



Addressing Oppression in Prevention Efforts

Total time: 23min 59sec

Kate Hildebrandt 00:00

Thank you for listening to this short recording. This series on common prevention challenges is part of a larger audio series to help explore creative prevention ideas and developing and expanding our prevention efforts. In this recording, we discuss challenges and brainstorm some strategies to navigate challenges related to addressing oppression in our prevention work. Today we are joined by Sexual Assault Task Force Staff.

Carli Rohner 00:20

Hi, I'm Carli Rohner, Campus Advocacy Coordinator.

Meg Foster 00:23

I'm Meg Foster and the Prevention Program Coordinator.

Kate Hildebrandt 00:26

And I'm Kate Hildebrandt; I'm the Campus Coordinator. The challenges we're going to discuss today were identified by participants in the statewide comprehensive prevention trainings. So let's get started.

All right, so our first question is when you have participants in a training who are unwilling to address their own problematic behaviors, especially those that might harm other participants or contribute to a culture of violence.

Carli Rohner 00:49

Yeah, this comes up in a couple of different ways. We can look at it both from the lens of, we have participants that might be difficult in terms of what they are bringing up in those training sessions and their unwillingness to confront those problematic behaviors. We can also think about us as facilitators, being unwilling to address problematic things that folks say within our training. And so to the first point, one of the things that I have found effective is if I cannot help positively reframe what that behavior is like in the context of the setting, maybe it's because the person or maybe because of timing, or I weighed out that the benefit to the group wouldn't be worth derailing that training, then oftentimes, I'll ask the person, I'll say something like, "You are bringing up a lot of points that sound really important for you and are often brought up in our trainings; can we please talk about this at break, I would be happy to chat with you." And oftentimes, I see folks taking us up on that. And that can be really difficult to navigate when you have a room full of, you know, 20/30/40 people and trying to balance your time as a facilitator.

So to the second point, as being willing to combat that behavior when it comes up and is problematic, oftentimes what I find myself doing is almost a cost benefit analysis of, if I don't address



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this problematic statement, often they're rooted in racist, sexist comments, what is the harm to the rest of the people in my training? So if I don't acknowledge this, if I don't say something that shows the rest of the audience that I and the rest of the training are not in alignment with that statement, how many folks are either going to tune out, not feel safe, or not feel comfortable? Oftentimes, that outweighs my own personal discomfort. It never feels good to challenge participants in the room especially when you're trying to create an inclusive setting. And so trying to approach that with a lot of empathy for this person; they are here for a reason. Hopefully, they are willing to learn and I have a duty to the rest of the folks in the room to show up and let that participant know that maybe this is problematic to the other folks in the space.

Meg Foster 03:05

I also think that it's really valuable too, when you're structuring or planning for your prevention programming, to build in space for flexibility. And a lot of times we try and cram as much as we possibly can into a short period of time knowing that we usually have limited sessions, limited access, and being able to factor in that flexibility and give time and space to explore things further, or ask follow up questions, to understand more and give people a chance to navigate those pieces. If our programming is structured to just move on immediately, we'll never be able to address those. So when we're developing/planning for and developing our programming, building in flexibility is really valuable to help address this.

Kate Hildebrandt 03:55

Also another thing that I [unclear] is, just following up on what Carli was talking about [and] addressing things with participants, I love that idea of saying, you know, "Hey, can we talk about this on a break?" because it is important to address things with people one-on-one and it being noticed that if another participant was harmed by a comment or that they're upset, checking up and following up with them, and then following up with whatever you need to do to make that right for the session. So if that is that you need to revisit the conversation, maybe after a break or the next time you're together as a group, to talk about it in a way that people have some space to process but that you're not just letting a problematic comment sit there without being addressed.

I know that sometimes as a facilitator, I've had been challenged to address it in the moment, maybe it either doesn't feel right, we have to move on, or the courage isn't with me in the moment, but knowing that I can, I have to, and I need to go back to that and that. If you can't in the moment, that's okay.

Meg Foster 04:54

An important part of prevention is, and we talked about this in other recordings as well, is being able to model humanity. Model what it's like to not be able to have all the answers; model what it's like to navigate these situations as they come up and not always get it, maybe 100% right. And when we are able to model that humanity, we make it easier for other people in the room to navigate that and figure out when we might be wrong, what to do in those situations, and how to move forward.

