




responding to disclosures of sexual violence: a primer.

A power-conscious, empathy-based 6-step guide to support victims/survivors of sexual violence at work and in life.

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preface.

Welcome - we're glad you're here!

It is incumbent on me that I begin by acknowledging that I am a white settler, able-bodied, cisgender man. Though I have personally experienced sexual assault, I remain part of many of the dominant, power-wielding segments of the population when it comes to sexual violence.

It is always important to be conscious of, and appreciate how, power plays into our conversations, analyses, and interventions within the realm of equity and social justice. This is particularly true within the scope of sexual violence, as it is laden with power-imbalances, coercion, and systemic oppression.

No matter how power-conscious I am, my privilege will have inevitably biased my proposed roadmap to responding to disclosures that led to this piece. Despite, and in fact due to, this privilege and bias, this methodology was generated in consultation with folks with different identities and experiences, and was put through various checks and balances to ensure it is survivor-centric and intentionally inclusive.

I believe what we end up with here is a reliable, survivor-centric, conscientious, and robust framework that will allow individuals and organizations to better respond to disclosures of sexual violence, while also allowing for personal judgment and flexibility within the course of these interactions.

Now, there is no perfect way to respond to a disclosure, as more often than not, there is nothing anyone among us can say or do to ease the trauma and suffering of those who have experienced something so traumatic. That said, there certainly are some best practices and habits that ought to be mandatory learning for each of us, and I have attempted to capture them here as a starting point for our collective growth.

Also important to note is that practically speaking, disclosures will rarely be as clear-cut and linear as this methodology outlines. Understanding this, you are encouraged to use these steps to inform your habits, philosophies, and awareness. Even if you are facilitating a disclosure that does not follow this trajectory, you can use the questions and lessons below to inform your actions and responses.

Before getting into specifics, it is important to recognize something that often gets overlooked: we should never begin the conversation about addressing sexual violence in our workplaces, campuses, communities, and homes by discussing how to respond to sexual violence that has already taken place.

We must recognize that the single greatest thing any of us can do for victims/survivors of sexual violence is to build accountable communities where sexual violence does not happen.

The single greatest intervention we can make, and must work every single day towards, is to dismantle the rape culture embedded into every layer of our society. This work necessitates enduring the hard labour of prevention that is only possible via fundamental shifts and elevations in our collective social consciousness. We are called to re-work our community ethos to ensure it prioritizes dignity and actively combats patriarchy, misogyny, transphobia, rape jokes, cat-calling, victim-blaming, sizism, ableism, racism, colonial violence, and classism, among others.

To address the factors at play that make sexual violence possible in the first place is the single greatest thing we can do to help support those among us who have, or who might otherwise, experience the horrors of sexual violence.

Seeing as we still live in a world where sexual violence is so pervasive, we must also be working together to better support victims and survivors in the interim. This is the driving force behind this primer's creation, and I welcome any and all feedback about the process to follow.

Lastly, a note about language. You will notice that throughout this primer, "victim/survivor" is used to designate an individual making a disclosure. The purpose of this framing is to ensure victims and survivors have the absolute agency to generate any labels for themselves. Not all who have experienced sexual violence will identify as "survivors", nor will all feel they are "victims". A "victim/survivor" framing allows space for any relationship one may have with these terms, ensuring that society as a whole does not have the prescriptive power to categorize those who have experienced sexual violence.

introduction.



"what are disclosures,
and why do I need
to be ready?"

understanding disclosures.

A disclosure of sexual violence describes when a victim or survivor shares any aspect(s) of their experience of sexual violence with another person.

Disclosures do not look or sound any one particular way, nor will they take place when or where we might expect them to.

organizations can design for survivor-centricity.

Organizations often have a designated person who all disclosures ought to be made to. In the case of larger organizations, it is often stipulated in policy that even when disclosures are made to someone other than that designate, that the designate must be notified when disclosures are made to anyone within the organization.

