

Strategies for Fostering Connection

A trauma-informed approach is anchored in the belief that safe, authentic, and positive relationships are the central vehicle for helping survivors heal from trauma and for building resilience. Here we discuss strategies for fostering connection with survivors that include encouraging providers to find ways to: 1) create space; 2) listen; 3) stay attuned; 4) support survivor choice and control; 5) identify strengths and celebrate successes; 6) be consistent and persistent; 7) be self-aware; and 8) be honest and authentic.

1. **Create Space.** It is important to create a welcoming relational space for survivors to engage and begin to share who they are. When that space is taken up with too many agenda items, the conversation can be overwhelming for survivors, and opportunities for real connection are diminished. Ideas for creating space include:

- Provide a warm welcome, wherever you meet survivors
- Ensure basic needs of the moment are met to the extent possible
- Invite survivors to be themselves without expectation or judgement
- Show genuine interest
- Invite survivors to share their perspective and story without being questioned or corrected
- Avoid appearing hurried or impatient
- Start by relating and engaging before addressing bigger issues

2. **Listen.** In the midst of the stress and pressure of direct service work, is easy to lose sight of one of the most basic and powerful strategies for supporting survivors: listening. Focused attention from a calm and caring person can help survivors to shift out of survival mode and into a more calm and connected space. Providers are encouraged to consider what it means to listen versus waiting to talk; what it means to support and explore with survivors instead of to tell and direct; and what it looks like to take a learning stance versus presenting as the expert. Skills associated with motivational interviewing, such as use of open-ended questions, affirmations, and reflective listening, are particularly helpful in fostering deep listening.

- **Open-ended questions** offer space for a survivor to tell their story. Examples include: What was that like?; Help me understand... ; and How would you like things to be different?
- **Affirmations** recognize and validate strengths and behaviors that may lead to positive change such as, *“That took a lot of courage to . . .”* *“One of your real strengths is your ability to . . .”* *“I appreciate you sharing that difficult information with me.”*

- **Reflective Listening** involves closing the communication loop to make sure you understand a survivor accurately. Includes repeating or rephrasing and paraphrasing what a survivor is saying and reflecting a person's feeling: *"So you want to do..." "So you feel..." "It sounds like you...."* Reflective listening includes repeating or rephrasing what someone has said; paraphrasing what they said; and/or reflecting the feelings associated with what they said.

3. *Stay attuned.* We have talked about the effects of trauma on states of arousal for trauma survivors. Oftentimes, people exposed to interpersonal trauma have not had the opportunity to form attachments that support self-regulation and coping. Relationships with providers may offer a restorative experience for survivors, if staff are tuned into shifts in their internal states and can help them come back into balance. There are a variety of strategies that providers can adopt to stay in tune with survivors.

- Learn to notice when people are moving into a survival state (changes in behavior, mood).
- Know when to stop and help survivors come back into a calmer and more connected state (e.g., pausing and breathing, offering space, moving around).
- Pay attention to the words, tones, movements, or environmental stimuli that trigger changes in emotional states for survivors.
- Identify patterns related to a survivor's level of regulation and dysregulation in the context of your interactions.
- Share what you are noticing with the survivor and ask for their thoughts and agreement or disagreement about what you are noticing.
- When people are in survival mode, prioritize helping them reregulate over giving advice or stating consequences.
- Validate survivor responses as effective survival strategies that make sense in context.
- Avoid distractions that can break the connection and send the person back into survival mode (e.g., external distractions or internal thoughts and worries).

