

Sensitive Practices for Practitioners: Lessons from Survivors of Trauma

SAVE the situation

The acronym **SAVE** is a guide for responding effectively and compassionately in a variety of emotionally charged situations.

Stop

Stop what you are doing and focus your full attention to the present situation.

Appreciate

Try to appreciate and understand the person's situation by using the helping skills of empathy and immediacy. Empathy involves imagining other person's experience. Immediacy is verbalizing one's observations and responses in the moment, using present tense language. For example, 'Your fists are clenched and you look angry. What is happening for you?' or 'You seem upset' or 'I doubt there is anything that I can say that will make this easier. Is it okay with you if I sit here with you for a few minutes? If the individual is unable or unwilling to answer, the helping professional can shift the focus to determining possible ways to be helpful (e.g., "How can I help you?")

Validate

Validate the other individual's experience. For example, "Given what you have just told me, it makes sense that you feel angry."

Explore

Explore the next step. For example, "Who can I call to come and stay with you?" or "This has been difficult for both of us. I am not sure where to go from here. Can I call you tomorrow to see how you are doing?"

Components of an effective response to disclosure

After hearing a disclosure of trauma, the helping professional should:

- Accept the information
- Express empathy and caring
- Clarify confidentiality
- Normalize the experience by acknowledging the prevalence of trauma
- Validate the disclosure
- Address time limitations
- Offer reassurance to counter feelings of vulnerability
- Collaborate with the survivor to develop an immediate plan for self-care
- Recognize that action is not always required
- Ask whether it is the first disclosure

At the time of disclosure or soon after:

- Discuss the implications of the trauma history for future care and interactions
- Inquire about social support around trauma issues

Responses to avoid after a disclosure:

- Convey pity (e.g., "Oh, you poor thing").
- Offering simplistic advice (e.g., "Look on the bright side," "Put it behind you," "Get over it," or "Don't dwell on the past.")
- Overstating or dwelling on the negative ("A thing like that can ruin your whole life").
- Smiling (while you may hope your smile conveys compassion, a neutral or concerned expression is more appropriate).
- Touching the person without permission, even if you intend it as a soothing gesture.
- Interrupting (let the individual finish speaking).
- Minimizing or ignoring the individual's experience of trauma, the potential impact of past trauma, or the decision to disclose (e.g., "How bad could it be?" "I know a woman that this happened to and she became an Olympic gold medalist," "Let's just concentrate on your back pain," or "What's that got to do with your sprained ankle?").
- Asking intrusive questions that are not pertinent to care
- Giving the impression that you know everything there is to know on the subject.

If helping professionals think they have inadvertently responded to the disclosure in an inappropriate way, or if the patient's nonverbal feedback suggests a negative reaction to their initial responses, they should immediately clarify the intended message and check with the survivor for further reaction.

Reflect on your last conversation where an individual disclosed experiencing trauma.

1. Identify with a ★ techniques from above that you utilized during the conversation.
2. Plan for your next conversation with an individual and circle techniques that you would like to practice.
3. Use the space below to reflect on your experience practicing the techniques you circled:

