



INFORMATION SHEET

Tips for Professionals Working with Survivors of Sexual Harassment and Assault

Using a trauma-informed approach when working with survivors of sexual harassment and assault can help prevent re-traumatization and promote healing, safety, and trust. Trauma can profoundly affect how individuals think, feel, remember, and interact with systems of support. By understanding trauma and responding with empathy, transparency, and respect for survivor autonomy, professionals can provide more effective, ethical, and survivor-centered care.

Below are six key tips for professionals working with adult survivors of sexual harassment and assault:

1. Educate yourself on trauma and its impact on brain function and behavior

Trauma can affect memory, concentration, emotional regulation, and the ability to recall events in a linear or detailed manner. Survivors may appear withdrawn, confused, emotionally detached, or highly reactive—these are common and normal trauma responses, not indicators of dishonesty or resistance. Ongoing education helps professionals respond with understanding rather than judgment and reduces the risk of causing further harm.

Educate yourself about the impact of trauma on adult sexual assault victims here:

https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/trauma/trauma_eng.pdf

2. Establish a safe and supportive environment

Create physical and emotional spaces that feel predictable, respectful, and non-threatening. This includes ensuring privacy, explaining processes clearly, allowing breaks, and minimizing power imbalances. Be mindful of tone of voice, body language, and questioning styles that may trigger distress. Safety also means respecting boundaries, checking in regularly, and avoiding unnecessary repetition of traumatic details.

3. Build trust through transparency and consistency

Trust develops over time and is strengthened through clear communication and follow-through. Be transparent about your role, the limits of confidentiality, and what survivors can expect from the process. Listen without interruption, validate survivors' experiences, and avoid making promises you cannot keep. Consistency and reliability help survivors feel believed and respected.

4. Conduct sensitive and trauma-informed interviews (where applicable)

When interviews are required, use open-ended, non-leading questions and allow survivors to share at their own pace. Avoid "why" questions and asking for unnecessary details. Do not expect your client's memories to follow a direct chronological timeline. Understand that delayed or fragmented disclosure is common and does not undermine your client's credibility.

5. Center survivor choice, autonomy, and social context

Empower survivors by offering meaningful choices and respecting their right to make decisions about their care, including the right to decline services or referrals. Recognize that sexual harassment and assault occur within broader social and systemic contexts, including gender inequality, racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression. Practice cultural humility and remain aware of how these factors may shape a survivor's experience, access to services, and willingness to disclose.

6. Encourage holistic, collaborative, and ethical care

Survivors may benefit from a range of supports, including medical care, counseling, legal advocacy, cultural or community supports, and practical assistance. With the survivor's informed consent, collaborate with other professionals to provide coordinated, survivor-centered care that aligns with their priorities. Professionals should also be attentive to their own well-being, seek supervision when needed, and recognize the impact of vicarious trauma to ensure sustainable and ethical practice.

Trauma-informed practice is not about perfection, but about responsiveness, respect, and continual learning. Small, thoughtful actions by professionals can significantly influence a survivor's sense of safety, dignity, and empowerment.

