“What Do I Say?”
Responding to Student Disclosures from a Trauma-Informed Perspective

Rachel Stewart, Bucknell University
Somer Dice, Bucknell University

Tuesday, March 6, 2018
Marriott Downtown, Salon L
Framing this Session

Numerous studies over the years have shown that faculty & student affairs professionals are not trained to handle disclosures

• The 2015 National Faculty Survey on Student Engagement (FSSE) found that over half of faculty reported receiving “some to no” training on sexual assault

• An EVERFI Pre-Assessment of its faculty and staff training module revealed that only 53% of faculty and staff understood the steps to handle a student disclosure

• In a general study of disclosures, most survivors reported wishing they had received more emotional support, validation, and tangible aid from those they disclosed to
Framework: The 4 R’s

To be trauma-informed, we must:

**Realize** the widespread impact of trauma

**Recognize** the signs and symptoms of trauma in our students

**Resist Re-Traumatization** when working with students

**Respond** by fully integrating this knowledge into practices and procedures
Realities of College-Enrolled Student Sexual Assault

- 80-90% of the time, the perpetrator is someone the victim knows
- 60% of the time, the assault takes place in the victim’s own place of residence, 30% of the time in the residence of a friend
- 72% of sexual assaults of female college students occurred when the victim was too intoxicated to consent
- Up to 30% of survivors of sexual assault develop PTSD
Not Just “A Woman’s Issue”

• The CDC reports that 1.7% of all men experience sexual assaults in their lifetime

• LGBTQ individuals are at an increased risk of sexual violence:
  • 44% of lesbian women
  • 26% of gay men
  • 46% of bisexual women
  • 37% of bisexual men
  • 50% of transgender people
Intrusive memories

Hopelessness
Nightmares, Flashbacks
Startle response
Shame, self-hatred
Panic attacks
Emotional overwhelm
Chronic pain, headaches
Eating disorders
Substance abuse
Self-destructive behaviors

Loss of interest
Irritability
Depression
Dissociation
Hypervigilance
Little or no memories
Impacts

• Following their assault, victim-survivors may face psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, self-harm, or PTSD
• Victim-survivors may also struggle with self-blame, low self-esteem, and guilt
• Victim-survivors may try to self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs
• Experiencing sexual violence prior to or during college is significantly correlated with lowered college GPA
Myth: Some sexual assaults are “worse” than others

• The way a person experiences trauma is a complex mix of the meaning they make of an event, the support they have afterwards, pre-existing psychological factors, and more
• There is no “hierarchy” of sexual violence trauma
• There is no correlation between the amount of physical violence during a sexual assault and the victim-survivor’s negative psychological symptoms
Story Fragmentation

• During trauma, the brain releases a rush of hormones to protect the physical and emotional well-being of the victim
  • The areas of the brain that are responsible for processing & storing memories are highly influenced by hormones

• Often, the strongest memories may sensory or emotional memories— the feeling of fear, smells, sights, etc.
  • Time or sequencing information and details are the least likely to be encoded into memory
Catecholamines

• One hormone with extremely high levels during a sexual assault
  • Can aid in fight or flight response
  • Can cause memories to be extremely fragmented, but still accurate
  • Gets in the way of rational thought during the assault

Thus, during an assault, the hormones released by the victim’s body can make it extremely hard for them to see the “logical” response or the “way out” of the situation
Other Hormones

- **Cortisol**— part of stress response, provides body with energy to combat stress
- **Opiates**— work to dull physical pain
- **Oxytocin**— increase positive emotional feelings/dull emotional pain

All of these hormones affect the function of the amygdala and the hippocampus, areas of the brain working to encode and store memories.
The Effects of Alcohol and Other Drugs on Memory

- Alcohol **depresses** the nervous system; particularly the hippocampus
- High BAC can impair **episodic memory** (blackouts)
- While intoxicated, memory **recall** is also affected
- THC also affects the **hippocampus** and prevents memory **formation**
- Opioids stimulate **dopamine** production, cocaine blocks dopamine receptors, leading to a dopamine “flood

Alcohol and drugs affect hormones → hormones affect memory storage
trauma + substances = high likelihood of fragmented memories
Fight, Flight, or Freeze

• Over 50% of victims report some manner of freezing in response to their assault
  • Dissociation, a feeling of being removed from one’s body, can also occur
  • “Tonic immobility” occurs in at least 50% of cases; a 2017 study found that 70% of survivors experience “significant” tonic immobility and 48% experience “extreme” tonic immobility
Remembering the Assault

• If a victim feels unsafe when they are questioned, they may not be able to use their prefrontal cortex to understand the questions and retrieve certain memories.

