



Listening and Witnessing

“Listening and witnessing is a vital step in creating a trusting relationship. Mothers, as with children and youth, respond to being listened to with close attention – without interrupting, commenting, fixing, or solving – while being encouraged to give voice to their experiences, sadness, fears, and hopes. Our capacity to bring full attention and awareness to a program participant’s or mother’s experience is critical to healing. It also helps mothers learn the importance and value of listening, making it possible for them to extend that experience to their children.” [PEACE Program Toolkit](#) P. 259.

Page 259 of the [PEACE Program Toolkit](#) outlines the importance of using listening and witnessing skills when supporting mothers. Mothers who have experienced violence often feel silenced in their relationship with the offender. The PEACE Program’s ability to provide a space where mothers can speak openly is one of the primary tools for building a trusting relationship. This section shares guidelines and tips for being a good listener when working with mothers. Through listening and witnessing, PEACE Program counselors can begin to acknowledge and better understand mothers’ fears, some of which may be supported through conversations about cultural diversity, as discussed in Chapter 4 of this guide: [Cultural Considerations for Working with Mothers](#).

Guidelines to support good listening¹

- **Ask open-ended questions** that start with words like how, what, would and could. Try to avoid ‘why’ questions, that can sometimes sound like blaming.
- **Keep the focus on them.** Let mothers drive the conversation with issues that are important for them.

¹ REACH Team (2022). REACH Beyond Domestic Violence. Retrieved from: <https://reachma.org/blog/10-tips-for-being-a-good-listener/>



- **Use reflection and reframing.** Reflection involves repeating back the words and/or emotions that you are hearing. If a survivor says, ‘I’ve been feeling so overwhelmed.’ You could respond with ‘It sounds like you’ve been feeling really overwhelmed.’ Reframing is similar to reflecting but changes up the words a little. A good way to do this is to start with phrases like ‘It seems like...’ or ‘It sounds like...’ As a reframe example, if a mother you are supporting is blaming herself or putting herself down, let them know that you hear how they are feeling and use ‘I’ statements to let them know that you don’t blame them. You could say, ‘I hear that you feel like this is all your fault. I just want you to know that I don’t blame you for what happened. But I hear that you feel that way right now.’ This way we are validating their experience, while also letting them know that someone does not blame them.
- **Believe mothers’ experiences.** As Carol Bilson from the [Anti-Violence Project](#) explains, *“believing survivors of sexual assault is absolutely crucial. In a world where survivors often face persecution, blame and harassment, believing survivors is the first, absolutely necessary step in supporting them.”*²
- **Notice your positionality/world view.** As you reflect and reframe, it is okay to inquire to see if your perceptions and interpretation are valid. As an example, after reframing, PEACE Program counsellors could ask mothers, ‘does that sound right to you?’
- **Be aware of what listening is not.** Listening does not include giving advice. It’s not sharing your own experiences to the point that it pulls the focus off mothers. It’s not criticizing or judging, and it is not forcing.
- **Self-Care is part of Listening.** Self-care refers to the range of personal and professional skills and behaviours that contribute to your wellbeing and the maintenance of effective performance at work and in your personal life. Listening and witnessing is demanding work.

² Anti-Violence Project (2015) *Four ways sexual assault is being challenged at UVic*. Retrieved January 12, 2022. retrieved from: <https://www.antiviolenceproject.org/2015/10/four-ways-sexual-assault-is-being-challenged-at-uvic/>



Be aware of the potential impact of this work on your own wellbeing and discuss any concerns you have with your supervisor.

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