

CONVERSATION GUIDE: **ACTIVITIES FOR STAFF MEETINGS AND IN-SERVICE TRAININGS**

Increasing Emotional Safety in Domestic Violence Shelters

This Conversation Guide series can be used to help increase the capacity of domestic violence programs to work with survivors who are experiencing mental health symptoms and/or psychiatric disabilities. You can use this guide to begin a conversation about these topics or as a way to focus or deepen conversations that have already started. Each one will lead you through discussions and activities that you can modify or adapt for your specific program's needs. This Conversation Guide is designed to help you increase emotional safety and improve responsiveness to trauma in your shelter or program.

Purpose and Variations:

The three activities in this Conversation Guide can be used together as one longer conversation, broken up into multiple conversations, or used as stand-alone activities to supplement other conversations you are having as a staff.

Additional Resources:

- *Tips for Enhancing Emotional Safety* (National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health)
- *Understanding Traumatic Triggers* handout (attached)
- *Supporting Emotional Safety: Background for Facilitators* (attached)

Materials:

- Prepared flipchart papers for Activities #1 & #2
- Copies of *Action Steps to Increase Emotional Safety: Worksheet* (enclosed).
- Paper and pens for all staff to write notes and reflections. If these activities are part of long-term training, staff can use notebooks to keep all of their reflections.

Ground Rules and Emotional Safety:

These activities should be used to encourage exploration in an atmosphere of as much safety as possible for participants. That means that the discussion should help all of us to think and talk openly about our work with survivors and our individual goals in the work. The discussion should not be used as a place to criticize other staff members; instead, each of us can approach these discussions as a time for personal learning and for joint exploration. Ground rules can often be helpful in this process. Below are some ground rules to get you started, but feel free to use your own. It may be helpful to spend the first few minutes discussing the ground rules every time you come together as a staff to work on these activities.

Potential ground rules:

- Speak from your own experience
- Identify your own learning points
- Join with an understanding that all of us are learning
- Commit to making the discussion safe for each person to be, learn, and grow

Activity #1: Critical questions: Deepening our awareness of emotional safety and common trauma responses

Suggested Time: 20 minutes

Preparation:

- Write each critical discussion question (listed below) at the top of a separate sheet of flipchart paper in order to record answers.

Instructions:

1. Allow 3-5 minutes for each question.
2. Use information and language from the resource section "Background Information for Facilitator" to support this discussion.

Discussion Questions:

1. The concept of emotional safety is an important aspect of serving survivors of trauma. But, survivors are unlikely to use those words and may not use any words at all to communicate whether they are feeling emotionally safe or unsafe. As advocates, we need to build the skills to "hear" what survivors are telling us about their emotional safety.

QUESTION: What are the ways that survivors you are working with communicate their sense of emotional safety while in your program (e.g., through body language, behaviors, interactions, tone of voice, words)?

2. We know that violence impacts people emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We may not always recognize what we are seeing as a trauma response. For example, a survivor may seem anxious or distracted, may seem to "go away" while you are talking, or may have difficulty with tasks that are triggering.

QUESTION: What are some behaviors that you see that could be trauma responses?

3. A trigger is a reminder of a past traumatizing event(s) and can come in many forms. Although it is not possible to avoid or get rid of all potential trauma triggers, there are many things that we can do to reduce triggering survivors.

QUESTION: What kinds of things might be triggering for survivors (consider physical environment, interactions with staff and other

residents, etc.)? How might you reduce potential triggers in your program?

4. While we can work to make the shelter environment as safe as possible, supporting survivors to build skills in managing trauma responses is also part of our work as advocates.

QUESTION: What kinds of things can we do to support survivors when they are triggered? How can we support survivors to build skills in managing trauma responses?

Activity #2: Assessing our shelter's emotional safety

Suggested time: 25-35 minutes

The way that we organize our shelters and programs and interact with survivors can influence whether a survivor feels unsafe, afraid, or off balance or can add to a survivor's emotional safety and help to manage difficult feelings if they do arise.

Preparation:

- Create the chart *Assessing Our Shelter's Emotional Safety: Worksheet* (page 5), either as a large visual (several sheets of flipchart paper) or print copies of the handout. This chart will be filled out during the discussion.

Instructions:

1. Put the chart up on the wall (or pass out) and ask staff to brainstorm responses.
2. **For each aspect of your program listed in the left-hand column of the chart, ask:** In what ways does this aspect of our shelter help to build emotional safety? In what ways could this aspect of our shelter make someone feel unsafe, afraid, or off balance? These answers will give us important information about what we can strengthen in our program and areas that may need change. *Additional questions may include:* What have survivors told us about the effect of our environments, our policies, and our practices on their sense of emotional safety? How would we experience the shelter if we were coming to the shelter as a resident?
3. **Variation:** Pass out the chart for people to take home and work on individually. Set up time to discuss as a staff.

Activity #3: Action steps to increase emotional safety

Suggested time: 20-30 minutes

Preparation:

- Make copies of *Action Steps to Increase Emotional Safety: Worksheet*

Instructions:

1. Pass out copies of *Action Steps to Increase Emotional Safety: Worksheet*
2. Ask for a notetaker
3. Review Activity #2 (if necessary)
4. Using the handout, lead a discussion about action steps to increase emotional safety in your shelter. This is an opportunity to be specific and concrete.

If you've used **this conversation guide** in your work, we would love to hear from you! Let us know: How did you use it? What worked well? What can we revise or improve? What did you learn? What suggestions would you have for other people who want to use this idea in their work?

Send us your feedback at info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org.

Assessing Our Shelter's Emotional Safety: Worksheet

Aspects	In what ways does this aspect of our shelter help to build emotional safety?	In what ways could this aspect of our shelter make someone feel unsafe, afraid, or off balance?
Physical characteristics of shelter		
Ways that staff interact with residents, each other		
Opportunities for survivors to practice self-care/stress management techniques		
Privacy		
Survivors' ability to make choices and exercise control (over environment, activities, routines)		
Staff's personal sense of emotional safety**		
[Add other aspects specific to your shelter]		

**Depending on staff's level of comfort (individually and as a staff) this can be talked about in a general sense, i.e., what helps increase emotional safety in organizations generally (e.g., supportive supervision, flexibility, etc.) or in a more specific sense, i.e., what is going on specifically in our organization to make staff feel safe or unsafe (e.g., we have great, regular supervision, we do regular check-ins, etc.).

Understanding Traumatic Triggers

ABOUT TRAUMATIC TRIGGERS

Traumatic triggers come in many forms. A trigger is a reminder of past traumatizing events. Many things can be a possible trigger for someone. For example, what seems like an “ordinary” request such as, “Make sure the children are ready for school on time,” can be a trigger for a survivor whose abusive partner terrorized and punished her if the children were late for school. Part of our work is in changing our frame so that we always keep in mind that survivors’ responses to seemingly neutral events and interactions with people may reflect a trauma response. Survivors may have adopted long-term patterns that reflect their efforts to adapt to a traumatizing life. We also work to hold in mind that this behavior and these patterns reflect strategies that survivors have developed to keep themselves safe—that is, they reflect strength and resiliency.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE IS TRIGGERED

We can understand how it might be for a survivor of a flood, like a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, who was swept away as water rushed into her house. We can understand how she might feel frightened when someone turns on a shower without warning—just the sound of sudden water may reawaken the old experience. In a similar way, a person who has experienced terroristic abuse and control by a partner or family member may be triggered by encountering a person in authority. A survivor whose abuser made and enforced “rules” in the house may feel anxious or frightened even by the words “shelter rules.”

CAN WE ELIMINATE TRIGGERS?	EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE TRIGGERS
<p>Once we become aware of triggers, we might feel an impulse to “get rid of all the triggers.” Of course, we will avoid violent images or angry tones in our speech, keep video and film with aggressive content out of the common shelter areas, and try to make the environment calm. But there will always be trauma triggers that we cannot anticipate and cannot avoid. Part of trauma-informed work is supporting survivors as they develop the skills to manage trauma responses both in our shelter and elsewhere in the world.</p>	<p>Traumatic triggers come in many forms. A person might be triggered by a particular color of clothing (“<i>My batterer always wore a plaid jacket home from work, and that’s when he would come after me</i>”), by the smell of a certain food (“<i>I was cooking taco meat when my batterer attacked me</i>”), or even the time of year (“<i>When it snows I remember the night I got pushed out into the snow in my nightgown</i>”). Encountering such triggers may cause us to feel uneasy or afraid. Sometimes we know why we are feeling a certain way and other times we aren’t sure why. Recognizing when we are being triggered is an important part of building the skills to manage our trauma responses.</p>

Supporting Emotional Safety: Background Information for the Facilitator, Part 1

PRIVACY, CONTROL, AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

It is important to make sure that the shelter environment, including both the physical characteristics and the interpersonal environment, is welcoming and accessible to survivors who are experiencing trauma responses and/or psychiatric disability. Some ways to make the environment more welcoming and accessible to survivors is by offering privacy and control and by increasing emotional safety.

- **Control:** Many survivors have experienced one or more forms of coercive control by their batterers. By giving survivors control in as many ways as possible (e.g., to decide how they will participate in programming), we are creating environments that are accessible and that counter the experience of being controlled with the experience of being empowered.
- **Privacy:** Having the option of privacy makes many of us feel safe. We may need privacy in order to feel better at times when we are feeling overwhelmed, angry, or upset. Many survivors may have been deprived of privacy as part of the abuse that they experienced, and for many survivors privacy may be important to their well-being during their shelter stay. What are some ways that we can increase privacy options at the shelter?
- **Emotional safety:** Think about the things that we do to make ourselves feel comfortable when we go out of town. We may bring pictures of family members when we attend a conference. We play music that is familiar. We enjoy familiar foods. Some might bring a pillow or a shawl from home. When we do these things for ourselves, we are engaging in self-care and stress management. Survivors of domestic violence come to shelter at a time of extreme stress and are often deprived of many of the things they would normally use to calm and care for themselves. What can we do to increase their emotional safety during this time?

Supporting Emotional Safety: Background Information for the Facilitator, Part 2

SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL SAFETY AND MANAGING TRAUMA RESPONSES

Each survivor has their own pattern of needs to achieve a sense of emotional safety and to manage trauma responses when they do arise. Here are some things that advocates can do to help support survivors to feel emotionally safe and to manage trauma responses...

- Being triggered or having other trauma responses can be disorienting and frightening, especially when we don't know what is happening. By providing clear and sensitive information that explains and normalizes these experiences, we can activate and engage the thinking-based processes that give survivors a greater feeling of safety and control.
- Survivors often develop ways to feel safer and manage their trauma responses, but may not recognize what they are doing. Help each survivor to recognize what she's already doing to feel safe, to value and appreciate her own strengths, and to further develop her skills and strategies.
- This more tailor-made approach to advocacy demands more of the staff members who carry it out. As a group, discuss the impact of this work on staff and how your program can make sure that staff are supported. Take time for self-care.