This is likely a common practice for a few core reasons:

Firstly, it helps simplify data collection within an organization. If, for instance, a post-secondary institution is mandated to report how many instances of sexual violence have taken place within the past year that they are aware of, having one singular person who facilitates all disclosures, or whom is made aware of all disclosures made elsewhere, makes this process much simpler.

Responding to disclosures can also be high-stakes interactions that may be best facilitated by a trained, qualified professional. Ensuring that you have designated an individual who can be trusted to facilitate disclosures can be seen as a way to prevent against inappropriate responses towards victims/survivors.

Despite these valid reasons, the streamlining of disclosures to a singular person on an institutional level has the potential to create unintended challenges for victims and survivors.

the way we structure reporting directly impacts how safe victims/survivors feel.

For one, it puts employees who respond to disclosures in a position to break the trust of the victim/survivor who has disclosed their experience, as any expectation of confidentiality runs up against the organizational expectation that a report gets made to the organization's designate. This is not survivor-centric.

Furthermore, this process often stems from the assumption that those who experience sexual violence will only and always disclose their experiences to those with whom they have a good relationship and established trust.

Unfortunately, this is not how all disclosures take place.

Imagine, for example, an employee within your organization, who has had poor attendance coupled with lacklustre work performance, is being questioned by their supervisor about these issues.

Let us imagine that this employee has recently experienced sexual violence, and that it is the primary cause of their drop in performance.

In order to facilitate empathy, understanding, and accommodations, not to mention to avoid losing their job, that employee might feel pressured to disclose their experience of sexual violence when they had not previously intended to.

The same goes for students who need extensions, employees requesting personal leave, or members of your team who might be seeking financial support to receive therapy or professional help as part of their recovery.

In situations such as these, where someone feels the need to be vulnerable in order to survive or maintain some level of control within their lives, the implication that their experience will be shared beyond their disclosure with another person becomes even more troubling and burdensome.

Any and all approaches to facilitating disclosures, and more broadly to eliminating sexual violence, should strive to **prioritize victims and survivors.**

Therefore, it is important for you to be ready, regardless of what role you have, because you can never be certain when, how, why, or even who might approach you and disclose an experience of sexual violence.

What is more: [studies have clearly established](#) that affirmative responses to disclosures of sexual violence significantly impact a victim or survivor's ability to heal, work through & manage trauma, and access resiliency along the road to recovery.

So, as intimidating as it might feel, it means we must all be prepared for this particularly tricky interaction, as it is vitally important that we get it right.

Though you might not have the power to make changes to how your institution is set up to respond to disclosures (and if you do, please ensure it prioritizes victims/survivors), you absolutely can do more to ensure you are ready.

If you do have decision-making power in crafting or altering reporting and support structures related to sexual violence and harassment, we will also outline our recommendations for what this might ideally look like.

So, in the spirit of helping you feel more prepared, let's take a look at our 6-step process to facilitating disclosures of sexual violence.

the process.

step 1:



"I believe you."

"I believe you."

It is worth noting at the outset that often the person disclosing their experience will not have categorized that experience as sexually violent. Perhaps, for example, they are sharing their experience of being inappropriately touched and describing it as “awkward” and are uncomfortably laughing about it; maybe they are describing an experience of harassment without seeming to realize that harassment has taken place.

did you know?

When a victim or survivor first discloses their experience, being believed is often the **single greatest factor impacting their ability to **heal** and receive the support they need.**

It does not fall on you to directly tell that person that their experiences are more serious and problematic than they might realize, nor to name it as sexual violence at this stage for them. Instead, you can ask more questions in order to help someone come to any conclusions on their own:

“
How did that make you feel?

Did you feel like you had any control over what happened?

Did you say that was okay for them to do?
”

Asking these questions, and in turn ensuring that the individual you're speaking to is thinking about the answers to them, can be an effective way of helping someone maintain the agency to name their experience while coming to a deeper, self-directed understanding of what that experience was.

