

# HILL TRAUMA-INFORMED MEETINGS



Many interest groups provide tip sheets to their members on how to have effective Hill meetings. Flipping the script, we're provide some tips to federal policymakers and staff on how to have effective Hill meetings with survivors of trauma.

Survivors of trauma are invaluable sources of expertise and leadership for the development of meaningful policy change. To have more effective meetings, it is essential to operate in a trauma-informed way; by operating in this way, the individuals who have experienced trauma are able to share more candidly their perspectives and experiences.

Being trauma-informed means you and your office realize the widespread impact of trauma and seek ways to mitigate the effects of trauma during interactions with survivors including actively avoiding re-traumatization while supporting healing, resilience, and wellbeing. Being trauma-informed also means, recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals, families, and communities and integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.

A trauma-informed approach is grounded in a person's history, acknowledging the entire context of their experience. **It starts from a place of assuming a person has experienced trauma and shifts the conversation from "What is wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?"**

## Trauma-Informed Language Tip

Advocates often use the term "survivor" instead of "victim" to keep a focus on an individuals' experience and to provide more context than just victimization. It is important to note that each individual may prefer to be identified differently, and this may vary day to day. While "survivor" may be the appropriate language to use, feel free to ask the individual how they prefer to be identified.

## BEFORE THE MEETING

### **Secure a quiet and confidential space for discussion**

Survivors are often sharing and revisiting their personal trauma in order to educate lawmakers about the impact of their experience and to share their perspectives. Being in an area that feels more confidential, but is large enough to accommodate everyone comfortably, can encourage greater candor, allow for deeper conversations, and improve the survivor's feelings of safety and security. Since it may be hard to find a private space, communicate ahead of the meeting time if this won't be an option and offer a virtual meeting for the survivor.

### **Communicate clearly who will be in attendance at the meeting**

Communicating clearly with survivors who will be in attendance gives the survivor needed information on who they will be sharing their story or perspective with and can help them to feel more safe and secure. If attendance changes, try to communicate that information as soon as possible. Keep in mind the perspectives of one survivor may not represent how all survivors feel. If possible, provide a brief bio on the staff member(s).

### **Photos and social media posts**

If interested in taking photos or posting on social media about the meeting, please ask the survivor and/or coordination organizations before the day of the meeting. And make sure to confirm that it is alright to post following the meeting.

### **Set aside the time and be clear before the meeting on your schedule**

Trauma does not function on a linear time frame. It can be hard to reduce or compact a survivor's narrative into a short discussion. When possible, allow for ample time for the meeting. A good practice is to try to provide for a 15 minute buffer of time before the next call or meeting. Share any time limitations at the beginning of the meeting; this provides meeting participants upfront information about restrictions/ limitations and allows them to make appropriate choices on how they share their story. Being transparent about restrictions and the realities of the pace in the office can help everyone feel more comfortable.

## DURING THE MEETING

### **Focus on the experience of the survivor rather than problem solving**

One way to think about this is by asking "what happened to you?" rather than "what is wrong with you?" Remembering this perspective changing shift-from a focus on the person as the problem to a focus on the story and experience-works to prevent re-traumatization and victim-blaming. Re-traumatization is an experience of triggering (bringing up an emotional or physical trauma response) or causing new trauma to a survivor. A best practice is to always thank the survivor for sharing their experiences and ensure there is enough space for the survivor to continue sharing if they feel inclined. Once it's clear the survivor is finished sharing, you can transition to problem solving and discussing policy and systemic issues.

## **Consider the seating arrangement and how it might be perceived by survivors**

For example, try not to have anyone sitting directly behind survivors as this can add to anxiety. If possible, use chairs with armrests as an added layer of support. Additionally, consider the space between you and survivors. If possible, avoid sitting behind a desk. Aim to sit outside of the personal space of the survivor but close enough to avoid a definitive power dynamic. Consider the survivor's view of the door (closed/mostly closed depending on privacy of space). Chairs slightly angled toward each other (conversation style) or across from one another at the same level of height, circled if more than two people in a meeting, etc. If possible, always allow the survivor to choose their seat first.

## **Be present and avoid distractions**

Sharing details of a personal story of abuse/trauma is a mental, emotional, and physical experience for survivors. Showing respect and being present is critical to creating a more trauma-informed environment. When possible, refrain from checking phones and email, or interrupting the survivor's story in any way. Maintaining soft eye contact and keeping open body language can be a subtle support for survivors.

## **Practice empathy during the discussion**

Practice empathy during the discussion by showing that you are actively listening. Being trauma-informed means bringing empathetic listening to the forefront of conversations. Questions and communication should be thoughtful and center the person's experience. Respond in a trauma-informed way to a survivor sharing their story, which includes open body posture and use positive, helpful language like "coming here today took a lot of courage", "thank you for telling me," or "I'm sorry this happened to you," or "this was not your fault," or even "I believe you." Examples of active listening include leaning in, making eye contact, and avoiding interruptions.

## **Limit your expectations on how much or little a survivor will share**

Trauma feels different on different days. It may be that the same survivor who shared openly about their abuse one day is unable to share in that same way on another day. It is critical that survivors are allowed to step in and share their stories how they see fit at any given time.

## **Ask thoughtful questions and avoid victim-blaming**

Being trauma-informed is being sensitive to others' experiences of trauma. Asking pointed questions that call into doubt the survivor's story or asking about damaging hypotheticals such as asking a survivor to imagine what they would do in another situation or asking questions that doubt the validity of their experience can retrigger trauma responses.

- Avoid questioning the survivors' story through inquiries that call into doubt the survivor's story such as asking a survivor to imagine what they would do in another situation or place blame on the survivor. Asking questions that doubt the validity of their experience can retrigger trauma responses.
- If you feel the need to ask a question for productive purposes then please practice asking survivors permission to ask certain questions E.g. "Is it ok for me to ask a question" or "may I ask you about?" And allow for survivors to consent or not to further questions.
- Discussing or asking questions about hypotheticals including someone being falsely accused of the trauma the survivor is sharing is never appropriate.

## **Be sure to clear the use of photos for social media**

Even if previously agreed upon, be sure to double check that posting to social media is alright and that the survivor feels comfortable with the use of media.

# RESPONDING IN A TRAUMA-INFORMED WAY TO A SURVIVOR SHARING THEIR STORY

## Don't

- Use your phone, laptop, or other technological distractions
- Cross your arms
- Turn away from the survivor
- Tell the survivor to “move on,” or “put it in the past”
- Question the survivors’ story with language like “are you sure?” or “maybe it was...”
- Use victim-blaming language like “what were you wearing” or “maybe if you had just... this wouldn’t have happened”

## Do

- Use active listening body language and soft eye contact
- Have open body posture
- Use positive, helpful language like “thank you for telling me” or “I’m sorry this happened to you” or “this was not your fault” or “I believe you”

## AFTER THE MEETING

### Schedule time for yourself to decompress and practice self-care after the meeting

We know that trauma is experienced by a wide range of people. For example, according to the CDC, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men experience sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Be aware of your own personal reactions to survivor's experiences. Be sure to practice grounding techniques and relaxation strategies. You also can reach out for local support and services in the region or get connected through Hill resources (House Office of Employee Assistance at 202-225-2400 and the Senate Employee Assistance Program at 202-224-3902) or local sexual assault services.

### Communicate clearly with survivors how the information and perspective they provided will be used moving forward

As stories and perspectives are utilized to influence change, make sure to communicate with survivors or groups how their voices are helping to create that change. This helps with transparency and demonstrates to the individuals that sharing their story was not in vain.

This tip sheet was created by The Assist, a nonprofit created by a group of more than 40 survivors of sexual violence focused on the systemic problem of sexual abuse against athletes.

Find more resources at  
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