
ADVOCACY SKILLS



DEVELOPING CURIOSITY

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.

“Strong advocates assess for multiple interventions and support options, meaning that we take a step back, take a breath, and understand the current situation. Then we can match our responses to that understanding. We need to understand how multiple systems operate in regards to sexual violence. We connect survivors to community resources when the time is right. This is where our knowledge of all medical services, criminal and civil legal systems, and community service options for victims of sexual violence come into play. Each survivor travels their own road, so we need to know what these roads look like. When we become more creative and curious, we are better equipped to meet the needs of survivors with multiple victimizations and complicated needs.”

-- [from Strengthening Our Practice](#)

How do advocates learn to ask questions and understand systems and issues that survivors will face? This worksheet will help advocates develop compassionate curiosity 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. Don't limit yourself to these questions! Use them as a springboard to ask more questions. The more advocates know, the more advocates are able to support survivors' empowerment and healing.

ABOUT LANGUAGE

In a compassionate and creative advocacy practice, survivors can and should seek support for a wide range of situations, ranging from deciding what to disclose to a new dating partner to anxiety about a medical procedure. This publication uses the word issue throughout to refer to the current question, problem, puzzle, or issue for which a survivor is seeking your support. Issue simply means ["An important topic or problem for debate or discussion"](#). It is a neutral term, letting you use your curiosity to explore the emotions and meaning within each issue for each survivor.

REFLECTION TOOL

Issues are current or upcoming situations or decisions for survivors. The sexual violence is, of course, at the root of the current issue. However, as you develop your curiosity and use this reflection tool, remember that your curiosity should be directed towards the systems with which the survivor is interacting. An advocate does not need to know any details of the sexual violence that a survivor endured.

1. What is the issue? Think about it:

- A. As the survivor defines it. This is, of course, the most important perspective on the issue.
- B. As you understand it. Your perceptions and knowledge affect your understanding of the issue. Are there things you know that can help the survivor? Are there things you know or believe that negatively affect your advocacy?
- C. From external parties' perspective. Other people involved in the issue might not have a complete understanding of who the survivor is or what their priorities are.
- D. If there's a difference in perspective or understanding, what is that about?

2. What assumptions did you make and why?

- A. Check your assumptions about the survivor (and their loved ones, if involved), the person who committed the sexual violence, and the people involved in the current issue.



3. How does oppression affect the survivor and this issue?

A. “Nobody exists outside the context of their culture or life experiences. Every day, we each have different experiences and struggles with various forms of oppression: racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, able-ism, etc, as well as places of privilege. These experiences of oppression shape our worldview, and the world’s view of us. They also shape access to resources and systems.”

- How could oppression affect:
- Your relationship with the survivor?
- The survivor’s perspective on the issue?
- How external parties interact with the survivor?

B. Are there things you need to learn?

4. What people are involved?

A. Lots of survivors find it difficult to feel safe and calm around new people, especially in stressful situations. Simply getting a list of all the people with whom the survivor will interact is a big help.

B. Does the survivor have any choice about who is involved? Can they request that loved ones be present? Can they request that fewer people be present or involved? Can they request a certain provider?

5. What physical places are involved in the issue?

A. Think about office layouts, routes from parking lots to buildings. Feeling lost only adds to the anxiety of an already hard situation, so this basic information is helpful.

B. Think about the geographic community, and issues of accessibility and comfort for the survivor. Will the survivor have to travel to a new

place? (This can be especially stressful for rural folks going to cities.) How will they get there? Will oppression be a factor in the survivor's comfort and safety?

- C. Are there several different places or does everything happen at one spot? How will they travel?
- D. Does the survivor have any choices about location(s)? Some things have to happen in a specific location, such as a hospital. But many other things can happen anywhere; it might be inconvenient for external parties but that doesn't mean it's impossible.

6. What are all the steps involved with this issue?

- A. Survivors will face all sorts of issues, some of which you'll be familiar with and some of which you won't. It is not your job to have all the answers for all situations! Good advocacy is about researching each new thing that comes up and helping survivors navigate it. Your job here is to ask people questions, do some reading, and then share what you've learned with the survivor.
- B. Find a provider or expert who can teach you about this issue. Consider asking your state/territory/tribal coalition, local library, other social service providers, and even your family and friends. There's no need or reason to share information about the survivor in order to ask your questions.
- C. Does the survivor have any choices about the steps? Can the survivor add a step where they meet with providers before harder steps? Can some steps be combined? Can some be skipped or taken out of order?
- D. How can you create a test run or practice session? Doing a practice session helps to make the issue more predictable, which lowers anxiety about it. It might not be possible to practice all steps, particularly if this is a healthcare issue, but some can be practiced.

