

Strengthening Services Through Evaluation

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If you ask professionals working with sexual assault survivors for their initial reactions to the word “evaluation”, you will get a variety of answers. In fact, I recently asked precisely this question of leaders in the field. Their responses included: “difficult”, “finding out how well you do”, “challenging”, “necessary”, “I hate it”, “important”, and “time consuming”. What is often left out is the connection to services. *Evaluation, when done well, should strengthen services for survivors.*

To achieve this, evaluation must be integrally a part of service delivery – not something that is added on or optional. It should be motivated by the program’s interests – not merely a response to a funder’s requirement. It should give voice to survivors’ experiences – not be a burden to them.

What is Happening in Evaluation?

There is no doubt that evaluation is increasingly being required of sexual assault programs. This is a responsible act on the part of funders who are accountable for how they use their donors’ and taxpayers’ dollars. As good stewards, they must demonstrate that they are funding effective programs. The continued existence of major funding streams may depend on this demonstration.

Sexual assault programs are stewards, too, and have a responsibility to their communities and survivors. From their perspective, there is legitimate concern that allocating resources to evaluation will take funds away from services. However, when done well, evaluation should be a tool for *strengthening services* and should help in *garnering more resources*. It should *build momentum and effectiveness*. If evaluation is not achieving this, then a new approach to evaluation is what is needed, not abandoning evaluation itself.

Other than requiring more evaluation, at this time there are not clear trends in what those evaluations look like. Many funders fail to specify what type of evaluation they want, what methods should be used, or what should be measured. Nor do they necessarily know what a meaningful evaluation of sexual assault services looks like. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that most sexual assault programs do not have experienced evaluators on their staff or boards, or sometimes even in their communities. So the lack of direction can create confusion. On the positive side, it means there is freedom to carry out the kind of evaluation that will be most useful and meaningful to the program.

Evidence-Based Practice or Practice-Based Evidence?

One phrase that is being bandied about is “evidence-based practice”. This refers to using practices (for example, counseling techniques, outreach strategies, support group formats, advocacy practices, etc.) that are based on sound evaluation or research evidence. Some funders are requiring the use of evidence-based practice. While this is well-intended, it poses a major challenge for our field. For sexual assault services there is very little evidence base in existence. What there is has most often come from clinical settings that do not reflect the settings and practices in the field. For example, a study on a 12-month counseling approach facilitated by licensed psychologists may have little bearing on a small rape crisis center that only provides short-term supportive listening.

What is really needed is “practice-based evidence” – findings that come from real-life, community settings that reflect the values and practices in the movement. What matters is that this evidence is

relevant, useful and an authentic expression of the practices we use. Practice-based evidence can only be generated through the leadership and involvement of the field.

What If It Doesn't Work?

The biggest fear most programs have when engaging in evaluation and generating that practice-based evidence is: What if we find that what we are doing does not work? While this is a scary thought, an even scarier one is that we serve survivors in ways that do not help them.

