SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE: A GUIDE FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

During the course of your time at CSU, you may have a student disclose to you that they are a survivor of sexual assault, relationship violence, or stalking. This situation may be recent, a long time in the past or ongoing. There are many reasons students may disclose to you – they may be asking for emotional support, asking for extra time or consideration in a class or program you run, or wondering where to go for help. However, regardless of the reason, research shows that the response of the person to whom a survivor makes an initial disclosure has a significant impact on their healing process. The most important response that you can have is to BELIEVE the survivor and to provide support and resources.

Key Phrases to Use When Talking about Interpersonal Violence

- Thank you for sharing with me.
- I believe you.
- Whatever you did to survive the situation was the right thing to do.
- Let me know how best I can support you.
- That must have been a very disturbing/scary/confusing/uncomfortable/frightening experience.

Common Reactions Following a Traumatic Event

- Note: These reactions are common for many survivors, but each person’s journey is different. These reactions often impact academics significantly, both in class and in completing assignments.

- Difficulty concentrating or focusing. Sleep and eating disturbance.
- Flashbacks (feeling as if the event is happening again), intrusive memories (can’t stop thinking about the event) and nightmares.
- Withdrawal from people and places in one’s life.
- Trying to go about one’s normal routine as if everything is OK.

About the Advocacy Services Available Through the Office of Women’s Programs and Studies

Advocates are available through the office to provide crisis intervention, emotional support, and information about legal, medical, emotional, academic and campus disciplinary resources to survivors of sexual assault, relationship violence and stalking and their loved ones. Call 970-491-6384 during business hours M-F. In addition, the 24-hour Victim Assistance Team is available to assist survivors of sexual assault and their loved ones. Call 970-491-7111 and ask to speak with an advocate. All information shared with advocates is confidential unless the person is a danger to themselves, someone is in imminent danger or a child currently under 18 has been abused.

How do I refer to an advocate? Try saying...

“I’d really like to call an advocate to work with us here if that’s OK with you. I can stay here with you, but they are a good resource to have.”
Things to consider when students disclose interpersonal violence to you

The student may not want you to solve the problem, or even expect you to know all the answers.
- If the student has experienced interpersonal violence, their power has been taken away. The best thing we can do is to give that power back by sharing resources and then empowering them to make their own choices. This is the empowerment model, which closely matches our philosophy as educators.
- Because it is so hard to believe that interpersonal violence happens, the first thing that most people do is question whether the survivor really experienced something traumatic. One of the most important things we can do is to BELIEVE THEM!

There may be cultural issues that impact the way a student responds to interpersonal violence
- Just as with any other situation, our life experiences make us who we are and affect the way we respond to situations. Religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation all play a significant role in a person’s response to interpersonal violence.

The student may blame themselves for what happened.
- The student may tell you what they did to provoke the incident, such as “because I drank too much…” or “because I made him mad…”
- If the student told someone else, such as a friend, roommate or family member, that person may have blamed them as well.
- We can help by giving them messages that counter this blame – “It wasn’t your fault. No matter what you did, no one deserves for this to happen to them.”

The student may have fear of judgment
- Especially if you have a close relationship with the student, it is likely the student will be fearful of your reaction.
- Talking about their trauma often makes survivors uneasy and heightens their sense of wariness.

The student may be worried that many other people will find out
- Students are often sensitive to others finding out about their trauma. In fact, it is one of the most significant reasons a student leaves school after a situation of interpersonal violence occurs.
- Share with the student that what they tell you will be kept in strict confidence, unless you have a responsibility to report incidents because of a university policy. If that is the case, be up front about that responsibility as well.

The student may minimize the situation
- Many survivors will minimize a situation so as not to draw attention to themselves, or to maintain control.

The student may have concern about what will happen to the assailant
- Because most types of violence happen between people who know each other, it is more likely than not that the survivor cared for the assailant in some way.