



Navigating People who have Experienced and Perpetrated Violence in our Prevention Settings

Total time: 28min 19sec

Meg Foster 00:00

[Thank you for listening to this] short recording. This series on common prevention challenges is a part of a larger audio series to help explore creative prevention ideas and develop and expanding our prevention efforts. In this recording, we will discuss challenges and brainstorm some strategies to navigate these challenges related to survivors and offenders within our prevention work. Today we are joined by Sexual Assault Task Force staff.

Kate Hildebrandt 00:23

I'm Kate Hildebrandt, Campus Coordinator.

Carli Rohner 00:25

And I'm Carli Rohner, the Campus Advocate Coordinator.

Meg Foster 00:27

And I'm Meg Foster, the Prevention Program Coordinator. The challenges we are going to discuss were identified by participants in the statewide comprehensive prevention training. Let's get started.

The first challenge we want to discuss is around stigma around trauma that results in survivors being consistently judged in our prevention work or other places.

Carli Rohner 00:48

Yeah, this came up a lot at our first prevention training around folks talking about, what does it look like in a room or how do facilitators handle when folks are constantly saying things like, survivors are broken, survivors should have made different decisions, and we're going to talk about victim blaming in a little bit, so I wanted to talk about resiliency folks being able to maintain whole other identities in themselves other than as a survivor or as a victim of crime. One of the best things that we can do as a facilitator is to acknowledge this for folks that somebody who's in the room who might identify as a survivor or victim is also a whole person who has life experiences outside of that survivorship. And as a facilitator, I often like to say things like, yes, you know, that might be particularly challenging for somebody to overcome and really focusing in on the strengths that that individual brings to their work. So really kind of combining that advocacy lens with our prevention work. Oftentimes, I find folks really struggling to see how, particularly in a school setting, we work a lot with colleges, and how a student might be excelling at academics or in other places in their life because it's a coping mechanism, or because it's just an area of their life that they feel really safe and grounded in, while still maybe having challenges related to their victimization in other parts of their life.



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

And so, I just like to remind folks within our trainings and within my facilitation style, that everybody has a whole myriad of life experiences that we bring into not only prevention work, but just to every space that we show up in. And for survivors, that's one part of their identity, not the entire component.

Meg Foster 02:40

We as facilitators, as people doing prevention, we also reinforce that stigma when we just automatically assume labels like survivor or offender, like we did at the intro to this recording. And so making space for people to have some identity and agency around their identities beyond just survivor, or people who've offended or whatever that looks like, and just making space for those conversations can be really valuable.

Carli Rohner 03:08

A helpful thing to do to make the example is to clarify our language and what we mean when we're coming in. So oftentimes when I'm working with schools, I'll say, the criminal justice system might talk about folks as victims of crime. Today, when I'm talking about someone who's been harmed by somebody, I'm going to say the word survivor or victim potentially interchangeably and that's not me prescribing that to anybody's experience. I've worked with survivors who are very adamant that they like the term survivor. I've also worked with folks who are like, no, I prefer the term victim. This is the thing that happened to me. And so I try and acknowledge and clarify my terms as a facilitator up front, and then allow space in the room if folks want to check out other ways that folks might identify labels that apply to them.

Meg Foster 03:56

A lot of the stigma comes from assuming that when we say, survivor, or offender, in this context that there's a lot of judgment about how people responded, experienced trauma, navigated their own situations, as a result of that. And so just being cognizant of the impact that our labels and the words that we choose might reinforce them.

Carli Rohner 04:25

Also as facilitators, we unintentionally reinforce this by the type of materials that we use and the types of datasets that we share, the types of resources that we share with the audience. And so I encourage folks to look at your PowerPoints, if that's what you're using, ahead of time or other materials are the only things, when you're talking about survivors, are the only images that you're using those of crying people? Those of folks who are particularly upset? Are you only sharing about the factors that somebody, when they've experienced violence, all of the negative things that happen to them and not also pairing it with, here's how folks demonstrate resiliency in the face of these difficult experiences. And so thinking about that, oftentimes, just because of the type of materials that we bring to an audience, or the images that we're showing, we're maybe unintentionally reinforcing some of these



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

stigmas. So that's a great way that you can check in with your material and with your co-workers ahead of time.

