

Creating Safety: Preventing Bias in Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Programs

INTRODUCTION

Many domestic violence and/or sexual assault programs worry about integrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) survivors into their program, fearing that other survivors may make biased remarks. Certainly preventing and addressing anti-LGBT remarks is important, but FORGE believes domestic violence/sexual assault programs can and should aim higher. In this paper we will discuss why we think traditional methods of addressing bias are unwise and why we have focused on how agencies can create environments that are free of biased statements and actions directed at anyone. We believe such agencies actively support the health and well-being of everyone by promoting inclusion and respect for all clients and by teaching badly-needed skills of embracing diversity and difference. We'll explore how some people describe such environments, because they are not the norm in the U.S.! The bulk of the paper will focus on eight categories of action agencies can take to help build healthy, diverse, and respectful environments.



The issue of addressing people's biases against others is an old one. Indeed, it is one that Americans have faced over and over again as we have sought to put into practice our founding beliefs: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are

endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

IT'S NOT JUST AN LGBT ISSUE

Although prejudice against LGBT people is widespread, this is not an LGBT-specific issue. People divide themselves into an endless array of categories and hold prejudices, stereotypes, and assumptions about: people of other genders; people of other races; people from other countries; people from different classes; people with very different educational levels, and on and on and on and on.

We recommend that you strive to build an environment that is not just safe for LGBT people, but for *all* people. Indeed, we believe that when an agency strives to create an environment in which *everyone* feels safe and respected and where people do not feel they have to leave behind or hide pieces of themselves in order to be accepted, it is helping fulfill its mission of promoting healthy individuals, families, and communities.

THE PROBLEMS WITH COMMON APPROACHES

Common approaches to addressing bias set up procedures in which those who have been subjected to negative remarks or actions must report the problem to staff, who are empowered to impose a range of sanctions on the perpetrator that may include discharging them from the program. Such procedures reinforce the social paradigm that in every situation there is a hierarchy, and that people higher on the hierarchy legitimately have the power to judge others and force them to do things they may not want to do. If this sounds suspiciously like “power and control,” it should! As domestic violence and sexual assault service providers, are these really the values we want to be living by?

Other no-bias policies emphasize social hierarchies by using language like “marginalized,” “oppressive,” and “privileged.” Here, too, although the intention is to acknowledge and respect people’s lived experiences, the implication is that not all survivors are equal: some inherently have less power than others. Although this may feel like the truth to many survivors, such program-reinforced divisions make it hard to create group cohesion and a sense of “we’re all in this together.”

Safety is the basic goal of every domestic violence/sexual violence program: survivors must feel safe in our programs. Obviously, that means they need to not be subjected to racism, homophobia, religious bigotry, or other forms of disrespect and abuse. Unfortunately, this is an incredibly tall order. Not only is the U.S. population as a whole highly prone to biased and stereotyped feelings about “others,” but domestic violence and sexual assault survivors are arguably less equipped to cope with these biases than are some other people. Not only may survivors be experiencing strong trauma consequences from their most recent abuse, but we now know that many of them have also experienced abuse in childhood that prevented them from learning needed social and emotional regulation skills.¹ Yet despite these deficits and the often heightened emotional states many recent domestic violence and sexual assault survivors are in, we often serve them in environments such as shared housing and support groups in which they are forced to interact with strangers who may be very different from the communities they are accustomed to.

Given how widespread stereotyping and bias are in our culture, given that trauma survivors may be less equipped to handle bias and conflict than others, given that we do not want to reinforce power-over-others hierarchies, and given that few, if any, of us have been taught

skills for addressing biases and embracing diversity, should we just give up hope about making our programs bias free?

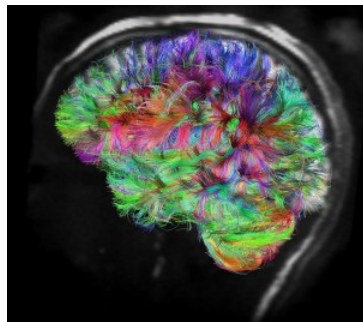
No.