On the other hand, when someone is knowingly making a disclosure to you, it can feel overwhelming, and sometimes even confusing to follow — that's okay.

We know that trauma affects one's ability to recall every aspect of their trauma's source memory, especially when it comes to specific details, so it makes sense if things come out a little scattered.

Therefore, if someone is telling you about what happened to them and it feels disjointed or does not entirely add up, it is important to understand that there is a neurological explanation that has nothing to do with dishonesty.

empathy pro-tip

**It is helpful to ensure you are always affirming and supportive without hesitation:
if you notice inconsistencies or things don't entirely make sense to you, leave it be.**



In essence, it is important to understand that your role when responding to a disclosure is to **support** and **validate**, not to investigate or cross-examine.

If the victim or survivor chooses to move forward with formal reporting and/or legal action (which we will talk about soon), details and stories will be scrutinized heavily at that stage in the process, which itself is littered with its own issues of morality.

empathy pro-tip

**When responding to a disclosure, make space for the seemingly erratic and avoid cross-examining as you would a witness to a crime.
Your job is as Chief **Affirming** Officer.**

step 2:



"do you feel safe?"

"do you feel safe?"

Once you have accomplished the immediate goal of validating and affirming the experiences of the individual disclosing their experiences to you, it is important to check and see if any steps can be taken to ensure they feel safe and secure.

There are a number of factors that may be affecting one's ability to feel safe when disclosing their experience of sexual violence with you, some of which you might not have considered before.

Are they alone in a room with you and perhaps feeling vulnerable? Would it help if any doors or windows were opened (or closed), depending on whether they might potentially feel trapped (or exposed)?

empathy pro-tip

We all have different sets of experiences that affect us in different ways. When trauma is affecting someone in our presence, it is an opportunity to reach out, connect with their struggle, and help guide them to safety, even if we do not fully understand what they are feeling.

Was the experience very recent, and if so, was it close by to where you are now? Would it be helpful to relocate to somewhere else where you can continue your conversation that will feel less threatening?

Are you wearing clothing reminiscent of the person with whom they experienced their trauma? Perhaps you could throw a sweater overtop so as to avoid re-traumatization every time they look at you?

Has opening up about what happened to them made them feel isolated or scared? Perhaps there is someone they are close to who they would want to come and be with them right now?

empathy pro-tip

Some of these questions and considerations might seem far-fetched, but ensuring the safety of a victim or survivor means making space for the seemingly ‘irrational’, as responses to trauma rarely follow typical emotional rules.

To be clear, it is not advisable to ask the questions listed above to the individual disclosing to you.

Rather, they are offered as examples of factors that might be affecting one's ability to feel safe. The answers to these questions can be unearthed organically by checking in to see how they are feeling in that moment.

By demonstrating that you are thinking about and prioritizing the comfort and dignity of the individual disclosing to you by asking if they feel safe, you are able to continue to build trust within the context of your conversation, further affirming that they made the right decision by talking to about what happened.



It will also greatly benefit you as a supporter, within and outside the scope of responding to disclosures, to understand more about disassociation and panic attacks.

It is quite common that someone who has experienced sexual violence might also experience psychological dissociation — that is, a disconnecting from one's self as a means of coping with trauma — and being able to recognize and identify when this is happening can be incredibly important.

The littlest things can often make the biggest difference, and depending on the nature and severity of the victim/survivor's experience and their ongoing trauma, logistical details of where and how the conversation is taking place can be vital pieces to make sure are in the right place.

fill your toolkit

For an in-depth look at disassociation and how to recognize it, take a look at [this helpful resource](#). Similarly, as panic attacks are also quite common, it is encouraged that you take a look at some [signs, symptoms, and strategies to support someone who is experiencing one](#).

step 3:



"what do you
need right now?"