Another way, like we said that this dovetails a lot in terms of facilitation and working in our prevention strategies is how to address victim blaming, and particularly when you're with an audience, how do you do that in a compassionate, inclusive way?

Kate Hildebrandt 05:41

Yeah, one thing that I found really helpful is to reframe victim blaming statements as a self protection statement. I see that as the root of a lot of victim blaming statements when folks are saying, you know, oh, you shouldn't have been out by yourself so late. You shouldn't have been drunk, should have had a friend with you. Different things like that, or like should have just left the relationship at the first sign of verbal abuse, things like that. It's because we all want to think that we would make those choices and that we could make choices that could protect ourselves from getting abused or violated or hurt in any way. I understand that mentality; I also would love to think that I can be in complete control over my own life and will never be hurt as long as I make smart choices. So if you look at it from that perspective, and help reframe that for folks in the room, that it's understandable why we would want to believe that all these things can happen. And that's not the reality of what happens because I always address victim blaming by talking about who is capable of preventing violence and abuse. That we can say that yes, choices of individuals may or may not have saved them from experiencing violence or abuse or all sorts of other ways that it could have happened to them anyways, or to a different person, that the person who is capable of preventing it is the person who perpetrated this. Just walking through that with people helps to reframe it and like, Yes, I understand why you would want to have this belief. And we still need to look at it a different way.

Carli Rohner 07:19

And it's just a lot of mental gymnastics that we're asking folks to go through then, to Kate's point around if we say, think about all the different ways that you can protect yourself and then turning that around into victim blaming statements, like well, they didn't. It's a much shorter mental pathway to say, if you choose to not perpetrate violence, or contribute to violence, that's a lot easier for folks to understand. And so coming at it in a way too where we can do that reframe, not only helps folks in the protective factors of thinking how they can see themselves in prevention work, but also it's just less mental energy which we can also use as a benefit in training.

Meg Foster 08:01

I've been doing this work for quite a while, as we all have, and there are still times when I don't recognize the victim blaming in a lot of the work, or the statements that are coming up. And so, like we've talked about in some of our previous recordings as well, that is the place where some of my privilege comes up. Like I don't think about all the scenarios where victim blaming might come up. And so too when people point it out to us, it's important that we are open to hearing that and figuring out



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

how to address that so that we're not continuing to model that in our materials or programming, whatever that looks like.

Kate Hildebrandt 08:38

Yeah and to that point of thinking about it with our programs or materials, it's important for us to look at our things ahead of time and think about how we're framing things. Are we framing it on an individual level and actions of individual control, or are we looking at systems and structures and active choices to not perpetuate violence? One of the hard things is when we frame things from a perspective, or we're looking at the behavior of survivors and the behavior of people who experienced violence, then it lends itself to victim blaming more, because we're opening ourselves up to looking at like, what could this person have done? Or what choices could they make, where it's really important that we structure our prevention work in the conversations that we have in a way that puts the emphasis on the responsibility of the person who perpetrated the violence or that it's our responsibility, all of our responsibilities as individuals, to choose to not perpetrate violence in the future. And by doing that, then we refocus away from picking apart the decisions of victims or survivors.

Carli Rohner 09:41

Which leads us really nicely to another question that we have had come up recently from folks around, how, as a facilitator or as someone who's working in prevention, do you navigate the challenge where you want survivors to be able to share their experiences in a way that's meaningful and inclusive in the room, but also trying to redirect and keep your training, your program, whatever it is, on track because that's what you're there to do. And so how do you kind of balance the two of those?

Kate Hildebrandt 10:15

One thing that we often suggest, that I always like to go back to, setting up an expectation at the beginning of your session or of your sessions about what kinds of things people should feel comfortable sharing and talking about, because while you want to create an open space, it's also important to acknowledge what the purpose of conversation in the room is about. So with our prevention training, it's often not focused on talking about the dynamics of sexual violence or those experiences of survivors. And of course, building empathy, and connecting the systems that we're talking about to those things is important, and that if we're veering into a space where it's just a sharing of traumatic experiences, that is not necessarily going to get us closer to our prevention goals in a lot of ways. So being open and honest about that. I know when I was doing prevention work, I would often have that as one of the group guidelines or agreements that we want people to openly share their stories and that sharing intensely detailed stories about our own experiences of trauma, abuse, or you know, other harm can be hard for others to hear. So we need to be mindful about not traumatizing others or not oversharing our experiences, and I would be happy to provide resources and other spaces for how to do that.

Now saying that, one, there are times where you will be in space where you're getting closer to those topics, or it'll be more appropriate for people to share. And just because you've created an agreement doesn't mean anyone's going to stick to it. So when people are getting that, one, we need to



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

practice empathetically interrupting people if there's, someone is getting into a story, sharing a lot of details, and you think that it's derailing the room or it's taking a long time, how do we empathetically interrupt folks to just pause them, and let them know that, thank them for sharing, validate their experience, and move the conversation forward, what that looks like. And if you created a space where you said, these are our goals, this is what we're talking about today, these are topics we're always going to come back to, and then you can point back to that conversation you had in the first place.

Carli Rohner 12:26

Being able to include some of those resources for folks to get connected to services up front, so even having slides or a handout, something where folks know that maybe as the facilitator you aren't the only connection that they would have to get help. This might be the first time that folks in the room are feeling safe or comfortable to talk about their experience. Maybe they haven't been involved in a community that actually openly talked about these topics before. And so having those resources is a great way, one, to pair with your response folks, maybe advocates or other community partners, and highlight their great work, but then also give folks a heads up of, "Hey, if you have some stuff coming up for you, there's options. And here's who we're going to help connect you to," as opposed to trying to process that in a room full of people.

Meg Foster 13:12

And that one of the things that comes up in our prevention work is we're talking about, you know, dynamics of healthier behavior, relationships, etc. and a lot of folks will be identifying in that process that maybe the experiences that they've had have been unhealthy, have been violent, or what also happens a lot is people identify that their behavior in the past has been violent, and that they maybe have perpetrated violence in the past. So making that space to navigate that, for all the reasons that Carli and Kate have just mentioned as well, is one of the reasons that we require in our RPE programs that preventionists who are funded, go through a basic level of advocacy training in order to handle like initial disclosure, and be able to navigate that, because if we don't have those skills in place, if we're not able to connect people to effective response systems, what happens is people fall through the cracks and aren't able to access the support that they need. And so just recognizing that that is going to be a product of our prevention work, and thinking through and planning for that ahead of time, can be really valuable to do that successfully moving forward.

Kate Hildebrandt 14:28

I also think we would be remiss if we didn't also call out you know, mandatory reporting/responsible employee responsibilities, if that is a factor in the prevention work that you're doing. If you're going into a school, if you're on a college campus, just knowing what your confidentiality level is and what that looks like. Also knowing what the other folks in the room, what their confidentiality level is, so that you can say that to participants ahead of time and you can create a space where people know what's going to happen with their information that they're choosing to share. That's also a reason why we need to



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

practice empathetically interrupting people because we want people to be in control of the information they're sharing and where it's going as much as possible.

Carli Rohner 15:09

To that point you can say to folks at the beginning, when you're talking about your confidentiality expectations, here's the type of conversations we're going to be having in the room. In that same kind of area, you can also talk about, here's what is going to happen if you share this information, like just really briefly, I don't think you've spent a lot of time there. But also reminding folks that you're in a room full of people, potentially strangers or other community partners that you don't know, and we can't guarantee confidentiality. So even though you might ask folks not to share out, that when folks go to share information in a training, they're granting some form of lack of control over where that information goes. That can be a helpful reminder for folks in that space.

Meg Foster 15:59

Yeah. And I appreciate that and as someone who implemented prevention programming in middle and high schools, my role was not a mandatory reporter, I worked in a domestic and sexual violence agency, and had the same requirements around confidentiality as other advocates. It's really important to understand different reporting requirements, but also make space for the people who are mandatory reporters to talk about what that means to them and how they understand that. I often will say that I worked in probably 50 different teachers' classrooms, and I always ask the teacher to define what mandatory reporting was, and I never got the same response. And really, what matters is not like my definition of mandatory reporting, it is how that teacher or those other people understand their role to be because that's what they're going to report on. And so whether or not that moves forward, whether or not that actually goes through DHS or any other system is, of course not necessarily up to that teacher. But being cognizant and making space for people to talk about how they understand their requirements, is a really valuable tool to avoid retraumatization.

Kate Hildebrandt 17:14

Right, so the next question we got was around when a survivor or victim butts heads with an advocate or facilitator.

Carli Rohner 17:21

I see this come up in ways, like Meg was talking about earlier and Kate talked about this a little bit, when folks are hearing information that is contrary to what their previous beliefs were coming into the training. So for example, I have worked with folks in the past who have come into a training had an idea of what healthy relationships look like based off of their faith values, their family, whatever kind of community that they grew up in, and during the course of our conversations in that prevention training, there were some light bulbs clicking for folks around their past experience not being something that was safe or healthy for them. Or that they were now concerned about, either on the side of somebody who had harmed some other folks, or is the person who might have been harmed. Oftentimes, that's where I



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

see that pushback coming from is folks, like Kate talked about earlier in this conversation, having a difficult time, merging their experiences with what we are now talking about. And that's sometimes for folks that brings up past trauma, that brings up the past things that they've done that they are very happy about, and it is much easier to, as a facilitator, discount me, and what I'm saying than to necessarily identify or agree with that they might have been harmed or harmed someone. Sometimes for folks, that's the space that they're at. And so when that comes up for folks I tried to do a lot of intentional work at the beginning of the training to say, I'm going to put very few spaces where it's just really apparent that folks could push back, that might be the types of statistics I share or different materials that I share, that would really bring up folks needing to have that kind of feelings. But when that does come up, I'm just like, "Yeah, you know, folks can have different experiences with this. I'm always happy to chat more offline." And I follow through with that, if somebody asks to talk to me on break, I try to do that in a way that's helpful and respectful of folks.

Meg Foster 19:25

We also have to be really honest, if one of our goals is that survivors/victims have access to systems and structures that are there to support them and navigate resources, and navigate trauma, we have to recognize that not every system is going to work for every survivor. And so maybe we are not the right people, to be a support person for that person, but who can we connect them to, what other resources are available. A lot of times we get into a pattern of like ownership over survivor services. And not every like, it's not one size fits all, we need to have a network of folks and resources and organizations to support people because needs are going to look differently and people can navigate that in different ways. So being open to that and helping connect people to lots of different resources is a really valuable tool of advocacy.

Carli Rohner 20:26

The only other thing that I would offer for folks, I ran into this, and I know that I did this a lot at the beginning of my career, was talking about things in a really concrete way. This is what violence looks like. This is what we know leads to violence and not leaving room for folks to see themselves in that experience. So folks who push back and say that's not how I experienced it, that's not how it was. That didn't make their experience less true. When thinking about how you're framing your conversations to allow that everyone's life experience is different and that one person's experience with victimization or perpetration doesn't look like the person sitting next to them. And so just leaving space for that in a group.

Kate Hildebrandt 21:14

Another question we get is around engaging participants who have biases about consent or just who are bringing up questions in a training because they know or care about somebody who was charged with sexual assault or accused of sexual harassment in some way.

Meg Foster 21:30



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

I feel like this has come up in almost like every single prevention activity that I've done. Because in the same way we've talked about in other recordings, there are a lot of people who, that we are all kind of taught within these structures and systems and one of the big ones is that we talk about people who've offended as you're either bad or you're good. Bad people offend, good people do not, and so that makes it really hard then to navigate the fact that we all exist within this structure, these systems that have taught us to value some people less than other people, which means that we've all learned the foundations of violence. We've all learned to be violent because of the structures and systems. And as we've mentioned in other recordings, as well, Kate mentioned, we are going to use our power and privilege potentially in harmful ways. And so recognizing that we're all a part of these systems, we're all a part of oppressive norms and values and these systems of violence and so recognizing the role that we play in that and thinking about that, and helping other people walk through that. It makes a lot of sense that people might have a hard time wrapping their head around their parents or their sibling or their friends or their, whoever, as someone who might have caused harm. And so talking through, the example here was consent, talking through what consent, not only just the definition of consent, but what consent can look like/feel like/sound like, to really promote skills to navigate healthy relationships and healthy skills is a really important part of this. That can really come across, this piece where people are having bias or pushing back, it could come across as defensiveness or pushback and again, making space or planning for space in your prevention programming to navigate some of those pieces, to unpack those a little bit, and spend time talking about that, because we've all been in situations where something like this has come up. And because we've packed our schedule too full, we've had to move on, and it just sits there and kind of hangs there and makes it really hard for lots of folks to engage with this material moving forward. So thinking about all those pieces.

