

From “The nature and dynamics of domestic violence: a framework for understanding”

A GUIDE TO WORKING WITH WOMEN IN CRISIS

The written Japanese *kanji* expression for “crisis” is composed of two characters. Taken separately, one means “opportunity,” the other means “danger.” Crisis can thus be a time of danger or vulnerability that offers an opportunity for change and growth.

- **REMAIN CALM**

Fear is contagious, and many women in crisis have enough fear bottled up to last a lifetime. By emotionally reacting to a woman’s fear you might limit your own ability to think clearly. The best ways to combat your fear are to be well-informed on procedures and resources, know yourself and learn to gauge your own emotional reactions, and get to know the woman you are working with so you can help her separate objective reality from her immediate sense of fear.

- **LET WOMEN DECIDE THEIR OWN PACE FOR CHANGE**

Allow women you are helping to decide on their own plan of action. Some women in crisis have never recognized their own resources. Others have lost touch with their resources. Respect and believe in a woman’s capacity to change and grow.

- **EXPLAIN ALL KINDS OF INFORMATION THOROUGHLY**

Don’t assume that women know about their rights or available services. Don’t talk down to women, but do be thorough in explaining information about our services and other community resources. If a woman looks or sounds confused, ask if she has any questions. Listen to her. Remember that she is the expert on her situation.

- **DO NOT IMPOSE YOUR OWN VALUES**

This does not mean you cannot express concern about a woman’s choices if you believe she is in danger, but it does mean you must be careful not to reject her even if you disagree with her behavior. Understanding the dynamics of domestic violence can help you avoid anger and despair when women struggle with decisions about ending a violent relationship or “giving it one more try.”

- **ENCOURAGE EACH WOMAN TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR HER FUTURE**

There might be a tendency for you to want to do things for her that she can do for herself. Even though you can and should help her, she will become stronger and more self-sufficient as she assumes responsibility for her own life.

- **DON’T CONVEY DISAPPOINTMENT IF A WOMAN RETURNS TO AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP**

She will have enough conflicts about her decision. She might feel like she is failing you. You can point out your concerns about her safety while still accepting her. Respect her decision and remind her that you are available if she needs you in the future. Always work with her to create a safety plan.

- **BE ABLE TO TOLERATE YOUR OWN ANGER AND THE WOMAN’S ANGER**

Have some personal outlets for your anger, anxiety, and frustrations. You will be better equipped to help women in crisis if you can avoid “burn out” and overwhelming stress. Talk to other staff members or domestic violence program advocates if you need help dealing with your anger or a woman’s anger about the violence she has survived.

- **MINIMIZE EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DIFFERENCES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE**

Avoid focusing on your own personal history. If you are distant, however, the woman you are trying to help might feel hurt. Strive for a comfortable balance. Answer her questions about you with minimal detail and turn the conversation back to her. Convey warmth, respect and concern.

Commentary for Child Welfare workers:

This guidance was written for domestic violence advocates, but it can largely be applied to parent engagement in cases where there is domestic violence. Our work has unique challenges. One thing that may help us deal with the emotional content of this work is to take a moment before meeting with a parent to check in with ourselves, so that we can be more self-aware as we try to engage them.

- To the greatest extent possible we should let the adult victim decide their own pace for change. But it is important to be completely transparent about this. Let the victim know that you want to allow them all the time they need, but also explain the timelines you are operating under.
- To the greatest extent possible we should not impose our own values, but child safety is our mandate. The point about not rejecting the person, even if you disagree with their choices is key. Our mandate to ensure child safety may require us to remove children if a survivor makes a choice that endangers them, and we should clearly explain that this will be a consequence, but we should not become judgmental toward the adult victim. We can even express understanding that they are making difficult choices.
- We may feel disappointment that, in our view, the survivor is “choosing her partner over her children,” but our interventions should focus on the behavior that makes the child unsafe, which is the batterer’s choice to use coercive control, not the relationship between the adult partners. We can continue to make it clear that the danger exists because of the actions of the batterer, not the choices of the survivor. We can reiterate there may be consequences to choices a survivor makes, if we believe those choices will put a child in danger, but that the person responsible for putting the child in danger is the batterer, and the batterer is the one with the power to make the changes that will allow us to return the child safely. This helps to make it clearer that Child Welfare is not the problem, and that it is the batterer’s choices that are creating the crisis.
- It is vital that we continue to honestly engage with the adult victim without becoming judgmental, angry, disgusted, or resentful while they navigate the complex dynamics of a relationship with a coercive and controlling person. This is the strongest expression of our clarity about the situation and our determination to hold batterers accountable for their choices and the outcomes of their behavior.