A. For the different steps, what comfort items or support people can the survivor have with them? There might be routines the survivor does before and after, things they wear, or other practices and items that bring calm and safety to this stressful situation.

7. What resources and strengths can the survivor use for support? Think about their internal strengths as well as family, friends, and other external supports.

A. What, if any, research do you need to do to understand these resources better?

LET'S PRACTICE!

Here is a survivor's story, and the advocate's thoughts as they work through the questions.

John is a 30-year-old Native American who does not live near his tribal community. John's grandparents were forcibly taken from their families and sent to Indian boarding schools. John has three sisters; the oldest sister was often left to watch the other children while both parents and grandparents were working. They are planning a family trip across the country to visit relatives. John's girlfriend was sexually assaulted recently. She has been receiving services from a counselor at your agency, and John often drives her to appointments and then seeks you out for information on how to support her. You have sensed for a while that John is troubled about something—something more than the violence done to his girlfriend. Finally, John reveals that ever since his girlfriend was assaulted, he has been flooded by horrible dreams. Sometimes the dreams happen when he's awake. They feel so real, like it's happening right now. "But this can't be real, because girls can't...and, you know, I'm a man...and that doesn't make sense...I mean, she's my sister," he struggles to say. John feels bewildered and confused every day and says he can't tell what's real anymore.

ADVOCATE'S THOUGHTS

1. **What is the issue?** John was raped and is scared of seeing his sister.
 - A. Wait. John said he has nightmares and thinks maybe something happened when he was a child.
 - B. I think John was raped. That's different than what John said. John says he is bewildered and isn't sure what happened in his childhood, but he's nervous about this family trip.
 - C. John hasn't told anyone else yet, but he said his girlfriend sees that he's upset about something. His family might think something is wrong, even if they don't know exactly what the issue is.

2. **What assumptions did you make and why?** Hmmmm, I'm not sure. Maybe I'll talk this through with my coworker.

3. **How does oppression affect the survivor and this issue?** I don't really know anything about the history of boarding schools or John's tribe and their culture, and that makes me nervous that I'll miss something. There's hardly any Native people in this town—I wonder where John finds his community.

4. **What people are involved?** John, his girlfriend, his immediate family, his extended family. If John goes on this trip, when will they all meet up? I bet John's first flight will be alone, since I know his family doesn't live close. But I wonder if he'll meet the family for the final driving part of the trip.

5. **What physical places are involved in the issue?** His home, the car on the way to the airport, the airport, the airplane, [and then we could list as many stops in the reservation and nearby communities as we want]

6. **What are all the steps involved with this issue?** John will need to decide whether or not to go on the trip. One step for me is to find out airline cancellation policies. John can decide what to tell his girlfriend

and when. John can decide whether or not seek more services from my program. One step might be to help John develop some coping skills for nightmares and flashbacks. Another step could be deciding who to sit next to on the long car ride. I should probably ask John how he feels about flying and being in a different part of the country. That will affect some of his choices if he does go. Will John be able to call his girlfriend or me from the reservation? I'll also leave myself a note to talk to John about the time difference and when he can reach me directly. I don't think it'll be possible to do a practice run of these steps. John and I can talk about comfort items, and I can help him make a list of coping techniques and resources he can call on.

7. What resources and strengths can the survivor use for support?

Think about their internal strengths as well as family, friends, and other external supports. I know John loves comic books. I'll ask him about his favorite comic book heroes and why. That might help him connect with a feeling of safety and strength. I wonder what his relationship with his grandparents and parents is like. Maybe they do things to comfort John that he can ask for, even if he doesn't tell them about why he needs support.

NOW LET'S APPLY THESE QUESTIONS TO YOU AND YOUR PRACTICE.

Think about a survivor of sexual violence whom you have served. If you're having trouble thinking of one, that's okay! You can use the following survivors' stories.

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!).

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.

1. What is the issue as the survivor defines it? As you understand it?
2. What assumptions did you make and why?
3. How does oppression affect the survivor and this issue?
4. What people are involved?
5. What physical places are involved in the issue?
6. What are all the steps involved with this issue?
7. What resources and strengths can the survivor use for support?

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