

Navigating Challenging Conversations with Survivors

TIPSHEET

Created in collaboration with [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)

Working with people in crisis sometimes means facing a variety of challenges in communicating with them. Whether it is because of substance use, mental illness, the impacts of trauma, or other reasons, conversations with trauma survivors can be tricky to navigate. This tipsheet will provide you with information on how to better understand crisis situations, and tools for how to approach and navigate these kinds of challenging conversations.

Wheelhouse Contacts

- On-target
- Victim assistance and compensation issues
- Can navigate the conversation despite challenges

Strategies:

- Remain empathetic and nonjudgmental
- Re-direct when needed
- Provide with resources and/or plan of action

Outside-the-Wheelhouse Contacts

- On-target
- Not related to victim assistance and compensation issues

Strategies:

- Remain empathetic and clarify what their need is
- Refer them to appropriate resources
- Respectfully end the conversation

Challenging Wheelhouse Contacts

- Off-target
- Abusive to staff
- Resistant to support

Strategies

- Re-direct where possible
- Inform them of boundaries re: respecting staff
- Disengagement
- Respectfully disconnect

Understanding Trauma

A traumatic event is any event that is distressful, painful, and disrupts and overwhelms a person's nervous system. Trauma is not the event itself, but [the impact of the event](#) on the nervous system.

When traumatic events happen, the brain's survival systems are triggered. This can disrupt the functions of the brain that govern memory and decision-making. Survivors may experience fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses.

Symptoms of trauma can last for a lifetime and can vary widely from survivor to survivor. Trauma survivors often experience physical, cognitive, and emotional symptoms. Examples include, but are not limited to, pain, hypervigilance, decreased immunity, impaired memory, impulsive behavior, difficulty focusing, anxiety, detachment, shame, and depression.



Vicarious Trauma

[Vicarious trauma](#) is what happens to helpers who support survivors of trauma and take on some of the impact of the trauma the survivor is experiencing. Be aware of the signs of trauma and have a plan for self-care, wellness, and support if you start to notice them in yourself.

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De-escalation

Because of the way that trauma can affect people, some survivors may be in an escalated state when they reach out for help. This can be especially true for situations where the traumatic event is recent.

When attempting to de-escalate a conversation:

- [Stay empathetic and nonjudgmental](#)
- Validate their feelings
- Keep your emotions in check
- Be aware of your approach (ex: tone & pace)
- Lead with what CAN be done
- Don't be afraid to respectfully end conversations
- Take time to decompress

There are different strategies you can offer your contact to support with de-escalation, like guided breathing, grounding exercises, & mindful walking.

Empathy and Validation

It is important to include empathy and validation when supporting trauma survivors. Reaching out to service systems can be re-traumatizing for many survivors, and maintaining empathy and showing validation can be crucial to building and keeping trust and rapport.

- Listen actively
- Be nonjudgmental
- Remember the impacts of trauma
- Time your time
- Take a breath
- Validate their feelings

You can use tools like the [Feelings Wheel](#) to help contacts name and express their feelings.

Disengagement

Disengagement strategies can help you move a conversation forward and wrap it up so that you are able to end the conversation. There are five key strategies you can use in any combination to help you disengage a challenging conversation.

Strategy	Example
1. Summarize key points	"We've talked about our eligibility requirements and some resources that may be able to support you."
2. Acknowledge steps made	"I know it took a lot of effort to go through this process, especially with what you're going through."
3. Encourage a plan of action	"I encourage you to try those resources we talked about and to follow up with us if your situation changes."
4. If they are upset, validate their feelings	"I hear that you're frustrated, and I can understand that you weren't able to get the answer you hoped for."
5. Clearly and directly state you are ending the conversation.	"I am going to wrap up our conversation now/I'll be disconnecting. Goodbye."

Making Referrals

Connecting survivors to resources to help meet their needs can be a helpful way to support them and give them actionable steps to take after your conversation. Learn what resources are in your area, how they can potentially help survivors, and be careful not to make promises about what services the survivor will get. You can [reach out to advocates at The Hotline](#) and your Assistance SAA for more information on what resources are in your area.