When you can’t find the words...

Training: sexual misconduct supporting skills

It can be very difficult to know what to say when someone shares that they have been affected by sexual harassment or assault, or sexual behavior that made them uncomfortable. Here are some phrases you might use. (with some help from Macalester College’s “Concerned Persons Sexual Assault Response Guide”)

Remember that survivors are not the only people affected by sexual harassment, assault, or inappropriate behavior. You may find yourself supporting a potential respondent or friends of either party. ALL of these people may be experiencing pain, fear, guilt, and uncertainty. They deserve and will benefit from your genuine care, validation, and listening.

Physical Space

- safe space—this is likely a private location, but some may prefer semi-private
- quiet, tissues, comfortable space
- clear exit path
- open your posture
- follow cues for physical (be very cautious about touch)

Affirm and Validate

- “Thank you for coming to me.”
- “This isn’t easy to talk about. Thank you for trusting me.”
- “It’s very courageous for you to be willing to share this with me. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to talk with someone about it.”
- “You have a right to all of your feelings.”
- “That’s definitely an understandable way to feel.”
- “There is no ‘right’ way to respond to this.”

Explain Required Reporting (for RAs, SWAs, IPLs, and GSCAs)

- “I am so glad that you are sharing this with me, and I sense that want to talk more...but before you go on, I want to make sure that you know that because I am your (RA, SWA, IPL, GSCA) I am required to fill out a form for the dean of students when I learn about sexual assault or harassment. It’s not a big deal—I don’t have to include any names, just basic information—and I can fill it out with you if you want, but I just wanted you to know right away so you can be in control of your information and decide what you want to share.”
- “It’s ok to laugh about the awkwardness of a caveat like this...but if you’re genuine in how you say it, they will appreciate your honesty and your care for their privacy. It also demonstrates that you are prepared for these sorts of conversations.

Establish Needs and Wants

- “Do you want to talk about it?”
- “Do you feel safe now?”
- “Do you have an immediate concern?”
- “Is there something you want me to do right away, or would you like to sit down and talk?”
- “I have 30 minutes until I need to leave, but if you want to talk until then, I’m happy to.”
- “I’m happy to just listen, or I can answer questions, or I can help you talk through things. It’s up to you.”

Encourage and Comfort
“Take your time, I’m not in a hurry.”
“When something painful happens, it often helps if you don’t try to carry it alone.”
“Tell me about it…”
“What else would you like me to know?”
“I see...uh huh....yeah...”
Silence.
“Let me see if I understand correctly...(paraphrase what they have told you)”
“Let me tell you what I think I’ve heard from you and you can tell me if I’ve got it right.”
“I imagine that was really hard.”
“This wasn’t your fault.” “You are not to blame.”
“You’re not alone.”
“That’s a perfectly normal and reasonable way to feel/thing to want.”

Empower/ Connect with Resources and Support

“You have a lot of options—and you can use all of them or you can use none of them.”
“I can’t define your experience for you. It’s up to you to decide what you want to call it.” “You get to choose the words you’re comfortable using right now.”
“I’m not going to tell you what to do, but I’d love to help you talk through what you want to do.”
“It’s up to you.”
“Would you like to look at the website with me to see what some possibilities are?”
“I wish I could do more, but there are people at Carleton who are a lot more prepared to help you with this.”
“Have you ever thought about talking with (the Wellness Center, Chaplain, CAASHA, etc.)?”
“It seems like it’s really been helpful to talk about this. Would you like to find someone to talk with on a regular basis?”
“What do you feel like you need now?”
“Have you talked with anyone else about this?”
“If you would like, I can go with you to the Wellness Center (etc.)”
“What have you tried/thought of so far?”
“It sounds like you’re having trouble deciding whether you want to report this. What are your thoughts?”
“It seems like you have some ideas about what you want.”

Conclude and Plan

“Thank you again for talking with me.”
“Is it ok if I check in with you next week?” “email or in person?”
“I’m going to fill out this reporting form, do you want to know what I write in it?”
“So, it sounds like you’re going to do _____. Do you need anything else from me?”
“Whenever my door is open, you are welcome to come talk.”
“I’m going to talk with _____. Do you want me to use your name or keep it private?”
“I want you to know that I’m not going to share this information with other students.”
“I won’t tell anyone except my supervisor and a confidential resource.”