

# Youth Bystander Intervention

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EMPACT-SPC Trauma Healing Services (THS) provides the Sexual Violence Youth Bystander Intervention program to youth and youth serving professionals in the community. Our program focuses on giving youth and youth-serving adults the knowledge, empathy and skills to intervene in situations they witness that can potentially lead to sexual violence, including those where people are demonstrating disrespect for gender, sexual orientation, gender identity expression, or personal or sexual boundaries. The curriculum incorporates the 9 primary principles of prevention and is about 6 hours in length. The curriculum is delivered in a multi-session format ensuring there is sufficient dosage to the participants. The program strives to foster good relationships with youth and youth serving professionals by targeting both populations for our workshops. This gives the professionals skills to utilize to be an active bystander in their professional role, as well as role model bystander intervention to the youth. Various teaching methods are applied to engage participants, including interactive teaching, experiential exercises and interpretive-focused processing with the discussion method. The Discussion Method was developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (1996) and utilizes four different types of questioning (objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional) in eliciting discussion among group members.<sup>1</sup> The method challenges participants to share their observations, explore feelings, identify belief systems, and identify areas in which participants can make behavior changes in their life to prevent sexual violence from initially occurring. This method helps to build connection within the group and allow for safe and vulnerable discussions. In our discussions one of our biggest challenges is overcoming victim blaming/rape myths and educating participants that sexual violence is never the victims fault.

According to *Sexual Violence and the Spectrum of Prevention: Towards a Community Solution*, social norms are one of the most powerful tools in shaping behavior.<sup>2</sup> Social norms are the root of sexual violence and can reinforce myths about sexual violence, as well as victim blaming. During workshops, participants are educated about the connection of social norms, individual belief systems and behaviors. Music, media and fairy tales are utilized to assist participants in gaining an understanding of gender role stereotyping and how it relates to sexual violence. Participants are asked to challenge their own beliefs, as well as identify all the different ways in which belief systems are developed.

One exercise that generates intense discussions is Mythbusters. In this activity participants are given actual case scenarios and are asked to match the crime to the victim to which it occurred. Cards include a short demographic description of a victim on each card while corresponding cards include short description of a crime that has occurred. The exceptional component of this exercise is that these cases will include populations that some do not consider being at-risk for sexual abuse (the elderly, LGBTQ, young teen males). Furthermore, the description of the crime is devoid of detailed case information and some contextual cues. Thus, participants must rely on 'assumptions' to best identify the match. This is an experiential activity with an element of competition. Participants are active, walking around, talking with

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Cultural Affairs. (1996). An Introduction to Discussion Method. Institute for Cultural Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, R., Parks, L.F., & Cohen, L. (2006). *Sexual Violence and the Spectrum of Prevention: Towards a Community Solution*. National Sexual Violence Resource Center and The Prevention Institute.

other team mates. After the activity is completed we discuss the crime and identify the correct victim. Youth are shocked when they hear an 83 year old grandmother was sexually assaulted by a 15 year old male or a mother of three assaulted by 3 men who were friends of her family. However, when a 19 year old female honor student was attacked after being followed by the perpetrator to her home, participants reply with “She should have known he was following her; she is an honor student,” perpetuating victim blaming. Discussions around the topic of victim blaming can become intense as we are motivating students to challenge the norms and beliefs that have been given to them by their core institutions; those of family, religion, and culture.

Perception of sexual violence is crucial to understanding the underlying social apathy. Higher levels of tolerance for sexual violence were reported by those who perceived sexual violence against women as less severe and less frequent and tolerance is higher among men who know a perpetrator and lower among men who know a victim. A victim-blaming attitude is also associated with higher levels of tolerance.<sup>3</sup> Developing empathy is vital in decreasing sexual violence and increasing bystander intervention in our community. When individuals have empathy for another, they are less likely to be violent toward that individual. Developing empathy towards victims of sexual assault is one way to decrease victim blaming. One of the challenges in assisting individuals in developing empathy towards victims of sexual violence is their own background and upbringing. Socio-economic status, sexual orientation, culture, race, age, religion, living environment and their own experiences with or without violence in their households or communities all factor into one’s ability to challenge their own belief systems and develop empathy towards victims of sexual violence. In working with at-risk boys in juvenile detention it was difficult for them to challenge their own beliefs about sexual orientation, as well as their beliefs about power and control related to males and females. The longer the belief has been instilled, the more difficult the individual has being open to the facts about sexual violence.

In facilitating workshops for the past 2 years we have learned the importance of having an effective measurement tool to be able to measure change in belief systems and the development of empathy. The original pre/post test we were using was very difficult for our youth participants to understand and often took participants 45-50 minutes to complete. Therefore we would lose about 2 hours of delivering the curricula. This year EMPACT-SPC THS has been working closely with the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS), Bureau of Women’s and Children’s Health (BWCH), Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Program, to develop an effective measurement tool for our workshops. ADHS worked diligently to develop a tool that is reliable, valid and able to be completed in a timely manner. When we initially piloted the test we found it took about 45-50 minutes to complete. So ADHS met with us again to determine what questions could be eliminated so our test still would remain reliable, valid and take less time to complete. Currently EMPACT is completing data entry, while ADHS evaluates the data to determine outcomes. Our new pre/post test has helped us to be able to have more time delivering our curricula to our participants and measures belief systems, empathy and behavior change.

Challenging belief systems is at the core of helping others gain empathy towards victims. At the root of victim blaming is how a person perceives sexual violence and these perceptions of sexual violence is what the workshops try to address. Our bystander intervention program challenges individuals and communities to explore their own beliefs, where those beliefs developed, and take a stand against sexual violence by being an active bystander in the community. Inevitably at the end of every workshop we have youth thanking us for talking about the topic of sexual violence and discussing their experiences and observations in the community. Sexual Violence is not a topic many parents talk to their children about and yet when youth are given the permission to discuss the topic they are engaged, ask questions and are open to the information. It is important to target our youth, as to be able to provide them with the facts

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<sup>3</sup> Garcia, E. (2006). Unreported cases of domestic violence against women: towards an epidemiology of social silence, tolerance, and inhibition. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*; 60:123-129.

about sexual assault so myths do not become hard wired into their beliefs systems. We will continue to educate adolescence about these issues to assist them in developing or gaining more empathy and bystander intervention skills which in essence will lessen victim blaming and sexual violence in our communities.