Carli Rohner 23:52

One of the things that comes up a lot in other portions of training throughout the task force is helping to frame these conversations with reporting statistics. So what are some of the barriers for folks to report but then also, what are the things that come up for folks when they report instances of sexual harassment or sexual abuse or sexual violence? And what are the costs to those folks? And part of that that we often see incorporated is rates of false reporting. So addressing that on the front end in a thoughtful meaningful way can also help frame some of these conversations, so that they don't come up later in your presentation. So not saying things like, Well, everybody who reports violence in some way has something to gain from it, because this person that I know or love was accused, and they would never do something like that. If you've already addressed some of the elements of that in the room, sure, that can be their experience or their thought about their loved one or friend, but it doesn't mean that it's true for all folks across the spectrum of folks who have experienced violence. I think that can be helpful to reframe for the group.

Meg Foster 24:57

One of the common buzzwords that we throw around too is doing our prevention work in survivor-centered ways. And so acknowledging that it is incredibly likely that there are people in every



Exploring Prevention Audio Library: Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

room that we go into who have experienced violence and there, if we broaden that out as well, that there are definitely people, including maybe ourselves who have experienced or just experienced violence in their lives in whatever capacity that might be, knowing that going in, we can do some of that modeling and help folks navigate that, whether that's checking in on break, whether that's responding in the moment, and whether it's unpacking that more, but it's really important. If we are going to be survivor-centered, we think about these pieces before we implement our prevention programming.

Kate Hildebrandt 25:50

And likewise, it's also you know, we should also go into a room assuming that there are people in the room who have perpetrated violence, and being thoughtful about how you have these conversations from both of those perspectives is really important. When people are, especially around conversations with consent, I see people push back a lot on well, isn't it at some point their responsibility to speak up and say no, if they didn't want to, or to talk about their desires and things like that. And so we need to be careful about how we're talking about that in a way that we are, of course, promoting healthy behaviors and acknowledging the systemic and cultural systems that make it really hard for people to talk about that. So we can be empathetic and broaden out to wider society, experiences, systems and institutions that can help reframe it for people while being empathetic, but also sticking to that survivor-centered mentality Meg was talking about, where we are not putting the responsibility on victims or even really on people that it should be the responsibility of all of us to ask our partners and to find out what they want and to acknowledge that, for some people and because of systems, it's really hard to work on those barriers.

Meg Foster 27:03

Yeah. And when we think about who exists in our society, if we ever truly want to end violence and abuse, we have to engage people who have offended to try and mitigate any future offense. And I always go back to, we all play a role, that might not be your role. It might be a part of your role, it might be something to think about, it might be something you haven't actually thought about in the past. I also think that in our prevention work, we have the opportunity to model what it means to have maybe caused harm, whether it is using our privilege or power in a potentially harmful way or something else, model how to navigate that, how to be accountable to that, and how to actively work not to cause that harm again. And that's a critical piece of our prevention work.

Carli Rohner 28:01

Thank you so much for listening to this short podcast today and we hope that you reach out if you have thoughts or questions about our conversation today. You can also find more resources available on our website OregonSATF.org. Thanks so much.



Exploring Prevention Audio Library:
Series 1, Episode 9 Transcript

Contact Us

Oregon Sexual Assault Task Force
3625 River Road North, Suite 275
Keizer, Oregon 97303
taskforce@oregonsatf.org
Phone: 503.990.6541
Fax: 503.990.6547