4. *Support survivor choice and control.* Experiences of trauma leave survivors feeling vulnerable, powerless, and out of control. Supporting survivor choice, voice, and empowerment is central to healing. Strategies for supporting survivor choice and control in relationships include:

- Invite survivors to collaborate in determining when and where to meet, so that they and staff both feel safe and free of distractions; encourage survivors to share information about the words, tones, and environmental stimuli that might potentially trigger a trauma response, so that steps can be taken to avoid any of these triggers
- Allow survivors to control the pace of your interactions

- Allow survivors the opportunity to end a conversation or interaction that feels uncomfortable
- Assist survivors in regaining a sense of emotional control if they start to shift into survival mode
- Provide a variety of options and choices to survivors whenever possible
- Offer space for survivors to make decisions about how they want an interaction to go
- Respect a survivor's right to make their own decisions, even if these decisions are at odds with a desired outcome
- Assist survivors in exploring their purpose and vision for the future
- Challenge survivors to reflect on their lives and decisions in a way that is feels empowering instead of judgmental

5. *Be consistent and persistent.* Feelings of uncertainty and confusion can trigger intense trauma responses for survivors related to past experiences. Maintaining consistency and predictability in your relationship with survivors can help to instill a sense of calm, which in turn allows the person to focus on healing and relationship-building. It is also important to be persistent in your work with survivors. Persistency sends the message that the survivors you serve matter, that they are of value, and people are not going to give up on them. This may look like:

- Ensuring consistent responses to survivors over time.
- Following through on what you say you will do.
- Using crises as opportunities to continue to show up and to build trust.

6. *Identify strengths and celebrate successes.* Focusing on what a survivor does well and the strengths that they bring to their current experiences is a powerful way to shift people from a hopeless state to a hopeful and future-oriented space. Sometimes, identifying strengths and celebrating successes requires a shift in provider perspective and expectation related to how success is defined and progress is measured. For example, instead of seeing difficult behaviors as entirely negative, staff can recognize the positive thinking, determination, and resourcefulness that a survivor has exhibited in advocating for what they need.

Things providers can do to incorporate a strengths-based approach in relationships include:

- Find ways to point to a survivor's strengths in your regular interactions.
- Identify strengths that feel honest and genuine to your experience with a particular survivor.
- Help survivors to define what success looks like to them.

- Recognize and celebrate successes, both small and large. In congregate settings, find ways to celebrate in community.

7. *Know yourself.* As a service provider, maintaining an awareness of who you are and what you bring to your relationships with survivors is a critical piece of providing quality care. Knowing yourself Includes:

- Understanding your own trauma-related triggers and being aware of which particular clients or situations may be difficult for you.
- Noticing signs of disengagement or desire to disconnect (e.g., feeling bored, thinking of other things, avoiding meetings/calls) and developing strategies for regaining your focus.
- Knowing when to step back or step out of an interaction with a survivor that is not productive or restorative.
- Acknowledging and attending to your biases
- Incorporating personal and professional strategies for supporting resilience.

8. *Be honest and authentic.* Almost always, severe emotional distress involves a loss of trust in important relationships. Building trust again is based on the person being able to believe you, especially at an emotional level. To build a foundation of trust, one must be honest and authentic. Being honest and authentic means balancing being yourself with your professional role. As part of striving for authenticity with survivors, it is important to consider issues related to boundaries, self-disclosure, repairing. Strategies include:

- Be clear about how you describe your relationship with survivors
- Be clear about what survivors can expect from you and be careful about what you promise.
- Pay attention to how you engage with survivors, including your physical proximity, emotional closeness, and level of personal information that you share.
- Consider self-disclosure carefully. Ask yourself when self-disclosure might be appropriate and when it could be misunderstood, and consider the intention behind the disclosure. For example, you might ask yourself about the purpose of a planned disclosure about yourself to the survivor you are working with, and if that disclosure will help to move the survivor forward in some way.

- Recognize that mistakes will happen in relationships. Be honest about your mistakes and work through them with survivors as you model what it looks like to make repairs when connections are disrupted.
- Be honest about your professional commitment to survivors, about the boundaries of that relationship, and about the inevitable end of the relationship, once the survivor is no longer in your program.

Discussion Questions

1. Which strategies for fostering connection are particular strengths for you?
2. Which strategies are more challenging?
3. What strategies would you like to be better prepared to implement?
4. What kind of additional training or support do you need to successfully implement those strategies?