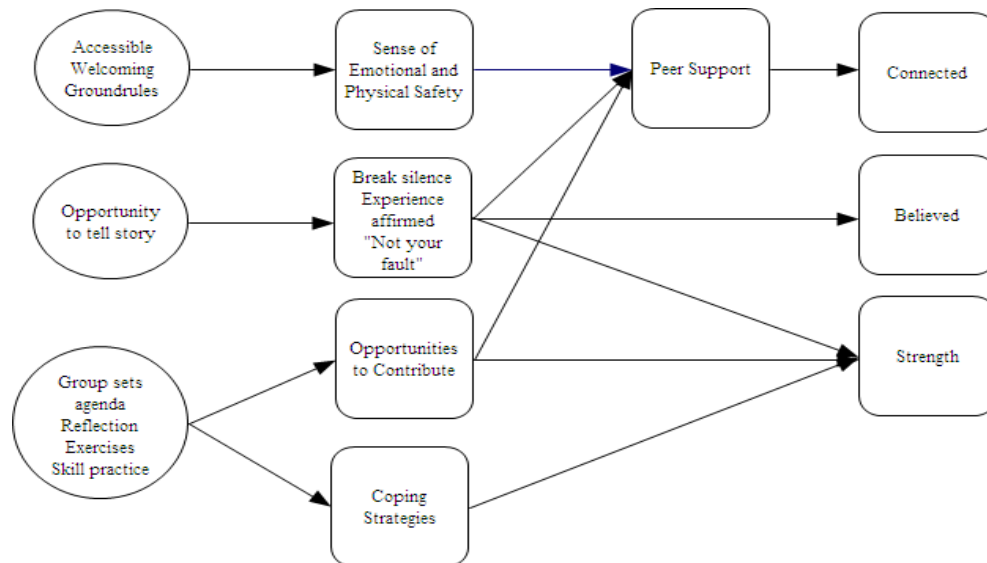
The truth is, if your services had no benefits for survivors, you would probably know. The real evaluation question is not "Do our services work?" The real questions are: "How well is our program working? Which parts are strong? Which parts need to be enhanced? Where are the gaps?" Or from another perspective, "What is it like for survivors to come here? What makes them feel safe and empowered here? What makes them feel fearful here? What else are they looking for?" These are the kinds of evaluation questions that programs can use to strengthen their services.

Where Do We Start?

If you want to design an evaluation that will be useful to your program and that will give survivors an opportunity to have their voices heard, then the place to start is with clearly articulating what it is you think you do and what it looks like when you are successful. Tell the story of how your services work.

We often have an intuitive sense of what we expect to happen in our programs, but we have not always named the changes clearly. What we need is a map, literally a picture, that illustrates "If we do A, then B will happen. If B happens, then C will happen, etc." until we get to our ultimate goal.

For example, a program might reflect on the support groups they facilitate. Their ultimate goals are that survivors feel believed, feel connected rather than isolated, and that they develop a sense of their own strength. But how do those changes actually happen in a group? Every program's road map will look different – there is more than one way to get from New York to California! Here is one illustration of what the change process might look like:



What does this have to do with evaluation? Everything-- because every one of those boxes is something that can be measured. Whether it is through surveys (a common but not always the best choice), interviews, focus groups, observations, or review of records, you can measure each of these steps along the way.

Without such a map, we may measure processes and outcomes that are not directly related to what we are actually trying to achieve. In this case, if we find minimal or no impact it is because what we are measuring is irrelevant and is not a reflection what we are achieving. If we only measure the ultimate outcomes, and not the many steps along the way, we again run the risk of showing no impact, when it is really that we have not gotten there yet. But if we measure the steps along the way, we can see how far we have come along, where the process breaks down, and where it is moving forward as planned. This is especially important for changes that take time.

Where Do We Go Next?

After you have clearly told the story of how your services work by illustrating the process of change, *then* you are ready to move on to the practical tasks of designing your evaluation. What is the best way of finding out what you need to know (surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, records)? What exactly will you ask (questions and measure development)? How will you make sense of the answers and find the patterns or themes in them (data analysis)? What do the findings mean (interpretation of results)? How will you use the information to strengthen services for survivors (utilization)?

There are guidelines for these evaluations steps. For example, while it is easy to write a survey it is not so easy to write a good survey. But strategies and skills for good evaluations are relatively easy to develop. Through training, professional development and technical assistance your program *can* develop fundamental evaluation skills. Doing so will empower your organization to better understand its work and give it the information that is necessary to make informed decisions about your services.

Some resources you may find helpful are:

- *Evaluating Sexual Violence Prevention Programs*, <http://nsvrc.org/elearning/20026>, an interactive online course to introduce your staff to evaluation. Although it is focused on prevention, the basic evaluation skills and strategies are the same.
- *Technical Assistance Guide and Resource Kit for Primary Prevention and Evaluation*, available from PCAR at www.pcar.org. This is the written document that expands on the NSVRC's online course. Again, the examples from the evaluation steps are easily adapted to evaluating services.
- State coalitions that have done especially thoughtful work around evaluating services and that can share their experiences and tools include: Kentucky Association of Sexual Assault Programs, Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape.