



What NOT to Say  
to a Survivor:

**UBC** SVPRO



## INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons survivors choose not to disclose and seek support is because they do not feel they will be believed. The language we use in responding to a disclosure can make a significant difference in whether a person chooses to connect with others or seek support.

The good news is that common responses that are problematic, do have alternatives! With those alternatives we create safer, healthier spaces for survivors to share their stories.

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### INSTEAD OF

*Tell me what happened.*

### TRY

*Would you be willing to tell me about what happened? You can share as much or as little as you are comfortable with. I can also connect you to a confidential support service, if you prefer.*

Unless the information of, 'what happened' is absolutely necessary for you to provide assistance or support, the details are not important for you to know. Giving the survivor a choice of how much information provide allows them to feel a sense of control over their story. This is crucial for someone who experienced that control taken away from them during an assault. It can also build rapport by indicating to the survivor that what they want matters.

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### INSTEAD OF

*Did you fight back? Scream? Try to stop them? Try to run?*

### TRY

*There is not a right way to respond to violence. No matter how you responded, what happened is not your fault.*

Rape culture already blames survivors by scrutinizing their actions instead of the action of the perpetrator. We do not want to perpetuate this further. Remember:

- It is NEVER the survivor's fault!
- Freezing is an involuntary survival state a brain may enter into when it senses danger. It is a completely natural response to trauma/violence
- How a survivor reacts in the moment is contingent on many things, including power dynamics, physical safety, sobriety, & past history of mental/emotional/physical harm

## INSTEAD OF

*Were you drunk? Or did you take anything?*

## TRY

*You are not to blame even if you were drinking or using drugs. and you will not get in trouble if you share that you were.*

The only thing that matters about the person's consumption of drugs and/or alcohol is whether or not they were able to consciously consent to sex. Asking about the details of consumption sounds like there is a right or wrong answer and the survivor may be less inclined to share with you if they feel like they will be blamed for their behaviour. There is no amount of drug or alcohol consumption that would make a person 'deserve' to be assaulted. So it doesn't really matter.

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## INSTEAD OF

*What is your relationship to the person who did this? Have you been intimate before?*

## TRY

*Is your home a safe place to go? Are you in danger of this occurring again? If home is not a safe option, do you have somewhere to go that is safe? Otherwise I can help connect you with a Support Specialist to explore options for safe housing*

If they wanted you to know the person's identity, they would tell you. There are lots of good reasons why they may not. Saying or hearing the person's name may be triggering for the survivor, may have larger safety implications, and is not a necessary detail you need in order to believe and support them.

The survivor does not have to share the name(s) or details with anyone. This doesn't mean they don't trust us or want support. Survivors are the experts of their own experiences, including what is safest for them in terms of information sharing.

Whether or not there was a pre-existing relationship or past sexual contact is not relevant to providing support, and asking about this can have the effect of making someone feel they are not being believed, which can make them less likely to share their experience and seek support.

## INSTEAD OF

*What were you wearing?*

## TRY

*Sometimes people find it helpful to document what they looked like and what the other person(s) looked like at the time of the incident, so they can have access to that information later. Would that be helpful for you?*

Asking survivors what they've been wearing is connected with rape culture myths such as that perpetrator's can't control their sex drive when in the presence of someone they believe to be dressed provocatively. It has also been used by authorities to 'test' a survivor if the assault was possible or likely. In reality, there is no correlation between clothing type and rates of sexual violence and it is thus entirely irrelevant.

If a survivor decides at any point that they wish to pursue reporting and investigation with UBC or police, it may be helpful for them to have some details recorded, including about what people looked like at the time of the incident, which could be helpful for finding the person who caused harm as well as any corroborating witnesses.

It is also okay for the survivor to not get into any of these details with any of us.

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## INSTEAD OF

*Have you reported this to police? or You should report this to the police.*

## TRY

*Do you have all the support you need right now? I would like to tell you about some supports and safety resources- would you be okay with that?*

There are many reasons a person may not go to the police. Among other reasons, some of these may include: the survivor's race, gender, or sexual orientation, who the perpetrator is, and previous experiences with law enforcement. The criminal legal system has a history of not being trauma-informed leading to re-traumatization of survivors who come forward hoping for justice. Additionally, the reputation for case contrition and low conviction rates may leave a survivor feeling helpless.

Whether or not a survivor reports their situation to the police is a personal decision that does not require explanation or justification. In order to demonstrate support to survivors, we cannot question their decisions.

Often, experiences like talking with police can be less traumatizing if someone has specialized support accompanying them, which SVPRO can provide. If you don't feel totally comfortable talking with survivors about police, or about reporting options, that's okay. The best thing you can do is connect them with support. Even if you think they "should" report, connecting with support services is associated with increased reporting. Avoid giving your advice in favour of listening to their needs.

## GENERAL TIPS

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### *"You should (x, y, z)"*

Unless the survivor has specifically asked you for your opinion, your only job is to listen and provide support as needed. The survivor is the expert of their own experience, and the only one with the information to make a fully informed decision.

### *Let them tell their story, uninterrupted*

It is really hard to reach out for help. Trauma sometimes makes it difficult to recall details in a linear fashion. Oftentimes our intention is to clarify, but this may come off as if you do not care about what the survivor has to say, or that you don't believe them because you don't think they make any sense. Let them tell their whole story as is natural for them, and follow up with clarifying questions afterward.

### *Centre the feelings of the survivor*

This moment isn't about you. When supporting a survivor, you need to put your own emotions aside to focus on the survivor and what they need. Your feelings are valid, but they can wait.

### *Mirror the language of the survivor*

Refrain from labeling a person's experience. It is not trauma informed to refer to something as "rape" if the survivor isn't already using that language. Let them take the lead, & use the language they are using

### *Only ask questions when an answer is needed to provide support*

Often questions are asked out of curiosity or an attempt to 'understand.' It's not always necessary for us to understand when providing support. The important thing is the survivor does not feel their experience is called into question.