

# Responding to Child and Youth Disclosures: Ensuring Trauma Informed Responses

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# Our hope –our work

“There is always light if we are only brave enough to see it. If we are only brave enough to be it.”

Amanda Gorman

# Defining Disclosure

Disclosure of child sexual abuse is often defined in general terms as telling, recounting and/or reporting by survivors of the abuse, in formal and/or ways informal (Paine & Hansen, 2002). Formal recipients of disclosures typically include professional service providers, and these can involve professionals (e.g., teachers, doctors, social workers/counsellors, police) who are not child protection workers, but who are mandated to report suspected child abuse to child protection authorities. Disclosures made to informal sources are those made to friends, family, or laypersons; however, these may also lead to formal processes in jurisdictions where mandatory reporting of child abuse policies operate.



# Disclosing trauma, violence & abuse: Background

- Disclosure of abuse can halt the progression of victimization, alleviate stress and symptoms, prevent hyper-vigilance around keeping the secret, create safety and receive
- Disclosure of abuse may lead to negative consequences such as being blamed and/or accused of fabricating allegations, experiencing withdrawal of support and/or increase in victimization and ultimately an exacerbation of symptoms related to the abuse
- Trauma survivors disclose in measured ways – when it is safe to do so and will retreat from disclosing if responses are negative and harmful to their well-being

# Types of disclosures

- Child sexual abuse
  - Sexual violence
  - Dating violence
  - Gender based violence
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- Patterns of disclosure
  - Disclosure pathways complex
  - Process not one event
  - Trauma informed response

# Speaking the Unspeakable

“The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable.”

(Herman, 1992)

# #MeToo Movement: The impact of social media on disclosures

- Social media represents an environmental shift for disclosing sexual violence
- Sexual abuse/assault survivors have found voice through social media after periods of silence and being silenced, turning to posting on-line when people and systems have failed to validate and support them
- Majority of sexual assaults reported to police after #MeToo had taken place in October 2017:
  - **47% on the day of the assault**
  - **26% within the month of the assault then leading up to reporting to police**
  - **After #MeToo, a slight increase in past sexual assaults over a decade old was noted -6% in total over 2016 and 2017 but represents the minority of reporting overall**

*However, the proportion of incidents resulting in charges declined after #MeToo from 36% to 29%*



# I never told until #metoo: Survivor voices

## **Social movements and collective disclosures**

Themes from MeToo Impact study has indicated:

- Social media and popular press is prompting disclosures
- Internal barriers are impacting disclosures of sexual abuse and/or sexual assault disclosures
- Family factors and mixed responses to disclosures are significant
- Mixed response from friends/peers to disclosures is common
- Partners were most supportive
- Responses from professionals are crucial to recovery
- Unaware it was sexual abuse/assault led to delays in disclosure



# What about the children and youth

- Vast majority of studies are on retrospective disclosures of adult data –adults talking about the past
- Disclosing becomes safer as an adult
- Emotionally immature and vulnerable children/youth are in close proximity and/or dependent on the abuser face unsurmountable challenges
- Developmental constraints impact disclosures of abuse –cognitive, language, etc.
- Pathways of disclosure are complex and multi-factorial

# Imposing silence

“In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure no one listens.”

(Herman, 1992)

# Types of disclosure: Established and emerging

- Purposeful
- Accidental
- Behavioural
- Elicited/prompted
- Triggered

(Alaggia, 2004)

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- Incremental
  - Partial/emerging
  - Naïve (not knowing)
  - Reported

(Alaggia, in development)