Far from it.

Domestic violence and sexual assault programs can instead embrace the challenge wholeheartedly and become the laboratories in which we collectively work to learn new ways of being with each other. Who better to take on this challenge than the survivors and advocates who know so intimately how much pain and damage is caused by *not* knowing peaceful ways of being with each other?

It's the healthy thing to do

More and more evidence is accumulating that taking a holistic and proactive approach to creating environments that are respectful and inclusive for everyone is directly related to health. To take but one example, one set of emerging data focuses on just how widespread bullying is among elders and how physically and mentally harmful such bullying is. Common estimates are that 10-20% of people who live in senior facilities or regularly visit senior centers experience bullying there.



We've learned that contrary to what we once believed, adult brains can continue to grow and make new connections. Helping adults learn new skills in relating to others can therefore promote their own cognitive health as well as healthy interpersonal relationships.

More and more research is also showing that having supportive human relationships improves not just our mental health, but also our physical health! Likewise, negative interactions and existing in high-bias environments *hurt* human health and longevity. So working to create and maintain an environment in which adults interact with each other in ways that are respectful and inclusive means promoting good health.

Healthy human interactions = better health

THE GOAL: RESPECTED AND WHOLE

There needs to be a commitment from the very top to create an environment in which everyone is respected and feels secure enough to bring in all parts of themselves. That means the commitment has to be *everywhere, everyday*. *EVERY* person must be respected, from the administrator or executive director to the line staff to the kitchen and cleaning staff. That doesn't mean you have to throw out hierarchies and chains of command, it just means that you have to respect and support the individuality of each person. Staff treatment has to model the way you want clients to treat each other. One of the phrases we will be using to describe such an environment is one in which everyone feels "respected and whole."

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DEFINITIONS OF ENVIRONMENTS

There are many descriptions of the kind of environment we're aiming for. The following are just some of the definitions used in a book on how good diversity and inclusion practices benefit workplaces:

"...creating, fostering, and sustaining practices and conditions that encourage and allow each of us to be fully ourselves – with our differences from and similarities to those around us..."

"a situation...in which...[everyone feels] fully present, engaged, and included."

"...when individuals' simultaneous needs for belonging and uniqueness can both be satisfied..."

“...degree to which individuals feel safe, trusted, accepted, respected, supported, valued, fulfilled, engaged, and authentic..., both as individuals and as members of particular identity groups.”

“...social acceptance, which enables a person to be with and among others with a sense of comfort and entitlement, or in short, a sense that she belongs and that she has a rightful place in the world.”

And the last definition we’ll leave you with is this one:

“true inclusion can be declared only when no one can say, ‘What about me?’”

NO MAGIC WAND

Unfortunately there is no magic wand for creating the kind of environment we’re talking about. Instead, there need to be a *lot* of things in place to create and sustain such an environment. We’re going to talk about eight categories of actions that you can take. Any combination will set you on the right road and can be built upon as you and the people you serve move along.

POLICIES

Policies are institutions’ formal guidance documents.

In the area of policies, here are some of the things you can do:

- Develop and distribute a comprehensive non-discrimination policy, which addresses what should NOT be done.
- Develop, distribute, and post a vision statement (this addresses what SHOULD be done, and might be based on some of the definitions we just gave).
- Create a statement to be signed by each employee pledging that they will strive at all times to uphold the agency’s vision.
- Create a statement to be signed by each new client explaining their rights and responsibilities.

A sample client rights and responsibilities statement might read:

“I understand that this agency serves all types of people and strives to create an environment in which all people feel safe, respected, and included. I understand and agree that staff and/or other clients may respectfully address any statements I make or

actions I take that may be perceived by others as biased, bullying, or a stereotype about a group of people. If I feel someone else makes a biased, bullying, or stereotyped statement or action against me, I understand that I am encouraged to seek staff assistance to address the problem so that I can again feel completely safe, respected, and included here.”

PROCEDURES

Procedures are the operational processes required to implement institutional policies.

Some of the procedures you can implement include:

- Develop a section in the employee manual and/or new employee training that addresses the agency’s “Respected and Whole” commitment.
- In performance reviews, always assess how well the employee is upholding the agency’s vision and make suggestions for continuous improvement.
- Incorporate into client admission/orientation forms and discussions information on the agency’s “Respected and Whole” commitment.

TRAIN AND EMPOWER

Once policies and procedures are in place, a critical step is ensuring that both staff and clients have the skills and knowledge they need to follow them. Training and empowerment are critical and need to be ongoing. Efforts can include:

- Model good behavior whenever possible in staff meetings, staff/client interactions, groups, and informal gatherings.
- Have staff do role plays in trainings and staff meetings to help them practice skills and receive feedback on ways to effectively counter biased remarks or bullying.
- Use case studies and/or videos that illustrate respectful interactions.
- Offer to individually coach or supervise both staff members and clients if and when they have an interaction they wish had gone better. It is important to help them figure out and practice a different approach that they think might lead to a better outcome; this practice and your encouragement and faith in their abilities and the process will help them try again next time.

- Introduce and occasionally reinforce some tools people can use when something happens that makes them uncomfortable, but for which they may not want to stop everything. “Ouch!” lets the speaker know they’ve said something that upset someone, and gives them the opportunity to re-state and/or apologize or explain. If the speaker doesn’t want to address the “ouch!,” others should check-in with the objector to find out if they want to pursue the issue further, or if, having labeled what happened as not ok with them, they are willing to let the group move on.
- “Don’t Yuk My Yum” was coined by an LGBT youth group in Milwaukee to remind people that just because someone likes something, it doesn’t mean everyone has to. This phrase can be used with lightness and humor to subtly remind people to respect each other’s beliefs and preferences.
- “Different Strokes for Different Folks” is a similar phrase that can be said light-heartedly to help make space for differences.

LINK TO EXISTING VALUES

Research on helping “mainstream” audiences hear from and accept “minority” viewpoints shows that framing the message with common values that many Americans believe in can help people with biases consider other viewpoints. These values include:

- The belief that everyone is created equal, enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence that opened this paper.
- The adage that people should walk a mile in another person’s shoes before judging them.
- The belief that families should support each other. In an anti-violence context in which many people have lost loved ones, it may be possible to begin helping clients think of each other as “family” who need to support each other. If and where this is possible, reminding people of the family’s traditional (and ideal!) role of supporting each other may help people move out of us/them oppositional stances.

When you are trying to get someone to understand a new idea or viewpoint, it is nearly always a good idea to make analogies between the new concept and what they already know from experience. Because the U.S. has such a deep immigration experience, it may be helpful to get adults talking about the experiences they or their ancestors had in trying to blend into U.S. society and/or in dealing with stereotypes about them. These stories can then be connected to more current-day struggles of various minority groups to be understood and accepted into the mainstream.

CUEING

This paper has used various “cues” to help reinforce the concepts we are trying to convey, such as a photograph of a line of immigrants at Ellis Island and an image of people of various races holding hands. Such cues or visual reminders of important values can be very inexpensive ways of helping remind people of the organization’s commitment to having people feel “respected and whole.” Some possibilities include:

- Attractively frame and hang the agency’s “respected and whole” vision statement.
- Post pictures of iconic symbols and role models like the Statue of Liberty, Abraham Lincoln, and Gandhi.
- Download, blow up, and post motivational phrases and quotes such as the one below. It’s easy to find these by choosing terms you are interested in promoting and then using a web browser that lets you search for “images.”

Cueing doesn’t have to always be subtle. Consider posting “100 Ways to Praise Someone” or



“Random Acts of Kindness” suggestions or other ideas you can download from the internet. You can also have clients generate a list of ways they can help create welcoming and respectful environments, and have those attractively written or printed up and posted where all can see. It is especially important to write up and post any ground rules that are supposed to govern discussions or meetings. Cues are most effective when they are new, so try to change your environmental cues frequently to keep them fresh.

