

Know and Tell Why

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Because transgender people and SOFFAs (Significant Others, Friends, Family, and Allies) are routinely asked inappropriate questions (at best) and often treated offensively or violently (at worst), they are often on guard when approaching a service provider. Providers and professionals working with transgender survivors and SOFFAs can substantially reduce their fears and improve service delivery by practicing the simple technique of “know and tell why.”

Know why

Professionals (and laypeople alike) frequently ask insensitive, ineffective, and unnecessary questions out of habit, curiosity, or ignorance. For example, a common routine intake question for many services is, “Are you married?” Although most people can and do answer either “yes” or “no” to this question, their answer might be meaningless, depending on what the asker was actually trying to find out. This is especially true now that some same-sex marriages are legal in some places and contexts, and not recognized in other places and contexts. Under the “know and tell why” doctrine, a service provider would need to know why their agency asks the question – what are you trying to find out? A health care provider asking this question might actually want to know whether someone is available to drive a patient home and provide care after outpatient surgery, which is unrelated to the legal status of their relationship. On the other hand, a benefits counselor may need to know the federal marriage status of the couple sitting before her to help determine who is eligible for what services. By contrast, a server at a restaurant has no professional reason to inquire about marriage status at all (unless a free piece of cake is offered on anniversary dates!).

Asking yourself, “Why do I/we want this information?” is critical for two reasons. First, it ensures that you are not asking inappropriate questions. If you find yourself wanting to know a transgender survivor’s genital status, for instance, asking yourself how you intend to use the answer may be revelatory. You may have a false believe that you should know the answer, have a right to know the answer, or that you simply want to know. If you can’t be more specific about why you need to know, your relationship with your transgender client will be better if you don’t ask the question at all.

Since so many forms and interview processes ask about marriage, the following are some of the potentially more effective questions a provider could ask.

WHAT WE OFTEN ASK:

Are you married?

WHAT WE MAY ACTUALLY WANT TO KNOW:

Is there someone you want us to notify in an emergency?

Do you have a caregiver?

Do you live alone?

If you were hospitalized, might anyone challenge your partner's right to visit you?

For income eligibility purposes, do we count your partner's income?

Are your legal affairs (Durable Power of Attorney, will, etc.) in order?

Who provides your emotional support?

If you were widowed, would you be eligible for survivor's benefits?

Are you sexually active?

How many people live in your home?

What pronoun should I use to refer to your partner?

On the other hand, you may think you need to know the answer because the client will be sharing sex-segregated facilities where the client might be "outed" as transgender if they 1) hadn't had surgeries to alter the look of their primary and/or secondary sex characteristics; and 2) someone else saw their unclothed body. In this case, an appropriate question might be, "This service won't be able to guarantee you body privacy. Would you like to talk about the possible implications for you?"

Tell why

The second reason it is critical for you to know how you will use information is so that you can tell your client why you are asking a specific question. In the example above, we not only asked a softer, less invasive question (which also has the advantage of soliciting problems — and solutions! — you may not have thought of), but the wording of the question also told the client why you needed to know the information. The practice of telling a client why you need sensitive information prior to asking it is extremely helpful in many situations. Many Americans, for example, view their income as an intensely personal and private piece of information, yet many agencies routinely ask about income. Telling a client why you need the information — "Our services are available on a sliding-scale fee basis; if you would like to disclose your income, I can tell you how much of a discount we can offer you" — lets them decide whether they are getting a fair return in exchange for information they may rather keep private. Another example would be, "Policy requires me to ask certain questions of every client privately," when briefly separating a transgender survivor from their companion to screen the survivor to ensure the accompanying person is not their abuser. Noting that this is a policy that applies to every client will serve to reassure the survivor and their support person that they have not been deprived of their "protection" so that the provider can act unethically or ask inappropriate questions. By telling a transgender client why you are asking a question, you reassure them that you have not singled them out (as they may have experienced with other providers) to ask questions purely out of curiosity or to find a reason to deny them services. Telling why is a simple style that promotes trust.

HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS CAN INCREASE ALL PATIENT/SURVIVORS' SENSE OF COMFORT, AS WELL AS SAFETY AND CONTROL (WHICH WERE TAKEN FROM THEM BY THE VICTIMIZATION), BY:

Reminding the survivor they have a right to say no to any portion of an exam, test or procedure;

Stating why a specific exam, test or procedure is recommended;

Explaining what is involved in each component of an exam, test, or procedure;

Asking for the survivor's overt permission or consent prior to every portion of an exam or procedure; and

Inquiring about and accommodating preferences about the presence of advocates or companions.

An added bonus to this know-and-tell-why practice is that it gives (all) survivors a better sense of control over what is happening to them and conveys a healing sense that you respect them and their choices.

Physical Exams

A special mention must be made about physical examinations of transgender crime survivors. While some medical providers, such as sexual assault nurse examiners, are well-practiced in informing clients and overtly asking for their consent before proceeding (or not, depending on the survivor's answer) with any medical procedures, not all medical providers have been trained to do so. Yet explaining what will happen and giving the survivor the right to refuse is critical both for transgender people (survivors or not) and assault survivors (transgender or not). Although this method may seem less time-effective and may not fit well within often-brief office visits, this informed consent-based process will ultimately increase the survivor's compliance with testing and treatment and result in better overall patient care (and comfort). In order to accommodate these specific needs and have successful outcomes, it may be appropriate to schedule longer appointment times for these survivors.