# The 6 guiding principles of trauma informed practice

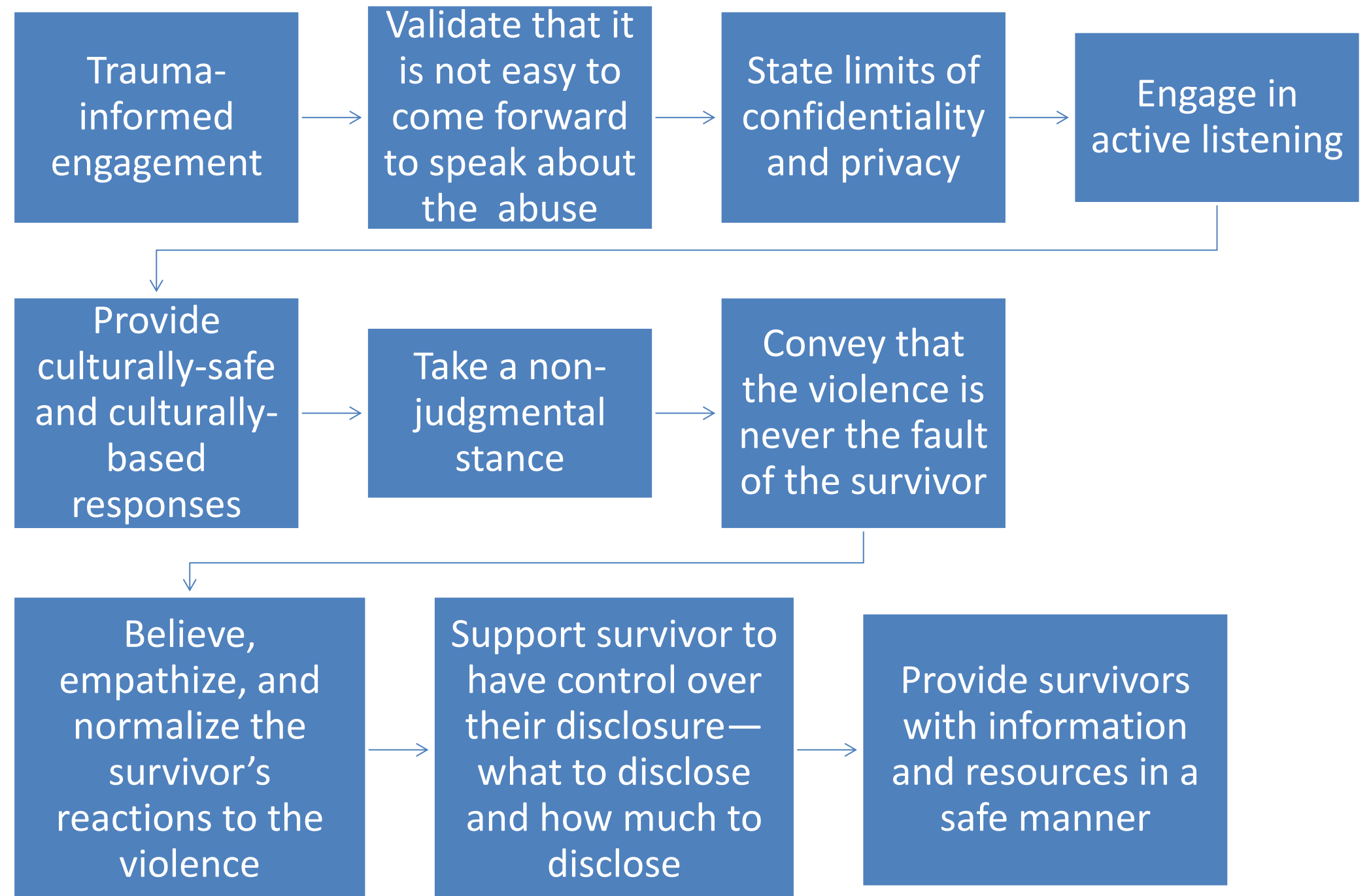
Trauma informed responses prevent further emotional and psychological harm and re-traumatization by:

- ✓ creating **safety**
- ✓ developing **trust**
- ✓ giving **choice** and **control**
- ✓ working **collaboratively**
- ✓ taking a **strengths-based** perspective
- ✓ working towards **empowerment** of survivors

(Harris & Fallot, 2001)



# 10 ways to provide trauma informed responses to disclosures



# Begin with trauma- informed engagement

- ✓ Start where the survivor is at
- ✓ Disclosure is a **process** and not a “one off” statement that occurs in a single session
- ✓ Develop **safety & trust** through **alliance building**
- ✓ **Work collaboratively** by providing **choice and control** for the survivor to speak their truth

# Do's & don'ts

**Validate how hard it is to come forward to tell**

Validation paves the way for a **strengths-based** approach

Facilitates a sense of safety and further supports trust building

**Avoid** asking:

“Why didn’t you come forward sooner?”

“Why didn’t you tell somebody when it happened?”

# Be upfront about limits of confidentiality /privacy

State the conditions under which you might need to break confidentiality as required by policies and laws

Do this early on for alliance building, be upfront and clear

Be transparent in clarifying your professional responsibilities

**Avoid** saying:

“Anything you say will remain confidential and everything will be alright.”

**DO** give specific examples of when you need to breach confidentiality

Invite questions

Offer **choice and control** to decide what to tell and when—without unintended consequences.



# Engage in active listening

Trauma can cause the brain to have difficulty in recalling details of assaults in cohesive, clear ways  
Fragmentation and inconsistencies in memories should be expected as the neuroscience research shows that trauma has profound effects on the brain

These effects include distorted cognitions, memory lapses and loss of details

**Avoid** pointing out discrepancies in survivor's narrative

Steer away from a self-centred focus by expressing your own outrage or opinions

**Do not** insist on the survivor taking action until they come to their conclusion.

Belief, empathic  
and non-  
judgmental  
responses

Increase your self-awareness to respond  
rather than react

Be aware of non-verbal reactions in your  
responses

Be honest in your responses

# Provide culturally-safe and culturally- based responses

- Use an intersectional lens
- Recognize and respect social location and diversity
- Identify structural violence

Probe for cultural beliefs about family roles, relationships, discipline, duty, loyalty, privacy, etc. are important to understand

**Avoid** “prescribing” actions to take

**Avoid** making statements that predict how friends and family will respond

Refer to culturally based services when indicated

Make 'space to  
pace' for survivors  
to have control  
over  
what to disclose  
and how much to  
disclose

Use “**scaffolding**” to prevent flooding of intense feelings or regrets about disclosing too much, too soon through use of specific skills—**summarizing, reflecting, pausing** their narrative.

**Avoid** pressing for a disclosure.

Resist trying to “fill in the blanks.”

Allow for pacing -resist inserting your own words and descriptions

Their narrative will come out over their own time

**DO** introduce some stress reducing exercises such as deep breathing, body scans, and other mindfulness techniques. Seek training on these techniques—even at rudimentary levels



What are you  
already doing that  
is trauma  
informed in  
responding to  
disclosures of child  
and youth trauma

- Describe what principles you are adhering to that are trauma informed
- What positive outcomes have you seen in youth disclosure processes using TI approaches
- Provide a narration of the therapeutic interaction that occurred





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In closing



# Questions

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