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“If I find out about violence, what should I do?”

For Adult Literacy Practitioners

One of six info sheets about the effects of violence on learning

- ✓ Learn more about how violence affects learning.
- ✓ Identify approaches to program delivery that promote more effective teaching and learning.

Dealing with the impact of violence on learning is not as difficult as you might think. It may transform some of your most frustrating challenges, and lead to more success for everyone.

Your journal might say ...

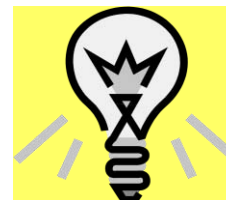
“I’m worried about Mary. She just doesn’t seem herself these days. She’s exhausted, and barely concentrating. I asked her if everything is OK and she said yes. I’m just not convinced, but I don’t know what I should do.



Then there’s Stephen. He wrote in his journal about how tough his childhood was and how he feels as if he is right back there when we are reading “My Name is Rose.” I don’t know what to say to him, or whether I should say anything.”



But did you know ...



- ① Mary might be dealing with controlling and abusive behaviour from a partner, child, other family member, or caregiver. Abuse and threats often get worse when a learner starts a program and looks like they might escape the control. The violence may be subtle or obvious, new or ongoing. Practitioners may not know exactly what is happening, but there are things you can do. If you're silent when you suspect someone experiences violence, it looks like you think violent behaviour is OK.
- ① A woman experiencing violence at home may have an especially urgent need to succeed in a program. She may need to improve her education and her confidence, to believe that she can cope alone and get a job. This powerful need may make success even more elusive, as it adds more anxiety and stress - closing down the brain.
- ① Immigrant learners may urgently need to improve their English and literacy skills to settle in a new land. Many may come from war and refugee camps. They may have lived through many forms of personal and social violence back home, on their journey, and in Canada. Many aspects of the curriculum - such as families, holidays, and homeland - can remind them of these tough experiences and huge losses.
- ① Like Stephen, many learners may find that memories of childhood abuse return with the tensions and school-like settings of adult education. Many adults who were abused, hurt, or humiliated in childhood feel they ought to have got over it. But even if people have had years of therapy and healing, past experiences can easily return to the present.
- ① For many the experience of violence was in school itself - especially residential and institutional schools. Returning to school as an adult



may be a terrifying experience that brings back personal, family, and/or community memories of threat and humiliation. Silence doesn't make the feelings go away, but telling the stories is not the answer either. Addressing the current feelings and impact on present learning may make a difference.




What Can I Do to Help Everybody Learn?

1. Help learners find the resources they need.

- Provide contact information for local resources: counsellors, elders, shelters, support groups, and programs for abusers and for addictions and substance abuse.
- Display posters and brochures. Make it clear that no one has to endure things alone. Show where to go for help. Some programs display this information in washrooms so people can take the information privately.
- Bring respected counsellors and staff from local agencies into class, at the beginning of a group. Assume all groups include learners familiar with violence. Make sure learners know about the resources in case they want to use them.
- Try not to say 'You should...' or suggest you know what learners need, or judge them for not leaving a violent situation. It is important to remember you never know the risks and losses someone else will have to face if they stay or leave. But warn learners if you're afraid for their safety in the choices they're making.

2. Prepare yourself and your program.

- Figure out your own limits. You don't have to listen to details of violence. Help learners understand they need a good listener and be clear that you can't fill that role yourself. Help them find the support they need.
 - Become a good 'side support'. Ask learners how it's going with the counsellor and whether it's helpful. Help them find another resource person or program if the first is not a good match.
 - Learn about your program's confidentiality policy. If you don't have one, think through issues of confidentiality before learners confide in you.
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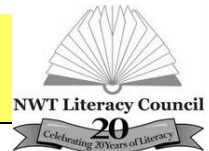
Make sure you follow clear guidelines about when you need to break confidentiality, why, and with whom.

3. Focus on teaching and learning.

- Make it clear that you don't expect learners to reveal their experience of violence. When a learner tells some of their story, be careful not to shame or suggest that they were wrong to tell, or that it is too overwhelming to hear. Help learners find good supports and don't treat them differently, as if they are fragile or heroic. Remember there may be more still unsaid.
- Carefully introduce any class content that may remind learners of harsh experiences. Describe what is in the material so that learners can make their own choices, to participate or not. Make it OK for a learner to say that they want to continue with an assignment or prefer to opt out of reading a particular book, or watching a video, or writing an assignment. Try not to press for reasons - be sensitive and check to find out if they have the supports they need.



More Information



Go to www.learningandviolence.net

- Making changes: [Personal Safety](#) and [Making stories of violence known](#)
- [Helping others learn](#): look for pop-up window on working with a counsellor.
- [Helping yourself learn](#) – esp. [Finding helpers](#) and [What to do when you feel bad](#)

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