

Guidance Note 6: Responding to Disclosures Guidance Note



What is disclosure in the context of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH)?

Disclosure happens when someone reveals that they, or someone they know, have experienced or perpetrated violence including GBVH. They may be sharing an incident or incidents that happened recently or in the past.

Why do we need to be sensitive in cases of GBVH disclosures?

Disclosing an incident can be difficult for a person due to the sensitive nature of the issue and the retelling of an incident (their own or someone else's), which can lead to re-traumatization where they may re-experience the negative emotions or symptoms associated with their original experiences of trauma related to GBVH.

Because of the potential negative impact we can have on a person disclosing an incident depending on how we respond, it is important to be sensitive in providing support to avoid re-traumatization and to avoid discouraging sharing of cases in a workplace.

What does a disclosure look like?

There is no single way of disclosing cases of GBVH. It is important to note that some people may not be able to define or label their experiences as violence or harassment for a variety of factors, from lack of understanding of what constitutes violence or harassment (for instance, the assumption that it has to be physical or very serious) or cultural and/or social norms. They may simply describe an incident based on how they feel and the harm experienced. Because of the different ways it can be disclosed, the person who is responsible for listening has to recognise the various forms and definitions of GBVH based on how it impacts the victims or survivors.

The when and where of the disclosure can also vary. Some people may choose to share an incident immediately after an incident, and for others, they may disclose an incident months, maybe even years, afterwards. In terms of settings, some may disclose during a group conversation, a training, or mention it in passing. Others may do so in a private one-on-one conversation.

How do we respond to disclosures?

There is no one right way to respond to disclosures, given the diverse nature and contexts. However, those who are preventing and responding to GBVH cases should be able to identify and respond in an effective, gender sensitive, and respectful manner.

Unless you have received professional accredited training as a counsellor or are employed as a counsellor in your organisation, you are not expected to be a counsellor. Instead, your role is to listen to the person, show you believe them and take the disclosure seriously. However, when speaking with victims or survivors, explain to the victim or survivor that you are not a counsellor or trained to deal with these cases directly, but you are able to direct them to professional and specialised services.

What can I do? What can I not do?

The three most important things you can do are:



Listen without judging or interrupting



Believe and validate their experience



Provide information that will support the person to make their own choice in what happens next

A general good practice is to follow the LIVES approach by ensuring that the person who is disclosing a case feels believed and supported, and that they are not to be blamed for the incident. The person disclosing their experiences is showing you that they trust you, and it is important to maintain the trust and confidentiality

during the disclosure. If you are concerned for someone's safety then consider helping them to act, but do not force them. In some instances, it may be enough to acknowledge that they have shared their experience with you.

You should	You should not
<input type="checkbox"/> Be supportive	<input type="checkbox"/> Provide advice
<input type="checkbox"/> Be non-judgemental	<input type="checkbox"/> Try to fix the situation
<input type="checkbox"/> Have accurate referral information	<input type="checkbox"/> Provide counselling
<input type="checkbox"/> Practice the LIVES approach	<input type="checkbox"/> Try to find out more details
	<input type="checkbox"/> Force the person to do or tell you anything

What is the LIVES approach?

There are five simple tasks involved in supporting victims and survivors.

Listen

Actively listen and to show empathy. Depending on your role in the workplace, you may be eager to establish the facts and, however, this first step is about providing space for victims or survivors to share without judgment or blame.

Dos	Don'ts
Find a quiet and private place to talk so the victim or survivor can speak confidentially	Speak about your or other people's experiences of violence or harassment
Be patient and calm	Ask many questions to get the details of the situation
Assure that what is shared will not be repeated without their consent	Do not rush them
Show that you are listening by nodding and encourage them to speak	Do not interrupt them
Listen to their feelings (and not what they are saying)	Avoid judgmental statements such as "you should not feel this way" or "you are lucky it is not worse"
Pay attention to both your body languages (eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture)	Avoid assigning blame to the victim or survivor through statements such as "you are only experiencing ... because you are or you did ..."
Allow for silences	Judge or criticize the decisions and choices made by the victim or survivor or suggest that they could have acted in different ways to protect themselves
If the victim or survivor cries, allow time to recover and offer pauses and breaks	Express frustration or anger at the victim or survivor
Believe their account of their experiences	Condemn or talk badly about the perpetrator
Show empathy and non-judgment	Provide counselling
Condemn the use of violence or harassment by the alleged perpetrator	

To show empathy and that you are paying attention to the victim or survivor, you could say the following while listening to the disclosure:



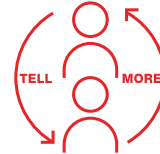
“That sounds like a horrible experience...”



“Based on what I am hearing, you are concerned that...”



“You mentioned that... Is that correct?”



“Can you tell me more about that?”



“Thank you for sharing”

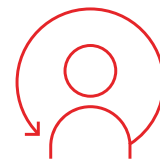
Inquire about needs and concerns

As you listen to the victim or survivor, ask about their needs and concerns. While speaking to them, listen to their needs and concerns, including health, economic, emotional, physical, safety, and social needs.

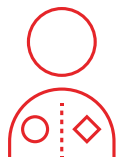
The following techniques can help you understand the needs and concerns of victims or survivors:



Avoid yes/no questions and instead, ask open-ended questions



Repeat what they have said to check that you understand what they are trying to say, ask for clarifications if needed



Reflect their feelings



Help them identify their needs and concerns by asking questions: “is there anything you need or that you are concerned about”, “it sounds like you may need...”

When asking about their needs and concerns, avoid asking leading questions, for example, asking the, if they feel a certain way (instead, ask them how they are feeling about a particular situation).

Validate

It is important to show the victim or survivor that their responses and feelings are normal, and that they have the right to live without fear and GBVH. This step is crucial to show that you are listening attentively and carefully, that you are not judging them, and that you believe what they are saying. Be sure to tell them that they are not and cannot be blamed for what has happened and that no one should experience GBVH (and nothing can justify the perpetration of GBVH).

To help validate the victim or survivor, you may wish to say the following:



I imagine it has taken a lot of courage for you to share your story with me



No one should have to experience what you have been through



Everyone deserves to feel safe and respected at work



I am worried that this may be affecting your health and/or well-being



Help is available (if it is true)

Enhance safety

Some people who have experienced GBVH may have fears about their safety, while others may assume that they will not experience another incident again. Explain that safety and well-being is an on-going discussion and is not a one-off process. Take the time to discuss with them their needs and the details of their specific situation, for instance, whether they may be in immediate danger.

If you are concerned about the immediate risks, share that you are concerned about their safety, and that you would like to discuss ways to prevent them from being in harm's way.

Serious instances that cause you to believe someone is at immediate risk should be discussed with a manager

(keeping confidentiality without disclosing names). Most organisations will have policies and processes for risks to immediate safety. Make yourself aware of organisational policies and procedures and seek advice from experts if immediate safety concerns are apparent.

Particularly in cases of domestic violence, it is unlikely to be a one-off incident, and it can continue over time and escalate. In cases where there are risks of a victim or survivor returning home, make a safety plan about safe places to go (other than home), plans for children and other dependents, transportation, items to take (documents, money, clothing, etc.), and support network (a neighbour, family member, or a friend who lives close-by).

Support

It is up to the person making the disclosure to decide whether they want to act and follow up on the referral information. People who have experienced violence have often had their ability to make decisions and control taken away from them; try to enable the victim or survivor to regain control and make their own decision about what action they want to take. Your role is to point them to the types of support services that are available, for instance, by saying the following:

- What would you like to do now?
- What would be the most helpful to you if we can do it right away?
- I don't have any special training in helping

people with experiences like yours but I can give you contact details for people who do

- What you choose to do with this information is up to you, but I can provide you with contact details for a free specialist service you can contact if you need to?
- Do you have contact details for any specialist services? If you grab a pen and paper I can provide them to you?
- Do you have a family member, friend, neighbour, or someone outside of the workplace that you can talk to?

Additional resources

Our Watch. 2017. Practice Guidance: Responding to disclosures.

Available at:

https://d2bb010tdzqaq7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/15002441/PG_Responding-to-disclosures_UpdatedFeb2019.pdf.

WHO. 2014. Health care for women subjected intimate partner violence or sexual violence: a clinical handbook.

Available at:

https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/136101/WHO_RHR_14.26_eng.pdf?sequence=1.

WHO. 2019. Caring for women subjected to violence: A WHO curriculum for training health-care providers.

Available at:

<https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/caring-for-women-subject-to-violence/en/>.