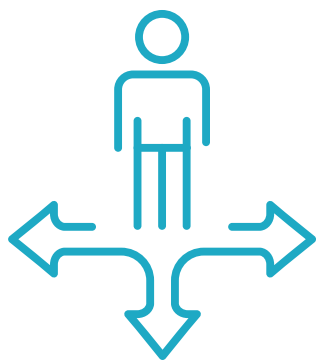
"what do you need right now?"

Once you have affirmed their experience and ensured their immediate feelings of safety, it can feel natural to start making suggestions or guiding the victim/survivor in various directions that feel helpful and prudent.

empathy pro-tip

It is natural and commendable to want to help, but it is vitally important **not to act without the victim/survivor's direction.**

As you may or may not know, sexual violence is an issue laden with power imbalances. As such, the importance of feeling in control throughout this process is heightened.



It is important that the victim/survivor disclosing maintains absolute control and agency throughout the course of this interaction.

The response to “what do you need right now?” is actually quite often “I’m not sure.” If this is the response you get, it is once again very important to ensure they are validated and not made to feel ashamed that they do not know what they want or need from you.

empathy pro-tip

A great way to validate someone who isn’t sure what they need from you is to point out that they are here, speaking with you, about what happened; they are already listening to what they need by doing so, and that is a great start.

Deciding to divulge their experience to you might have been, understandably, as far as they were able to get in terms of planning and mapping out the conversation. That is okay, and it is important you let them know.

In any event, you will either learn about what they could use from you, or they will be able to appreciate that you are allowing them the space to dictate what happens from here on out.

step 4:



"are there any
next steps you'd
like me to help
you take?"

"are there any next steps you'd like me to help you take?"

As with our previous step, this question is all about ensuring the maintenance of control and agency on the part of the victim/survivor.

This question is a little bit more leading than previous steps in the process, and it is possible that it might be marginally anxiety-inducing for the individual disclosing to you.

In the event that a victim/survivor feels spooked by the very suggestion of next steps, make sure to quickly reassure them that there is no pressure to think about that right now if they would rather not.

empathy pro-tip

If looking beyond this conversation feels overwhelming for a victim/survivor, hold space for those feelings and affirm that they are valid. Kindly redirect the conversation to what they feel able to work through in this moment and see if there are any ways they could use your help.



When someone wants your help taking various next steps, it is important to first be aware of your own limitations.

internal check-in

Do you have the emotional capacity to help with the things they are asking for your help with?

Is engaging with this experience beyond this conversation (re)traumatizing for you?

Do you understand what these next steps entail?

You cannot exactly account for the relationship between your emotional capacity to support someone else and facilitating a disclosure, as more often than not, they will happen without warning and cannot be planned for.

That doesn't mean you should not pay attention to your own needs and mental well-being beyond this conversation.

In fact, this step as a whole should look slightly different if you feel unable to access the capacity to undertake any further emotional labour.

If you do not have the capacity to help, you can instead ask:

“Are there any next steps you are looking to take and would like ~~my~~ help with?”

Rather than promising your personal assistance in taking a next step, framing it slightly differently like this allows you the opportunity to connect the victim/survivor with someone who does feel able to support them along that journey.

If they would like your help to file a report with your organization or the police and you feel able to help them (i.e. “I can fill the report out with you, either now or when you feel ready”), it can be helpful to respond with calm positivity at their decision rather than over-the-top excitement.

empathy pro-tip

If someone is looking to report, jumping up and down to celebrate their bravery might feel overwhelming. Saying something like — “Awesome, I think it’s great you’re looking to take some next steps and I’m happy to help in any way I can to make it happen” — can be a compassionate and comfortable way to recognize their courage and resilience.

On the other hand, it is vitally important that you do not shame someone who is not looking to make a report or pursue further action, either now or in the future.

be survivor-centric

The **only** appropriate time for a victim/survivor to take further action with regards to their experiences is **when they feel sure and ready** that they can take on that burden.