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Carli Rohner 05:27

An in-between strategy that has been helpful in the past when I don't have, like Kate said, that courage in the moment, sometimes things people say that are problematic in trainings hit us individually in a way that makes us really uncomfortable based on the type of identities that we have or just because of that role as a facilitator and acknowledging that power that you have in a room. And so a couple of times what I've done when that has come up and I'm trying to model humanity, and I'm trying to model that I don't have all the answers is to ask the group. So for example, a participant might say something problematic, and I'll say, "That's really interesting. How are other folks feeling about that?" And oftentimes there's somebody in the room that is feeling courageous or does feel really strongly to be able to identify and address that comment. Some of the challenges of that are you don't have any control over that messaging from the other participants and if that's met with equally problematic dynamics, how are you going to navigate that? So it's a kind of in between step and an in between strategy that you can use, but I also caution you to think about what kind of tone and what does that do to the rest of your facilitation if that conversation doesn't go how you hope.

Meg Foster 06:40

With the additional caveat, as well, of just being cognizant of who are the people in the room that are consistently doing that work to educate other participants who says problematic things, and maybe where we as facilitators might need to step up more and not ask folks who are usually on the receiving end of oppression and microaggressions that have to do a lot of that labor.

Carli Rohner 07:03

So for example, if you're in a room full of folks that are predominantly people of color and you as a white facilitator hear a problematic comment about folks of color, I would encourage you to be the person that addresses that, not make the folks in the room do all that labor.

Meg Foster 07:19

And it takes practice, like everything in prevention it takes practice. So what are the opportunities you can build into your workplace/your personal life to practice responding to challenging/problematic comments, tough questions, all those pieces and think through some of those things before, after, and during facilitation.

Carli Rohner 07:42

One of the other comments that comes up along this similar topic thread, often from our participants about how they can handle challenges and facilitation is the concept of white fragility. So how do you handle when white identified folks in the room are having a really hard time receiving feedback or feeling a lot of pushback in that space and what does that look like?



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Kate Hildebrandt 08:04

I have definitely some initial thoughts on this, but I also want to just name and acknowledge that I am a white person. And so sometimes that blinds me to being able to handle this well, as well. So we were going to offer some thoughts as white folks and we would love to hear from other folks about spots where we may be blind in this as well.

So I mean, the first thing that comes up with that is that you have to go into trainings expecting that you will see some white fragility, that people will bring their feelings, and that no matter what you do, you're probably gonna have some of that dynamic in the room. Regardless of whether you are talking exclusively about racism or not, you're going to see some people experience white fragility.

For folks that, just to kind of back up a little bit, for folks that might not be as familiar with the term white fragility, there is a ton of really great research on this and really great writing and I definitely want to recommend the book *White Fragility* --

Carli Rohner 09:10

It's by Robyn D'Angelo, there's a lot of resources that she's created for specifically white folks to examine, what does that mean? What does that look like to be a white person and not have really negative reactions whenever people bring that topic up for us? And so there's a lot of really great researchers and writers and that's just one popular resource that we recommend for folks.

Kate Hildebrandt 09:33

Yeah, so definitely recommend doing some homework for everyone on this. One way this might come up, for example, we see this a lot with white folks and maybe more often, white women, crying in response to being confronted with their own behaviors, for example. And so, it's the idea that they can't handle being confronted with their own white privilege behavior and that that fragileness expands and takes up the whole room. So definitely expect that some of that is going to come up in your trainings regardless.

So a couple of things that are foundational to that is, one, it is our role as white folks to handle ourselves and to handle other white people in the ways that they're expressing white fragility and the ways that that comes up. So if you notice that in training, if you're a participant or facilitator, if you are a white person, step up and hold other white people accountable. Do your own work in that way. If you're a facilitator, you can also try to set up some of the initial agreements or group guidelines, whatever you do, to explicitly address this, and to talk about the ways that people might feel feelings based on what you're going to talk about and how it's appropriate for participants to handle those, and what that's going to look like. I also think it's really important, depending on the context of the training, but in a lot of cases to explicitly name racism and white fragility, so that people don't think they're just ambiguously talking about feelings, but you're expressing naming ways in which power and privilege might show up in the context of those feelings.

I also think that when people do demonstrate that when you see somebody who does, for example, this has happened to me a lot of the trainings, a white person gets very upset, either angry or emotional, and because of the ways that folks are raised to be gendered. For me, I've seen a lot of

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male participants may be angry and defensive, may get upset. That doesn't hold all the time. It's a gender dynamic in our society that I've noticed in my own facilitation. When you see that you can be empathetic towards their feelings and their experiences, and still gently be naming that and be creating a space where the folks of color in the room are not going to feel totally marginalized, or that their feelings are taking over the whole space.

