



The Benefits of Active Listening

Research demonstrates that survivors of sexual violence benefit from compassionate and non-judgmental support (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2009). One of the primary ways this is provided to survivors is through the active listening that takes place during in-person advocacy or counseling meetings and on the hotline. Campbell et al. (2009), in a survey of individuals who have experienced sexual assault, found that a few essential components strengthened survivors' perceptions of having a positive experience when seeking support related to their experience of sexual violence.

Each of these components demonstrates an aspect of or approach to active listening. Taking a closer look at these components can help us to understand both why and how active listening is essential to advocacy services.

Advocates know that anyone can experience sexual violence and that survivors may react in a wide variety of ways.

There is no one type of survivor of sexual violence. It affects people of all genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, faiths, body types, age, socioeconomic status, and cultures. There are many factors that influence how a person reacts to sexual violence, such as history of trauma, the type or duration of the assault, and the way others responded to them after the assault or disclosure of the assault. Because each person's experience is different, there is no "right" way to react to the experience of sexual violence.

Application to Active Listening

1. Advocates are warm and welcoming to all survivors who seek services.
2. Advocates do not make assumptions about survivors' experiences.
3. Advocates invite survivors to share their stories and listen without judgment, but do not ask survivors to share things before they are ready.
4. Advocates affirm each survivor's courage and strength and normalize their experience(s).



Advocates can engage with survivors at all stages of healing.

Trauma can create a ripple effect in the lives of survivors. Physical health, sexual relationships, connection with family, and general life functioning can be adversely affected (Campbell et al., 2009). Understanding that complexity of a survivor's response to sexual violence and how it may change over time is essential to supporting survivors at all stages of healing.

Application to Active Listening

1. Advocates are prepared to hear about more than psychological trauma. Sexual violence hurts minds, bodies, and souls and advocates need to be available to witness all forms of hurt that someone has experienced.
2. Advocates do not make assumptions about where a survivor is at in their healing journey.
3. Advocates normalize the multiple effects of sexual violence and invite survivors to share their experiences and needs, if that would be helpful to the survivor.
4. Advocates are equipped with education and training on the impact of sexual violence so as to be well-informed about the possible experiences of survivors.

Advocates use their knowledge about sexual violence and its impact by providing the space for survivors to talk freely about their experience.

It can be challenging to talk about painful and traumatic events with a stranger. Shame, embarrassment, and discomfort are common feelings experienced by survivors. Survivors may need on-going opportunities to build trust and rapport with individuals providing support before feeling comfortable enough to share about their assault or related needs. Not all survivors will want to discuss their experience of sexual violence, and that is ok. It is not necessary to know all of the details to be a good advocate. Knowing that opportunities are available to talk through the experience can be important for survivors at various stages in their healing journeys (Campbell et al., 2009).



Application to Active Listening

1. Advocates show patience by inviting survivors to talk at their own pace and giving them control of what they would like to discuss.
2. Advocates listen. They do not try to fix, give advice, ask prodding questions, evaluate truthfulness, manage what happens next or soothe their own distress (Campbell et al., 2009).
3. Advocates provide undivided attention. They are fully present and provide uninterrupted support.
4. Advocates identify ways to practice self-care when listening to stories of trauma and tune-in to situations in which they feel triggered or in need of more organizational support.

Survivors need opportunities to talk about their experiences and needs over time and in their own words. Advocates can support survivors by showing patience, non-judgment, and respect for the survivor's dignity. Advocates can demonstrate warmth, compassion, care, and non-judgmental support as they help to normalize the experiences of survivors and create time and space for their healing.

Campbell, R., Adams, A. E., Wasco, S. M., Ahrens, C. E., & Sefl, T. (2009). Training interviewers for research on sexual violence : A qualitative study of rape survivors' recommendations for interview practice. *Violence Against Women, 15*, 595-617. doi:10.1177/1077801208331248

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