It might not make sense to you, but ensure you intentionally practice empathy in order to validate how intimidating that course of action must be.

step 5:



"can I share these
resources with
you?"

"can I share these resources with you?"

Applying pressure inadvertently can cause a number of issues for those who are disclosing their experiences, so it can be helpful to hold off on throwing brochures or pamphlets their way or encouraging them to contact particular people at their earliest convenience.

Instead, you can let them know what resources or support you are aware of that they can access, should they choose to, and ask how they feel about the resources available.

empathy pro-tip

Resources, pamphlets, and future support interventions can feel like an awful lot to think about on the other end of this conversation. Try to ensure the victim/survivor doesn't feel pressured or forced.

If you are unaware of what resources might be available, you can offer to look into what options exist in and/or outside of your workplace if they would find that helpful.

step 6:



reporting +
follow-up

reporting + follow-up.

When the conversation is finished, it is a good idea to once again thank the victim/survivor for trusting you with their experience, and to remind them that you are here to support them in whichever ways they might need (if you have the capacity to make such an offer).

Now, let's talk about reporting.

organizational check-in

It's important for you and everyone you work with to understand your responsibilities. Make note of your organization's approach to reporting instances of sexual violence, how you fit in, and where gaps might exist.

Don't forget to carry out the reporting procedures present in your organization. If you are unsure as to what your responsibilities are, make sure to consult any employee handbook, constitution, guidelines, or policies your organization might have about the issue of sexual violence and reporting.

If your organization does not have any policies, now is a good time to suggest something is done about that!

If your organization does and it involves filing a report and disclosing the experience to someone else, we would encourage you to constructively challenge such a policy in order to allow for a confidential, survivor-centric process.

To be clear, we are not recommending that you disobey the rules of your organization if you are expected to report it elsewhere.

We are an organization focused directly on supporting victims/survivors and eradicating sexual violence. Because of this, we feel it is important to point out what survivor-centricity looks like, as we know this to be the best way to support victims/survivors. We need leaders in every sector to push for more survivor-centric policies, and we all benefit from engaging in this dialogue.

A good way to establish a survivor-centric system is to embed consent into your policies, where any information pertaining to a disclosure may only be shared with someone else if a victim/survivor understands what is being shared and agrees it is okay to do so.

When a victim/survivor understands what information will be passed along, and what that information will be used for, they are more likely to feel empowered by your organization and its policy.

key terms

"Survivor-centric" refers to any policy or intervention that centers and prioritizes the voices, experiences, and needs of victims and survivors of sexual violence. When a disclosure of sexual violence is required to be passed along to another party within your community or organization, victims/survivors might feel discouraged from sharing their experiences.

Victims and survivors are human beings. It's important to remember that and reinforce it with our actions and support.



Once you have met your organizational responsibilities, it is important to think of any potential follow-ups that might be prudent, such as checking in with the victim/survivor to ensure they are doing well and to see if they are experiencing any issues pertaining to their experience at work.

empathy pro-tip

Reaching out to the victim/survivor — who might also be your colleague, neighbour, or friend — as you would in any situation can reinforce to that person that you value them and do not see them as any lesser following their disclosure.

final thoughts + next steps.