Like Meg was talking about, though, that's practice. So figuring out what that looks like for you may be practicing in a different context, if you see other facilitators modeling this really well, asking them for help and how they do that effectively, what you can do to build those skills, because I do think it's a gentle process of how you balance empathy for the person and not wanting to create a space where you're shutting other folks out or creating a space for white privilege is taking over.

Carli Rohner 12:26

It's okay to validate somebody's feelings. Discomfort isn't great for anyone, and especially for a participant in the training that's coming up with these feelings for the first time. It's okay to say something like, "Yeah, it sounds like this is really hard for you." And what I like to do is try and connect that to how some of their comments or their behavior links to what folks in marginalized communities also experience. So if someone's saying, "I'm just really upset about this, I'm feeling really left out." It's like, yeah, we can acknowledge it that would not be great for anyone. That brings us back to some of the root causes of our prevention training. So how do we then bring some of that validation for that person's feelings and come back to, and, these are the same root causes that are causing this and bringing us to have to talk about this in the first place.

Meg Foster 13:18

As Carli and Kate both have said as well, how we set up the spaces in which we're doing our work is really important. And there's a lot of research that shows that people learn out of discomfort and that that's a really valuable tool for helping us navigate learning. And so a lot of times when I facilitate trainings or other mediums, one of my goals is actually that there is some discomfort because we want to be able to like practice and learn from sitting in discomfort and move forward with discomfort and so thinking about how we can set up the space to acknowledge that this might be uncomfortable, what structures are in place to help people navigate discomfort, and just having some of those conversations upfront might be really valuable as to how we set up our spaces.

Carli Rohner 14:13

If you are a white person, you can also connect with that person at break, at lunch, whatever it is an offer, say, "I'm really happy to talk with you about this more," and be able to pull some of that focus back to training and being able to connect to that person on a one-on-one level, that same topic [unclear].

Kate Hildebrandt 14:33

Alright. Another question that we got that I think all of us have probably heard come up in our trainings a lot is when people are making comments about assumptions that everyone can just pull themselves

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up by their bootstraps. That bootstrap-ism of if you just work hard, then you'll be able to get yourself out of a situation whether that's a situation of experiencing domestic violence or something like that or privilege and oppression more generally. So how do you deal with that?

Carli Rohner 15:02

Yeah, when this comes up in trainings oftentimes folks are speaking from their own personal frame. And it's really helpful to bring us back to that everyone's life experiences are different. And if we are talking about equity versus equality, and revisiting some of those frameworks for folks to kind of walk back to, "Yes, pulling ourselves up by that metaphorical bootstraps might be achievable if we don't have any additional barriers in the way, so what kind of barriers come up for different communities around accessing care, around leaving a violent situation?" You can talk about barriers that come up for survivors generally, survivors of color, queer survivors, so what does that look like to kind of broaden that lens from "Yes, in certain situations that could absolutely be applicable. And we know that that's not the case for all folks."

Meg Foster 15:56

That's one of the reasons why it's really important to focus on the different levels of oppression. I noticed this coming up more when we focus exclusively on like, individual ways that oppression is perpetuated or perpetrated. And so thinking out beyond that to those systems and those structures, and making sure that those are part of the conversation, as well as like community levels of oppression, as well as in our personal levels. And not just focusing in on one space, so being able to connect to this bigger structure that is designed to keep some people down.

Carli Rohner 16:36

And to help us learn how it teaches us to value some people more than other people. Another way that this also comes up in trainings, I see some parallels between this and the question that we often get from participants, which is about how do you help folks debunk rape culture. When we're talking about rape culture, we're thinking about those things at our societal level that make it more likely that someone could experience violence, also more likely to perpetrate violence, and allow that to continue in our society.