WORKING OUT THE KINKS

One of the most important parts of creating an environment where people feel respected, whole, and included is having a way to address comments and actions that have the opposite effect. The trick to this is to not make the bully or bigot feel disrespected or excluded in the process. It is critical that we model respect and inclusion even – or maybe most often! – when someone is being hurtful, intentionally or not. At the same time, it is critical for everyone else’s sense of safety that they know that hurtful behavior will not go unchallenged.



One way to get out of the conundrum that is caused by wanting to “confront” “perpetrators” or “offenders” and “hold them accountable,” is to create a task that everyone is expected to work on. Thus, agencies can make it an ongoing, explicit goal for staff and clients to always keep learning together HOW to create environments in which everyone is respected and whole. After all, the truth is that most of us aren’t very good at this, so let’s make it our job to figure out how to do things better!

When the learning process is the goal, those who say or do something offensive or questionable become a very useful part of the process:

“You know, Jane, I want to thank you for bringing that up! This gives us an opportunity to do some more work on our goal of learning how to make environments where people

feel ‘respected and whole.’”

The leader or staff person or empowered participant can then continue to lead the discussion:

“Let’s take a moment to work with what Jane has put on the table for us: do statements or actions like [re-state what was done without specifically naming Jane again] help or hurt our goal of having a ‘respected and whole’ environment?”

More specific follow-up questions can include:

- What kinds of feelings come up when this kind of thing happens?
- Does something like this affect people who are just witnesses and bystanders? How?
- How do people who experience this type of thing typically react to the person who (said or did) something like this?
- What other approaches might have had a different effect more in line with our group values?

Directing the conversation away from Jane’s action and toward a more global question gives Jane the opportunity to hear how others react to her and how they might treat her as a result of her behavior without making HER the problem or focus of the conversation.

It also gives the targeted person(s) the opportunity to express how the statement or action affected them, OR to stay silent and listen to others articulate what it feels like to be targeted.

This choice – do I speak up or let others speak for me? – is very affirming and empowering for victims. If other people articulate their own feelings about what happened, the target or targets may feel affirmed: “Good! I’m not crazy for feeling that way!” They are also more likely to feel that they are not alone: others have experienced similar hurt and can empathize. This is a direct salve to the wound caused by the feelings of being singled out and excluded that come from being bullied or hearing someone express bias against you.

If the conversation moves back into naming or focusing on the target(s) and/or initiator, anyone can redirect it by saying something like:

“Let’s remember we aren’t talking about just one incident; this is about what happens in general when there is a statement or action like [restate what was done without attributing it to anyone]. What kinds of behavior might better help us meet our goal of having a place where everyone feels respected and can safely bring their whole selves?”

Both Jane and her target or targets should receive individual attention soon after the gathering breaks up. These individual conversations should be focused on empathetic listening to the feelings the incident brought up for Jane and her target(s). Additional problem-solving, counseling, or support can be offered in these private settings. Again, the goal is not to “hold Jane accountable” or “correct” her, but to gently convey to her the feedback that what she said or did is not in line with the group’s values, and help her choose behavior that is both in line with the group’s values and that may help *her* feel better respected and included (since bullies are frequently avoided and isolated, it may be very helpful for Jane to realize that changing her behavior may help change how people treat *her*). The intended target(s) need to have a chance to be heard, if they were not already. If they do not feel satisfied by the group’s discussion, they may also need help thinking about the next steps they or the agency need to take to help restore to them a sense of being welcome, respected, included and whole.

AMPING UP THE CULTURE

It is one thing to try to keep an environment free of biased remarks and bullying, and quite something else to create an environment where everyone feels included, accepted, respected, and able to bring all parts of themselves to the table.

There are literally hundreds of ways to promote respect for diversity and inclusion and acknowledgement for all. We will discuss several.

One of the most important ways of building a “respected and whole” environment is to make sure that everyone feels like they have an important role to play within the group. This is especially true of people who are prone to bullying.