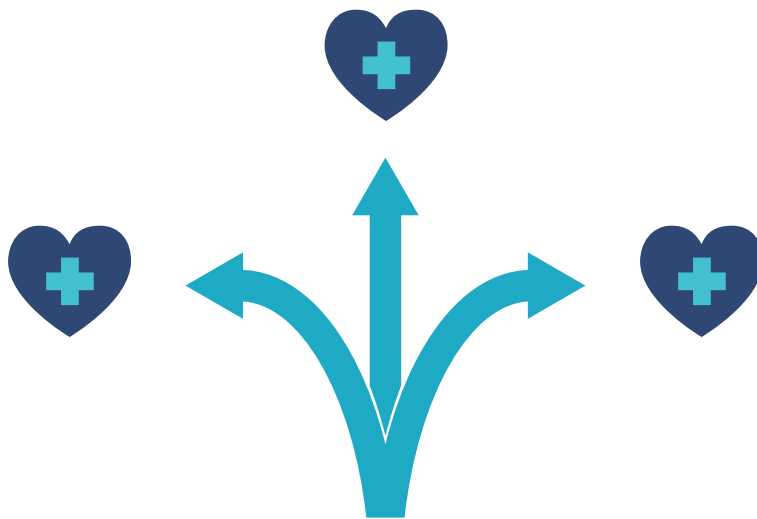


reflections +
takeaways

reflections + takeaways.

This might all feel overwhelming, but understand this:

If you are taking the time to think critically about your positionality on a regular basis, working to ensure the culture at your place of work is accountable, inclusive, and accessible, and if you are actively prioritizing any victims/survivors who disclose their experiences to you, you are more than likely going to do and say the right things.



empathy pro-tip

Though there are concrete conversational guidelines here for you to follow, you can focus on establishing **compassionate, empathetic, and power-conscious habits** rather than trying to memorize a script.

These **habits and commitments** will lead you to develop **your own script** that looks something like ours.

a few key takeaways.

- Victims/Survivors of sexual violence will not always disclose their experiences, and when they do, will often do so out of necessity (i.e. to acquire academic accommodations) or by seeking out someone they trust.
- The first step of facilitating disclosures is actually working to facilitate a culture of compassion, trust, and empathy on a daily basis.
- Prioritize immediate health and safety by making space and asking questions gently.
- Allow the pace and scope of the disclosure to be dictated by the party disclosing.
- Avoid prying questions, especially about logistical details of the disclosure that feel confusing to you.
- Offer to connect the victim/survivor with resources, but do not force any upon them.
- Allow any and all decisions to be made by the victim/survivor.
- Ensure you are considering your own mental well-being and emotional limitations when supporting someone who has experienced trauma.

acknowledgements.

The information provided in this primer has come from generations of feminist organizations, frontline workers, and activists whose work has paved the way for those of us currently making contributions.

The Empathy Institute is forever indebted to those whose work has made our own work possible. These lessons have been finely tuned over the past 5 years providing sexual violence and consent education and through conversations with friends, family, and colleagues.

Special thanks to Leandra Keren for her personal contributions, and to Claire Gummo, Farrah Khan, Julie Lalonde, Jeff Perera, and many more whose leadership from afar in this space has been an example we have been privileged and eager to follow. We also thank Farrah Khan who rightfully reminded us of the importance of acknowledging the history of activism, organizing, and educating from which our own has emerged.

Lastly, we are grateful to each "Bringing in the Bystander" and "Upstander" training programs that were present on university campuses while we were in school, and whose frameworks for tackling these issues have been incredibly formative.

about the **empathy institute**: facilitating human(e) growth.

we are **people experts** who are passionate about the
transformative potential of **power-conscious empathy**.

Through education, advising, and consulting, The Empathy Institute connects people to themselves, each other, and the issues they care about. We show you how empathy, emotional intelligence, compassionate leadership, and inclusive communication can work together to create kinder, healthier, and more dynamic communities + organizations.

our **expertise** broken down:

- sexual violence + consent
- mental health
- self + community care
- emotional intelligence
- pedagogical empathy + compassion
- educational project design and management
- employee + organizational development
- healthy workplace dynamics
- compassionate leadership
- empathetic conflict management
- inclusive communication
- camp counsellor training
- gender diversity + redefining masculinities
- hiring, on-boarding, and retention
- strategic planning

making the world **kinder**, flexibly:

01

advising

reviewing/editing;
specialized advice; conflict
resolution support.

03

facilitating

developing + leading
training; facilitating
focus groups or events.

02

partnering

co-creating programs; +
collaborating on events.

04

consulting

full-service educational
challenges; strategic +
management support.

please contact us for questions, requests, and to see past work.

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