SUPPORTING SURVIVORS
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

It is estimated that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience some form of sexual assault in their lifetime - there is a good chance that someone close to you is a survivor. Survivors are often blamed for their own sexual assault, discouraged from speaking out, and are often faced with disbelief or are not taken seriously when they do disclose. These are a few of the reasons why it can be very frightening for survivors to talk about what they have experienced, and makes getting help more difficult.

The following communication strategies can help you be a supportive friend, family member, partner or ally when someone confides in you that they have been sexually assaulted.

ATTENDING
Attending is the ability to pay attention and focus on what the survivor is communicating and feeling. Attending skills include paying attention to the survivor’s face, body posture, and positioning, and knowing how to use your face and body posture to convey that you are listening. Attending also means that you are aware of blocks to communication and how to avoid them.

ACTIVE LISTENING
This skill includes trying to understand the survivor’s ideas, values and feelings by listening to the person and then responding in a way that conveys your understanding. It means listening for cues that indicate the person’s feelings (voice tone, choice of words, speech patterns, sighs), acknowledging the feelings you hear, and verifying what you think you understand (your perceptions).

Active listening also helps you to keep focused on the survivor’s concerns and feelings rather than your own.

*See the Supporting Survivors: Active Listening handout for more details*

PERMISSION GIVING
This involves “allowing” the survivor to express emotions freely. It involves your understanding of the difficulty they may have in expressing emotion. Many people were punished or humiliated as children for crying, being afraid, or expressing anger. Most adults will suppress feelings seen as negative because of such conditioning. It is important to acknowledge this, while at the same time giving the survivor information about the importance of expressing pain so that healing can take place. Let the person know that it is ok to cry and to express any feelings of shame, grief or anger.

EMPOWERING
This involves conveying respect for a survivor’s actions and choices, helping the person feel heard, providing tools that can be used for healing, and facilitating (but not taking over) someone’s own process of staying safe and moving forward. Sometimes this can also involve helping a survivor’s family or friends find positive ways to express their concern and support without overprotecting or projecting their own fears. By empowering survivors you foster the development of a person’s ability to act.
QUESTIONING
This skill enables you to help the survivor explore emotions, needs and decisions. Open-ended questions that can be answered with more than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ encourage survivors to respond in any way they choose. Closed questions restrict a survivor to a limited number of responses. You may need to ask some closed questions in an initial crisis stage, but open ended questions will be useful in long term support and communication with survivors. “How” and “What” questions are usually open-ended and allow a person to express themselves more fully. “Why” questions tend to imply wrongdoing or guilt.

SUMMARIZING
This involves pulling together the feelings and information given to you by the survivor. This enables you to make sure you have understood everything accurately and helps the survivor focus on the important elements of the situation from their own point of view. It also provides a way of moving on from exploration of feelings to problem solving and making required decisions.
