best for them. Respect and support whatever choices they make, even if you would not make the same ones. This can help cultivate a trusting working relationship.

### **Discuss the support options they has available to them**

Let your client know that many people find it helpful to talk with a counsellor/therapist who has experience working with survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence.

### **Know yourself**

Take a critical look at your own values, biases, assumptions and how these have been shaped. We have all been exposed to common myths about sexual assault and intimate partner violence, as well as ideas about various communities. It is important to reflect on our own biases and how they may impact our interactions with members of diverse and marginalized communities, and then do the work of unlearning these. Biases and assumptions can unintentionally emerge during the provision of care, and can act as barriers to survivors/victims accessing or returning to services. The accompanying 'Power Flower' can be used as a self-reflection tool to help us reflect on the intersecting aspects of our identity in relation to the centre of power/privilege in society

### **Stay informed**

Gather information about sexual assault and intimate partner violence and make linkages with service agencies working in the area of anti-violence. This way, you can support survivors/victims by providing them with concrete information about the services/resources available to them and how to access these. This will help them make informed decisions about their options. Turn to your local gender-based violence organizations. They have a wealth of accumulated experience and knowledge. Talk to them. Read their literature. Learn from them.

### **Some local women's organizations in Toronto are:**

Assaulted Women's Helpline: 416.863.0511, 1.866.863.0511 [www.awhl.org](http://www.awhl.org)

Barbara Schlifer Commemorative Clinic: 416.323.9149 [www.schliferclinic.com](http://www.schliferclinic.com)

METRAC Action on Violence: 416.392.3135 [www.metrac.org](http://www.metrac.org)

Toronto Rape Crisis Centre Multicultural Women Against Rape (TRCCMWAR): 416.597.8808  
[www.trccmwar.ca](http://www.trccmwar.ca)

**Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Care Centre (SA/DVCC);  
Women's College Hospital  
416.323.6040**