



**Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of
Sexual and Domestic Violence
Podcast Transcript
Season 2 Episode 1: August 5, 2020
Barriers to Getting Support: Myths and Facts**
Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate

Hello, and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop podcast, intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on a healing topic.

This week our topic is Barriers to Getting Support: Myths and Facts. I am your host, Marissa, and I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center.

I want to talk a little bit about season 2, as this will be the first episode. Thank you so much to all that listened to our first season, and we hope that we continue to be helpful in the community for survivors, support persons to survivors, and really anyone looking to learn about these topics. We intend to keep on with this podcast series, even when things quote: "return to normal," whatever that is and whenever it happens. We look to keep building onto accessible programming, which I will talk about a bit later.

I will be going solo for this first episode, but throughout this season we will feature voices from many of our programs here at The Women's Center. We want you to know that you deserve to be supported through the entirety of your journey, and there are all kinds of ways we can support here.

In this first season we've found that we have listeners from outside the Waukesha, Wisconsin area, so an excellent resource would be to contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1.800.799.7233) or RAINN (1.800.656.4673) in the US to find out

what services are available in your area. We will post that information alongside this podcast on our website. As always, we appreciate your support of this podcast series.

You may have also wanted to get to know me a little bit, too. I have been with The Women's Center for just over a year, I have a background in Social Welfare and Communications with prior experience working in grassroots activism, prevention and residential (or shelter) services before beginning my role here providing 1:1 support to domestic violence survivors and of course coordinating this podcast.

Let's get started in talking about some of those common myths associated with accessing a domestic violence or sexual assault program for the first time. It can be really difficult to open up about past or current abuse, especially to a stranger. In addition, it's unfortunately no secret that our culture doesn't always believe survivors or treat them with respect or dignity.

Abuse enforces a system of power and control, and some very common tactics to get that control are through denying or minimizing, gaslighting, and isolation. This is done so that if the survivor tries to reach out for help (if they still even have a functioning network of supports), they appear to lack credibility. Due to the trauma you may not be able to share your story in a linear fashion, or you may suddenly forget or remember certain details; surviving abuse can affect the memory significantly. Abusers may also convince you that friends, family, or agencies won't believe the abuse is happening, or that you are not worth their time. This is simply not true.

Domestic violence and sexual assault programs are designed to center survivors of any kind of abuse, with a mission to believe and support survivors. A lot of my work specifically deals with rebuilding connections following abuse, trying to get that support back in their lives whether it's family, friends, or other supportive services, and empowering individuals to own their story (not the guilt or shame) and believe in themselves and the strength they have to heal. Even if your friends didn't believe you, or your family shut you out for speaking out about the abuse: we believe you, and we are here for you.

Moving forward, there is also the myth that men aren't allowed into these agencies, that these programs are woman-only spaces. And, this might come up for a few different reasons: men's emotions and pain aren't seen as valid in our society, along with the belief that men can't possibly be survivors of domestic or sexual violence.

Toxic masculinity is a term that is defined by the overwhelming expectations that men have to be "tough, emotionless, sexually dominant" in all aspects of life. This term is not meant to demonize men and boys; in fact, toxic masculinity is particularly harmful to men and boys since it creates only a very narrow view on how to perform their gender successfully. Think about a time where your feelings may have been invalidated—you weren't allowed to feel upset about something that really hurt you, you couldn't be excited for something you were longing for, being emotionally close with friends and family was off limits—oftentimes men don't get to have these feelings be validated, or even have the space to process through **any** emotion. When you are told to "suck it up" or "be a man", it can be nearly impossible to express to others that you think you are being abused.

There is a cultural stigma about male survivors in the US that is not talked about, even though 1 in 10 men have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner. For nonbinary and trans survivors, the rate of intimate partner violence is about 54%. We often hear about domestic or sexual violence as a single narrative. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, "The majority of domestic violence stories covered by the media are about male perpetrators and female victims who are typically in heterosexual relationships. [...] This might make many victims feel like they don't have the space or the support to speak out about their own experiences and seek help." Again, having only these narrow views about gender and violence ultimately harms everyone.

Sometimes the name of the agency can be a barrier too; we understand that by being called The Women's Center we may not immediately be seen as a resource for individuals who don't identify as women. That said, we feel it is important to affirm that

we do serve all genders, as we know that violence does not discriminate. Our space is meant to be a safe haven for all who have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, or trafficking.

Another common myth is that if a program offers counseling or advocacy, that it's going to be expensive. I think this comes from the similarity of this particular service to traditional therapy, which of course can be an economic barrier due to fees, insurance, et cetera. At The Women's Center, we offer one-to-one individual supportive sessions where we can talk about safety planning, identifying abuse, coping skills, and work on rebuilding one's sense of self and well-being. While we do not diagnose or treat any mental health concerns or provide general therapeutic services, we can help connect you to resources to ensure you are getting all that you need.

As we will talk about later on this season, we also offer Employment and Housing Support, Youth and Family Advocacy, Legal Advocacy, Shelter and Hotline services, and Violence Prevention/Community Education. All of this is free of charge. I will say it again: all of this is free of charge. We also offer Transitional Living—this is our only “paid” service, with the intent to help survivors build rental history and good credit to be successful in obtaining permanent housing. It is free to meet with the Transitional Living Coordinator to discuss this option.