• If a victim feels traumatized by questioning, this may trigger the bottom-up retrieval of fragmentary sensations and emotions that are nearly as intense as the assault itself.
Managing Identity

• Embodied Agency

• Trying to manage perceptions of self as a means of control following an assault:
  • Homeostasis—Pretending or acting as if everything is normal
  • Diffraction—changing behavior or appearance to distance self from their attack
Research on Student Disclosures

- Disclosing to others has been linked to improved psychological well-being
- 80% of the time, the first person a student discloses to is a peer (friend or RA)
- In a study of 30 professors who had experienced a student disclosure, 93% received multiple disclosures
  - Of students who initiated a disclosure:
    - 30% came up to a professor after class
    - 20% contacted them via email
    - 16% mentioned being victimized in an assignment
  - 93% of students did not ask for academic flexibility while disclosing
Barriers to Disclosure

• Many victims never officially report that they were sexually assaulted
  • May not be able to identify the incident as sexual assault, relationship violence, or stalking
  • May fear not being believed or being blamed
  • May fear the consequences of their friends or family finding out
  • May not acknowledge what happened to them as rape, sexual assault, or dating violence
  • May be experiencing feelings of guilt or uncertainty
Reporting

• Only about 5% of victim-survivors ever report to law enforcement; of those, only a quarter report within 24 hours

• A study on college campuses found that on average, a victim delayed 11 months before reporting to campus authorities

• The nature of the incident may affect rates of reporting;
  • The greater the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, the less likely they are to report
  • The more a victim blames themselves, the less likely they are to report
  • Factors that increase likelihood of reporting: if force was used, if the perpetrator was a stranger, if weapons were used
But I’m a Responsible Employee!

• There are many ways you can proactively let students know that you are a responsible employee—mentioning during training, a statement in a handbook, etc.

• After a student has disclosed, explain your role and what will happen after you pass the information along to the Title IX Coordinator

• You do not need to interrupt the student as soon as you suspect they are about to disclose—doing so can make them feel like they are being silenced
The ABC’s of Responding

• Acknowledge

• Believe

• Check in
More Considerations

1) Listen to the student without judging or blaming
2) Allow them to dictate the course of the conversation
3) Remind them that it isn’t their fault
4) Mirror the language they use about themselves
5) Focus on giving options, rather than advice
Ways to Be an Ally

• Be mindful of language! There are likely students you interact with who are victim-survivors, even if they haven’t disclosed to you

• If you are having an event or training that discusses sexual violence, consider making sure resources are available

• If you are watching a film or leading a discussion that deals with sexual violence, consider giving students a brief content warning beforehand and allow them to leave the space if they need a break

• Consider attending campus events which support survivors or promote awareness, such as Take Back The Night
Questions?
You notice a student you supervise has been acting somewhat withdrawn and not like themselves. When you privately ask the student if they are okay, they seem slightly distraught, but mostly confused. They explain to you that they, “got into a bad situation” a few weekends ago and that they wish it had never happened.

When you ask them to explain further, they say, “I didn’t really want to hook up with him, but I wanted him to like me. It all happened so fast,“

When you suggest that it might be good for the student to contact an advocate or one of the other campus resources, the student becomes extremely upset. “I didn’t say it was rape!”
Thank you for joining us today!

Please remember to complete your online evaluation following the conference.

See you in Los Angeles in 2019!

ras072@bucknell.edu
sd037@bucknell.edu

#NASPA18
Sources


Further Reading and Viewing

Office for Victims of Crime, *The Neurobiology of Trauma and Sexual Assault*, [https://www.ovcttac.gov/saact/module4.cfm](https://www.ovcttac.gov/saact/module4.cfm)

*The Neurobiology of Sexual Assault*, Dr. Rebecca Campbell, National Institute of Justice. [https://www.nsvrc.org/elearning/20044](https://www.nsvrc.org/elearning/20044)


Faculty Against Rape, How to Respond When A Student Discloses Sexual Assault. [https://www.armstrong.edu/images/uploads/diversity/How_To_Respond_To_Students.pdf](https://www.armstrong.edu/images/uploads/diversity/How_To_Respond_To_Students.pdf)