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# ENHANCING KNOWLEDGE

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## CHOICE POINTS

Our **Advocacy Skills series** includes discrete tools that you can use in your work with adult survivors of child sexual abuse to meet each individual's unique needs. This resource is not designed to be used by survivors, but instead to help advocates develop skills. As you develop this skill it will become an ingrained part of your advocacy practice and you will no longer need this resource to prompt your practice.

Sexual violence robs the survivor of their power. Healing comes, in part, from the survivor finding and acting in their own power again. Choices help survivors regain and act in their power. A **choice point is a moment where survivors can pause and actively make a decision.** Every event in life is actually made up of many moments where people can exercise their power and autonomy—where they can find their choice points. Oftentimes, the choice points are hidden. Sometimes a survivor feels like they have no choices, but the choice points are always there. It might be a choice about how something happens rather than if it happens. Some choice points are small or subtle, but every choice matters. Choices are also about saying no to things a survivor thinks they should do, even saying no to their advocate. An advocate's job is to help survivors find their choice points, and think about their choices. The more that advocates increase their own knowledge and ability to observe and name choice points, the more that advocates can support survivors' voices and power.

In learning to see and use choice points, there are a few important things to consider:

- There are many layers of survivors' identities and contexts that affect the choices.
- There are choices before, during, and after any event
- Don't get stuck in believing that choice points are complex. A lot of them are very simple. The purpose of finding choice points isn't to develop a fancy or intricate advocacy skill. It is purely to help survivors identify places where they have choice and then to actively and mindfully choose.

This worksheet will help advocates develop choice points in their work. It is a reflective tool for advocates to use in enhancing their skills, either in personal contemplation or with the support of a supervisor or colleague. You can also practice by looking for choice points in your own life, with everyday activities.

## **CHOICE POINTS IN ACTION**

Let's look at one survivor's story to understand choice points in action.

Holly is an adult who was sexually abused by a teacher when she was in elementary school. The parent and teacher conferences for her daughter, Lucy, is next week. Holly wants to be there for Lucy, but as it gets closer, Holly is having nightmares and is afraid to be in the elementary school building. For the last week, Holly has been so scared that she has had Lucy get a ride to school with a friend. Holly has called the helpline because she received an email from the teacher asking Holly to confirm the time.

There's so much to think about in our advocacy for Holly, including how she explains things to Lucy, or feels about how this affects her parenting. However, for this exercise, we're just going to focus on the choice points regarding how and if Holly attends the parent-teacher conference.

In each of the moments, Holly has choices that the advocate can help identify. Holly could (among many other ideas):

Email to confirm

Get ready to go to  
school

Go to the school

Meet with teacher

Leave school

Decompress

- Email to confirm
  - Confirm or cancel
  - Tell teacher about school-related anxiety (with or without specifically telling about the sexual abuse)
  - Ask for accommodations, like meeting over the phone or in a different location
- Get ready to go to school
  - Pick clothing or objects to increase sense of safety and comfort
  - Ask a loved one to come with, for the drive or the whole appointment
- Go to the school
  - Decide on a route -- maybe there's a place that brings Holly comfort and she could drive past it or stop in
  - Decide on a method of transportation. Perhaps Holly enjoys walking, and the school is a reasonable distance (even if a bit far) for her to walk there
- Meet with the teacher
  - Have an object for comfort or safety with her
  - Write down, or ask the teacher to write down, important notes if Holly is worried about forgetting
  - Practice a grounding or calming skill just before and/or during appointment
- Leave school
  - Decide on a method of transportation that feels good and is safe. If Holly is very anxious or activated, she may want to practice a calming skill before driving, for example.
- Decompress
  - Decide on an activity (or several) to burn off anxious energy, restore sense of self, and/or comfort self.
  - Decide whether to call helpline and/or loved one

## **PRACTICE SCENARIOS**

### **SCENARIO ONE**

Alma, a Latinx woman in her thirties, comes to your office for an advocacy appointment; she had called the helpline a few nights ago and decided to come in to talk more. Alma tells you that she was “messed with” when she was a child. She has been experiencing some pain in her abdomen, and her primary care doctor referred her to a gynecologist for more tests. Alma tells you that she’s never been to a gynecologist because she can’t bear the thought of anyone looking at or touching “down there.” She tried calling the gynecologist’s office, but keeps panicking and hanging up on them. As you get to know Alma better, you learn that she is very active in her church and loves gardening (she even gives you a few tips on the office’s garden!).

### **SCENARIO TWO**

Lucy is a 43-year-old woman who was sexually abused by her father, Mike. Lucy never told anyone. Until recently, she coped very well and thought she had put the abuse behind her. Recently, Lucy’s 13-year-old niece, Tiffany, revealed that Mike sexually abused her as well. Tiffany and her parents are not angry with Lucy, and Lucy has been an important support for Tiffany. However, Lucy is distraught with guilt and shame. While talking with Lucy, you noticed some fresh cuts on her arms. Lucy acknowledges the cuts, blushing and saying, “well, I guess it’s what I deserve.” Tiffany and her parents are getting support from one of your coworkers, while you serve Lucy.

## SCENARIO THREE

Devon, an African-American man in his forties, calls you on the hotline after a flashback. He is a long-term client of the center, and occasionally calls the hotline. You know from experience with Devon that he suffered years of sexual abuse by his now deceased grandfather. He does not bring up any specifics about the abuse on this call, just the flashback and how scared he feels now. Devon has migraines and Crohn's disease, a chronic gastro-intestinal disorder. Tonight, he got scared after the flashback and he can't calm down. He tells you, "it won't stop, it won't stop. Please make him stop..." He doesn't feel safe and is scared to move out of the chair he's sitting in right now. He hasn't left the chair for 3 hours now, although he needs to take his medication. He tried praying and tried to reach his church deacon, who is always able to calm him and make him feel safe, but she didn't answer the phone.

For each survivor's story, complete the worksheets at the end of this booklet. On the left, fill in all the moments that make up this event. Then, in the rectangles on the right, write down all the choices that this survivor could make.



**SURVIVOR CHOICE POINTS WORKSHEET**

Choice Point	Options

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Choice Point	Options

## **“Choice Points”**

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