We know that financial control is a major component to domestic violence in an attempt to prevent survivors from getting the help that they need. We want to ensure that all survivors get all the support they are looking for. With that in mind, another myth to accessing services is that there is a cap to receiving support, that you may only come to talk to us a certain amount of times per month, year, or even in a lifetime. This simply is not true. You have likely heard us say that healing is not linear, meaning that during the healing process you will have both good and bad stretches of time, and that those bad times do not make you “regress” in your process in any way. Since healing is not linear, we know that clients may choose to disengage or re-engage in services to reflect their process, and that is okay.

I oftentimes get asked this question by survivors of abuse: “If I decide to stay in my relationship, am I going to be kicked out of the program or shamed into leaving my partner?” I feel like this myth is extremely important to dispel. On average it takes about 7 times to leave an abusive partner for good, and there are many reasons for this. A survivor might not realize the relationship is abusive until it escalates to the point of being unsafe to “just leave”. This can be a life-threatening act by a survivor, and lots of safety planning has to go into this exit. It is also immensely difficult to break out of the cycle of violence. Abuse destroys a survivor’s sense of self-esteem and worth, and so when tension builds or the abuser “explodes”, survivors feel it is their own fault. This extends into the “honeymoon phase” of the cycle of abuse; the abuser may “apologize”, but even that is a tool to blame the survivor for the incident and make them feel like the abuser is the only one that could ever find them lovable.

All of this is to say that our priority is the survivor’s wellbeing and to show them that they have the power to make their own choices in life. We will never pry into why a survivor may want to stay in an abusive relationship or convince them to change their mind. When we are told by a survivor that they are going back to an abuser or are choosing not to leave the relationship altogether, our focus then becomes safety planning and harm reduction. If at that point the survivor wants to terminate services, we will allow that, but we will also ensure that they know we are still available for any other questions or if they want to re-engage at any time. Ending abuse is ultimately about restoring power to the survivor, and that involves giving a survivor nonjudgmental space to process and decide their life’s path. Our role is not to advise, but to accompany survivors in this journey.

Lastly, we want to ensure that each and every individual that comes to us feels safe to do so. We know that not every survivor has equal access to or experiences with systems intervention—police departments, medical care, social services, etc.—and sometimes those systems can cause even more harm for marginalized individuals. I want to take this time here to address our unwavering commitment to confidentiality, and what our role can be in supporting survivors through systems. For listeners outside of Waukesha,

this is the norm for domestic violence and sexual assault programs in the US, again if you are looking for support in your area please contact the National Hotlines.

Confidentiality is the ultimate priority in all that we do, but what does it mean? This means that any and all information a client provides to us is protected and kept private to the fullest extent of the law. There are very limited instances in which we would break that confidentiality, for instance if a client were to disclose to us that they intend to harm themselves or another person, or if there is an observation of child abuse. Aside from those instances, we will do all we can to maintain that confidentiality in order to keep clients safe when interacting with us.

Why is this so important? Survivors are often terrified to share their story with someone new, particularly there's that fear of "will my abuser find out" or "will I/they get in trouble?" When you engage in services for the first time we will ask what's been going on that made you decide to call us, and to aid in safety planning we may ask some questions about the abuser; none of that gets reported to any outside agencies, and we aren't going to pressure you to tell those agencies yourself either. The most important part about supporting a survivor is that support in self-empowerment to make your own decisions about yourself, your relationships, and your meaning of justice. Again, our role as service providers is not to advise, but to accompany.

To that point, there are times where we help navigate through systems with survivors, especially when a survivor may have unequal access to a support, or face systemic oppressions based on their race, age, sexuality, gender, ability, class, and so on. While we do partner with systems in the community and we ultimately champion those relationships, our priority is always survivors, and we feel that we have a unique position in these relationships to regularly educate our system partners, check them on their biases, and grow together in the name of survivor-centered care. In the words of renowned civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, "Nobody's free until everybody's free."

If you have felt any of these barriers or hesitated in reaching out for help, know that you are not alone in these thoughts, and that the support that you are looking for is

available. Again, all of our services are confidential, and we will never share your information with anyone. If you are a loved one to a survivor, know that you have the power to also dispel these myths on a personal level—visit the “Help a Friend” tab of our website to learn more about supporting a survivor.

We at The Women’s Center are excited to continue this season discussing the vast array of services we have to offer. If you have any questions related to this podcast or if you would like to see us cover a specific topic, feel free to email us at mail@twcwaukesha.org. Please note that computer use can be monitored, and the record of email contacts may be impossible to completely clear. If you choose to email us and are requesting a reply from us via email, we will do so assuming that you have taken all necessary precautions to protect your safety and privacy.

Thank you for joining me to learn more about Barriers to Support: Myths and Facts. Our next session will be about Back to School and Supporting Kids through Transitions with Rachel, one of our Youth Advocates.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262 542 3828. Learn more about The Women’s Center at www.twcwaukesha.org.

Thank you and be well.