- Research on adult bullies shows that they often act in inappropriate ways out of feelings of loss (which are, we know, frequent experiences for many adults) and disconnection. It can be very helpful to give them leadership roles that put them in positive contact with others and increase their self-esteem. Obviously, these roles must be carefully designed so as to promote positive interactions and minimize the opportunity for bullying!
- Another very important tactic is to make concentrated and ongoing efforts to notice and acknowledge as many positive actions as possible. Both staff and clients should receive an actual or symbolic “pat on the back” whenever they do something kind, respectful, or inclusive.

While informal, ad hoc acknowledgements are great, agencies can also institutionalize reinforcing good behavior through such means as:

- Designating a “Caring Squad” whose job is to notice acts of kindness and reward them. This can be a particularly good task to give clients who tend to observe others more than interact with them. It is also a particularly good job for clients who tend to be cynical, complaining, or bullying; if they are able to get into the job and are well-acknowledged for THEIR efforts, it may help them shift their overall attitudes. The “acknowledgement” can be a verbal “nice job”, a sticker or other positive symbol of recognition, or points that can be redeemed for some sort of prizes or benefits.
- Agencies can also institute monthly acknowledgements of one or two people who have been particularly helpful in creating the kind of environment everyone is striving for. Choosing a name for this acknowledgement and selection criteria is a good task to give a client work group to promote buy-in and help them continue thinking about what makes for a positive environment.

Agencies can also create events that promote inclusion and appreciation of every client.



Among the possibilities are:

- A “Thank Others” day in which everyone is encouraged to thank as many people as they possibly can for specific qualities they have or actions they have taken.
- A “Random-Acts-of-Kindness” week can encourage people to be creative in noticing and affirming each other.

There are various types of appreciation rituals agencies can implement.

- In one, people sit in a circle, and each in turn says something they appreciate about the person on their right. FORGE nearly always ends its support group meetings by asking each participant in turn, “What did you appreciate about today’s meeting?” (which can reference what someone said or did, or focus on a larger concept or personal insight).
- A fun exercise can be for everyone to create and decorate their own “page” that is then circulated for others to write appreciations on. If people are generous in their praise and one or more people work to make sure there are plenty of comments on everyone’s page, this exercise can be extremely affirming.
- Another activity can be setting up a “secret pals” program in which cards, notes, and inexpensive gifts are sent by one client to another, who only learns who their “secret pal” was when the program reaches a specified date or event.

Some of the ways an agency can help clients share parts of themselves that are often not seen or are “left behind” in order to fit in include the following:

- Plan a day in which people sign up to give demonstrations about and/or teach “how-to’s” about parts of their cultural background.
- Create a “sharing wall” on which people can post photographs, writings, etc. about important aspects of their culture(s).
- Hold a “Take a Bite of Culture” event in which people are encouraged to make and share types of food that have been passed down their cultural lineage.

Another strategy is to continually upgrade staff and clients’ “people” skills through skill- and self- development workshops. These could be on a wide variety of topics, including:

- Assertiveness training (to help people distinguish it from aggressiveness or passivity)
- Conflict resolution
- Meeting and keeping new friends
- Listening and communication skills
- Anger management
- Emotional intelligence and/or emotion management
- The relationship between human interactions and health

Finally, we are going to end with a reminder for those of you who may be thinking, “how can I do any of this; my staff is already complaining about overwork!”

The answer is the survivors you work with.

One of the most potent ways of making someone feel included and valuable is to give them a job that will end up making a positive impact on others.

Another fact that you can use is the finding that one of the best ways to reduce prejudice and stereotyping is by getting diverse people to work together on a common goal. Create as many common goals as you can, and as many diverse work groups as you can. Ask your clients to create caring squads, research images and tips on the internet, teach interpersonal skills workshops, and generally take charge of creating the kind of environment they love being in. Their results may surprise you!

ⁱ Nakazawa, D. J. (2015). *Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal*. Atria Books, New York.