Kate Hildebrandt 17:08

Yeah, when addressing either of these things, because both of these are pretty pervasive forms and myths in our culture, I find it helpful to use a mix of data along with stories and anecdotes, analogies and things like that. Because again, when it comes to people having beliefs that align with rape culture, you know, which I often find to be things about individual protection, like, "Oh, they could have just done this, like, why were they out so late? Why weren't they protecting themselves?" Myths around drinking and sexual violence or that anyone can just leave; myths about whose responsibility it is to prevent sexual assault. A lot of those beliefs also come from personal experiences and with both of these what's helped me in addressing these participants is to view the root of these as self-protection. When it

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comes to believing myths about who's responsible for and who's capable of preventing sexual assault or rape and when it comes to thinking about what is my role and am I able to pull myself out of a bad situation, of course, I want to believe that I have control of my own life. And of course, I want to believe that if I am broke that I just work hard enough, and then I'll be able to retire a millionaire, of course, I would love for that to be true because there's a ton of incentive to believe that. So it makes sense that people would believe any of these things; it's a personal thing. And therefore, we need to look at both what does the data show us statistically about general trends of experiences, that we're taking it away from your experience, which is, your experience is your own, and when we see like large general trends, people within those groups tend to deviate wildly, and so we're not invalidating that person's own experience. But just saying this is what we see more widely. As well as using kind of personal anecdotes, analogies, things like that, because that's a great adult learning style to connect with folks.

Kate Hildebrandt 19:13

The other thing that I do with this, if one person is saying it in the room, other people are thinking it, and the person who's saying it, you don't necessarily have to change their mind, but offering other options so that other people in the room who might be more open to changing could see how that is. How you respond to that person, don't look at it as changing their minds, looking at it as changing everyone's mind. And that'll help. That helps me.

Carli Rohner 19:41

And that that change doesn't happen immediately in that room. One of the things I like to think about when confronted with either that pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality or the rape culture kind of pushback that we get in rooms is that everybody's starting in this work in different place and at one point in time in our career we were probably not very familiar with some of these frameworks. And so being able to provide, like Kate said, that information in different ways to be able to help folks in the moment, but then also have the materials to take back and kind of digest and compare with how their life experience has been, often brings folks back to that conversation, in a much more willing way, so we're able to continue that learning.

Meg Foster 20:22

Yeah. And it also goes back to like how we are structuring our prevention programming. We need to make space to navigate these conversations when they come up in whatever way that needs to take in that situation. One cool tool that I know a lot of programs have used is they've had a lot of these same challenges come up, these comments, and they've facilitated something for their co-workers or their colleagues and have them ask or say these problematic statements so that they can have the chance to actually practice. I also think that when we're talking about anti-oppression in our work, and people are having these moments of pushback or aha moments, etc., it can feel really overwhelming and so when we're talking about prevention, it's really important to still talk about tangible things that people can do today, tomorrow, and the next year, whatever that looks like to help people move forward. Even if that handful of pieces, like go read the book on white fragility, not the book, but a book on white

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fragility, or continue learning, here's some resources or think about how you could have some conversations or shift how you talk about consent or sex or sexuality. And so thinking about those opportunities to really do something tangible is really valuable. Otherwise, part of that pushback is that this feels really overwhelming.

Carli Rohner 21:50

Yeah, I'd like to overlap that with the socio-ecological model. So we've talked about that in other audio series episodes that we've done, but that's another really tangible way to help it not feel as big for folks. So talking about, on a societal level, here's some of the things that are happening, but on an individual level, maybe I'm encouraging folks to evaluate their consumption of media, and what type of messages they're taking in via media, and giving them some tools at all of those different levels, maybe within their relationships, within their institutions. So again, when they're thinking about our culture as a whole, it doesn't feel like they have to take everything on because we know that that's not sustainable or possible for one person.

Kate Hildebrandt 22:30

I also have found it really freeing to talk about the structural causes of all of this. And of course, we would all believe this and of course, our own individual values and actions would sometimes uphold rape culture, uphold privilege and oppression, because we live in these larger structures and systems that we didn't create and don't have a lot of control over. That can be helpful for participants in easing them into taking accountability for their own actions, behaviors, and beliefs because if they can see it not as, I'm doing this, it's my fault. I'm doing a bad thing, but I'm doing this. And there's a reason I'm doing this because the system is set up to encourage me to do this. I think that's a gentler step. It's one of the reasons why sometimes we start off talking about implicit bias when we're talking about bias because we're trained in this system of, look it's all around you. It's not your fault that you're doing this. And that's a really easy intro for folks who don't like to take responsibility, because our society doesn't encourage us to take responsibility for our own actions.

Meg Foster 23:35

So these are just some of the challenges that folks have identified around anti-oppression work within prevention. We're going to explore this more in some of our other audio recordings. So please check those out. Thank you for tuning in today. And we appreciate you all sharing your feedback and challenges that you're experiencing. Thank you.

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Oregon Sexual Assault Task Force

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