



## **Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence**

### **Podcast Transcript**

### **Season 2 Episode 6: October 28, 2020**

### **Supporting Survivors is for Everyone**

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Jon, Bilingual Youth Advocate

**Marissa:** 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 Supporting Survivors is for Everyone. We are your hosts: my name is Marissa, and I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate with The Women's Center.

**Jon:** I am Jon, my pronouns are he/him/his. I am the Bilingual Youth Advocate, I started working here towards the end of January. My role here as a youth advocate is to listen to the youth who have experience either DV, SA or both and help them process the situation. We work on processing their thoughts and feelings, create a safety plan, work on coping skills and above all help the youth regain the voice back.

**Marissa:** So, what is advocacy anyway? If you've listened to previous podcasts, you've probably noticed that "Advocate" is in each of our titles; advocacy is a skill which is fully integrated into all services of TWC. Our Founding Mothers, the women who created The Women's Center in 1977, intended our advocacy to be to "provide information and [support] for [survivors]...to coordinate with local educational institutions, industry, social and governmental agencies...to bring together unmet community needs with [available] human resources."

The Founding Mothers began with a traditional counseling model (as most were counselors or therapists in the Waukesha community at the time), and we have since broadened our definition of support and advocacy in our community. Our current model is based off of support services that focus on crisis intervention and providing emotional

support. We work with individuals and families on developing boundaries, practicing coping skills, identifying supports, and connecting to additional resources. We are meant to be a short-term, first-responder style of support; while we do not provide mental health counseling, diagnosis, or treatment plans, we can offer referrals to other community resources too.

Whether providing direct-service advocacy to clients or participating in community activities as TWC representatives, advocacy is a skill woven into the fabric of the work we do. Advocacy involves active listening, respecting the survivor as the expert of their own lives, and ensuring they have safe space to work towards their goals. Advocacy can and must be individualized for survivors and must exist as part of the bigger picture of increasing knowledge and awareness of domestic and sexual violence.

So, what do we do with all of this information? You might be wondering to yourself, “am I an advocate?” The answer is a resounding yes! By listening to this podcast, this shows that you care about issues affecting survivors of abuse. If you are a survivor, you are practicing self-advocacy by giving yourself tools and opportunities to heal. We can all be agents of change in supporting survivors and breaking the cycle of violence.

**Jon:** Supports play a vital role for survivors of domestic violence. Family and friends can have a positive impact through their emotional support. They may increase a survivor’s confidence, self-esteem, dignity by believing and reinforcing the account of the relationship, they can provide safe spaces, financial support, childcare, or assist with travels, or encourage the survivor to engage in services, accompaniment to specialists, and more.

**Marissa:** Supports play a vital role for survivors of sexual assault as well. The way we respond to sexual assault survivors can impact their decision-making surrounding future disclosures or asking for more help.

Though this is not an exhaustive list, most sexual assaults are not reported due to shame, fear of being revictimized, or fear of not being believed. We know that 1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime, and about 3% of American men—or 1 in 33—have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime, according to RAINN. Men in particular are vastly underreported as victims of sexual assault; there is the myth that this type of violence cannot happen to men. We will discuss this more later in the podcast. Moreover, we know that the rate of sexual violence victimization increases for transgender and nonbinary individuals: nearly half of these individuals (47%) have reported sexual assault in their lifetime, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality, with numbers being even higher in communities of color.

It's important to note that when we respond with support and listening, survivors tend to feel more empowered to utilize resources and obtain even more support. At TWC, one important way we show support to survivors of SA in crisis are through hospital accompaniments when a survivor is in need of a SANE exam. We provide nonjudgmental support (as much or as little as they want) and allow them to make their own decisions and choose their next steps.

**Jon:** All of this comes back to a model called Advocacy through Empowerment, which is depicted through the Advocacy and Empowerment Wheel. This wheel was originally created by the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence. We will be linking to this resource on our website. We have adapted this model to utilize gender-neutral language, as again we recognize that anyone can be affected by domestic and sexual violence, regardless of gender.

First and foremost, it is essential to respect confidentiality. For safety and ensuring trust, all discussions must occur in private without others present. We should also be sure to believe survivors, and validate their experiences; listen to them, and truly believe what they are telling you. Acknowledge their feelings and let them know that they are not alone; unfortunately, abuse is very common, and many others have similar experiences. Assure them that the violence perpetrated against them is not their fault, and that no one deserves to be abuse.

Also, crucially important to supporting a survivor is respecting their autonomy; we may feel we know what's best, or that we have a "objective" view of the situation, but this is not true. The survivor is the expert in their situation, and we need to respect their right to make their own decisions in their own life whenever they are ready, even if we wouldn't necessarily do it the same way. If a survivor does ask for your advice, we can help them plan for their future safety. We may ask them what they have tried in the past to keep themselves safe, whether it had been helpful, and if they have a safe place to go if they need to escape. We have a previous podcast on Safety Planning in Relationships if that is a topic you would like to explore further.

Lastly, we can empower survivors by promoting access to community services. Is there a hotline in your community, or a shelter program? If you are in the greater Milwaukee area, we are an option, but outside of that it is helpful to know all of the resources in your community.

**Marissa:** When a survivor discloses abuse, in most cases they disclose to a close personal contact: the way they respond can impact the likelihood of further disclosures, and them ultimately leaving the abusive relationship. Practicing advocacy makes a world of difference to a survivor, and it shows that an individual's social networks can have a powerful role on healing.

**Jon:** So, what can we say when we feel that a friend of ours might need help? We have many resources on our website, and I wanted to talk through one of them. Some questions you may ask are, “what should I do if I see abuse/violence?” If you see someone being physically hurt or threatened with a weapon, call 911.

“What can I do if I suspect an adult I know is being abused?” Talk to them. Tell them you are concerned for their safety and that you are there to help. Let them know that domestic or sexual violence do not stop without some sort of outside intervention. Offer to accompany them to speak with an advocate, if the agency allows a support person to join the space.

You could also offer to be part of their “safety plan”. A safety plan is created by the victim either on their own, or with the help of a support person or advocate. The intent is to plan for a victim’s safety needs before another violent episode erupts, or as they plan to exit the abusive relationship. It can be helpful to review a safety plan with an advocate who specializes in domestic or sexual violence, to make sure all safety concerns have been considered.

“Should I talk to the abuser?” Be careful with this one. The abuser may feel like he or she is losing control and therefore try to harm the victim. Consider your own safety as well. Ask the victim FIRST what could happen if you talk to the abuser, and do not talk to the abuser if the victim does not want you to.

“Should I talk to the victim’s friends or family?” Be careful as well. Well-intended family members may tell the abuser that the victim has told you about the abuse. Others may confront the abuser. Either way, the victim could be at greater risk of harm. Ask the victim FIRST what could happen if you talk to family members or friends, and do not talk to family members or friends if the victim does not want you to. Like we had discussed earlier, respecting a survivor’s confidentiality is extremely important.

**Marissa:** Ultimately, know that what you say matters. The perception and acceptance of victim-blaming and rape culture perpetuates survivors of any sort of violent crime from not reporting or not leaving a relationship; and you know, those supports can either help identify abuse and support the survivor, or sometimes can unwittingly sustain or enable abuse.

**Jon:** Sometimes, some support systems may not know where to step in and help or may have attempted to intervene before and have given up. When a survivor comes to you or you witness abuse, oftentimes inaction is just as harmful as responding negatively. The bystander effect is a term coined in the 1960’s by social psychologists and refers to the decreased likelihood that a person will intervene or help in an emergency situation if there are other people present. Some individuals may be embarrassed if they intervene

and it truly was a misunderstanding, or their help is declined by the survivor; those emotions are normal, but they should not stop us from being there for others.

**Marissa:** Yes, by speaking up even when others are silent, we can help break the cycle. Another important way to do that is by practicing accountability. As support people, we've all likely inadvertently caused harm—we may have said the wrong thing or reacted in a way that we didn't expect when someone asks for support. We may also have fallen into the bystander effect, like Jon mentioned, where we could have done something to help but did not take any action.

We will be including a couple of TED talks for further listening on this topic. Jon, as the guest-host this episode, wanted to provide insight on advocacy from a male-perspective. Domestic and sexual violence are not “women's issues”, we all have a stake in supporting survivors and ending violence. To share a quote from one of the talks by Justin Baldoni, “will you actually stand up and do something so that one day we don't have to live in a world where a woman has to risk everything and come forward to say the words ‘me too?’”

Begin by checking yourself and reflect on your individual actions. Do not blame others and own up to your mistakes if you've made them. Impact is much more important than intent. Even if you meant well, it's important to acknowledge harm and commit to positive change.

**Jon:** It's also so important to speak your mind, particularly as an advocate who is male. Men specifically are often told that their emotions are not valid, and that they are better off handling their issues on their own. This isn't true, and this culture silences male allies and male survivors too.

As males we need to break the cycle of what is perceived to be the definition of “being a man”—men can be sensitive, and can both give and receive support. Healthy masculinity exists. Vulnerability is a strength to embrace, it is not a weakness.

To quote another TED speaker, Jocelyn Lehrer, “harmful social ideas about masculinity contribute to diverse health and justice challenges for people of all genders.”

**Marissa:** We want to close this episode by talking about the resiliency of survivors, in the face of the trauma that they have experienced. Resiliency is the capability of individuals to cope successfully in the face of significant change, adversity, or risk: the capacity changes over time and is enhanced by protective factors in the individual and environment, such as supportive friends or family or a stable job, for example. Studies show that having a support network (caring people within or outside the family)

contribute to one's resiliency: these relationships create love, trust, encourage growth, and reassurance.

**Jon:** If you are a survivor yourself, there are ways to practice self-advocacy and self-compassion as you are healing. Reconnect with yourself: reflect on how your relationship has affected you, reflect on people you enjoyed spending time with, activities you enjoyed doing, and places you would go. You can also create space to look at future steps you may take.

Reach out: identify safe people you feel comfortable around and take small steps to reconnect. Perhaps reconnecting with community can be helpful, by joining a support group, organization, or club.

Be patient with yourself: healing is not linear and limiting isolation does not happen overnight – celebrate small successes!

And lastly, stay safe: safety looks different for everyone, and you know your definition of safety best. You deserve safety and support.

**Marissa:** All excellent points to leave off on. Thank you so much for joining us for Supporting Survivors is for Everyone. Our next session will be about Coping in Communal Living Environments with our Lead Shelter Advocate, Renee.

The Women's Center welcomes and serves survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses, recognizing that their unique experience informs the perspective of each person.

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](http://www.twcwaukesha.org). Thank you and be well.