

## Principles Informing Work with an Abused Woman

### 1. Each woman is the expert on her life: respect her choices.

You will see common themes and patterns, but each woman's experience is unique. She has her own journey and the direction she takes must be defined by her. She can make decisions that worry you, like staying with or returning to an abusive partner. You may not agree with everything she says or does, but this is her life.

### 2. Safety is the priority.

A crucial first step in any intervention with women is to think about the likelihood of on-going or escalating harm. Inquests held to examine intimate partner homicides often conclude that the victim suspected her partner or ex-partner had the potential to kill her. Other work suggests that abused woman's sense of risk is distorted by chronic victimization or the socialization of women to be polite and non-assertive or to hope for the best. She may need an outside perspective to understand the gravity of her situation. Or she may recognize the danger and look to you for help.

### 3. Seek to understand each woman, in all her complexity.

Don't assume abuse is the only problem in her life. Her needs may encompass a variety of issues including health concerns, mental health issues, need for legal advice, or housing. Relationship issues may be the least of her worries at this moment. Let her tell you what she needs and be prepared to refer her elsewhere if necessary.

### 4. Be aware of the power imbalance between the helper and the helped.

Advocacy means working with her and on her behalf. To minimize the effects of the power imbalance, acknowledge and be aware of the power differential. Clarify limits of confidentiality, emphasize that your assistance is optional and she can opt out or proceed at her pace.

### 5. Don't give advice: help her identify and assess her choices.

Giving advice is essentially telling her what to do. She may have choices and options of which she is not yet aware. Or she may need help assessing the pros and cons of the available options. Help her have enough information to choose.

### 6. Be aware of messages hidden in well-meaning words.

Having good intentions doesn't guarantee our words and actions are helpful. "Why didn't you leave?" A person using those words intends to say that a woman's situation was intolerable or unacceptable. The woman hears it differently as she processes the messages inferred in that question. She could feel judged: other (normal) people wouldn't put up with that treatment, or you are crazy to love a guy like that. She could feel blamed for being a victim. Well-meaning words can create distance, convey judgment, prevent rapport building and exaggerate the power differential between you.

### 7. Listen more than talk.

As helpers we want to offer insights, solutions or helpful suggestions. So it can be difficult to stay quiet. Use the steps of active listening to ensure accuracy in your suggestions. *Don't forget how cathartic it can be just to talk.*

### 8. Adopt a strength-based approach.

The goal of strength-based interventions is to increase the frequency of healthy and positive behaviours while decreasing the frequency of less desired behaviours and the attitudes driving them.

When working with abused women, less desired behaviours and attitudes could be poor self-image, lack of confidence, or pessimistic view of the future. The essence of the strength-based approach is to find the strengths inherent in the person and build on them.

#### 9. Bring a message of hope and healing.

It is essential to validate and acknowledge the harm done to her. Don't minimize what she has been through. But at the same time, you can instill a message of hope for a better tomorrow. Healing is a journey and speaking with you is a solid step on that path. Woman can blossom and grow once freed from criticism and fear. When appropriate introduce the concept of equality in relationships (see the Equality Wheel) so she knows what to expect from a healthy, equal relationship.

### Active Listening

The best listening is an active rather than a passive process. The goal of *active listening* is for the listener to understand the speaker without judgment, and not necessarily to suggest strategies to solve her problems. Active listening prevents a listener from misinterpreting, missing or dismissing what the speaker wants or has to say. These are the steps:

**Suspend Judgment:** It's difficult to listen if we already believe we understand what she needs, assume we know what she wants, prematurely decide what she will say, or presume we know what is best.

**Focus - be in the minute with her:** Distraction also blocks listening, either from activities happening nearby and by thoughts pulling our attention away. If you can't focus on listening either arrange another time to talk, quickly address the distraction before you begin, or at least name the distraction so she knows what to expect (e.g. "the telephone will ring at 4 pm because my son checks in when he gets home from school.")

**Wait and Watch:** Give her time to explain herself and don't rush her. Watch her body language for clues of distress. Nod and acknowledge you are listening but don't interrupt.

**Restatement/Paraphrase:** In the form of a statement, rather than a question, summarize your understanding, "It sounds like..."

**Reflection:** What she tells you likely has 3 components: facts, her thoughts and her feelings. Repeat the facts as you have heard them and let her correct you if necessary. Make an observation, if appropriate, to underline your appreciation of the importance of her words or what she is thinking or feeling, as in "I hear how upset you are." If appropriate, add your thoughts or observations here, (e.g. "you have every right to be angry").

**Clarification:** At some point before ending the discussion, clarify your understanding of what she wants, needs or expects from you now.

Adapted from *Helping an Abused Woman* by L. Baker & A. Cunningham (2008).  
Further adapted by Liberty Lane Outreach Program  
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