

## Centring Survivors and Repairing Harm in Organizing Communities

Summary Handout:

Common bystander situations, with barriers to (and strategies for) intervening with integrity

<b>When someone we know is in abuse, and it's really hard for them to figure that out and describe it to others</b>	
Abuse is very confusing, foggy, and hard to name when you're inside it (in part because power disguises it)	
<b>Barriers:</b>	<b>Strategies:</b>
Doubting our own perceptions when faced with denial / dismissal	Understanding how common this situation is, and why it's hard to see when inside of it
Worrying about causing more harm than good by naming what we see, not wanting to engage in conflict with the survivor	Naming what we see while upholding survivor's agency: okay if they don't see it the same way, still useful to name what we see for them to process at their pace
Not knowing how to help survivors overcome physiological and linguistic barriers to naming the harm they're experiencing	Create a patient container for their story: ask if they are struggling with words, offer to go beyond active listening (offering words)
Pain of witnessing harm and not being able to change it can make us want to withdraw, or to pressure the survivor so they will take action	Letting them know they won't lose our support if they don't act on our input (and following through on that, being sturdy)
Not knowing how else to support survivors who aren't able/ready to see, disclose, discuss, or address the harm they're experiencing	Helping them get other things in place, build up their capacity to eventually confront the situation (help add stability to their life, gather a crew of solid people ready to support)

**When someone is trying to describe the harm they are experiencing to us**

It's really hard to understand someone describing abuse (like, way harder than we think)

<b>Barriers:</b>	<b>Strategies:</b>
Not understanding, so not believing: if we don't have the framework, it's like we can't hear it	Starting from 'survivors don't lie about this shit: if i'm not getting it, i need to listen better'
Thinking we understand, when actually projecting (and potentially gaslighting): we plug in what we hear to our existing experiences, rather than hearing what the survivor is actually saying	Remembering that structural power shapes our capacity to see even what is right in front of us, signaling to survivor that we know our understanding is probably distorted, and we want to keep listening
We only experience things from our perspective, don't see the cumulative impact of bystander dynamics on the survivor (forgetting, gaslighting, interrogating...), and can feel their reactions are "out of proportion"	Contextualizing the survivor's reactions to bystander dynamics - keeping in mind that they're being hit on all sides, and their reactions are likely in proportion (or less) to what they're experiencing
"Those are intense words, you must be an intense person" - the mirror distortion, caused by both neurological impulse and cultural conditioning	Being aware of our tendency to look for the closest source of any distress, and to experience the person who names harm as <i>the cause</i> of our emotional response

**When someone asks us for help or protection of some kind**

When asked to protect survivors, our instinct is to protect, empathize with, or “figure out” people who have harmed

**Barriers:**

**Strategies:**

We are culturally conditioned not to empathize with survivors or centre them in our thinking: we instinctively empathize up and punch down across power differences

Noticing where we focus our empathy and attention, consciously drag it back to survivor when it shifts to abuser; practicing this on our own time, to reduce impact on survivor

If we're not ready to intervene, we'll find a reason not to: any possible abuse situation can be considered “an exception”:  
If we feel unclear, we think it must not be real or serious. If it feels serious, we require an impossible burden of proof before intervening

Recognize our discomfort as being rooted in power structures, and examine where our resistance is coming from - is this really about the situation, or is it about us?

If we have survived trauma by normalizing it, hearing someone name their own trauma that's in any way similar can feel like a threat to our survival strategies / world-view

We need to work on ourselves in order to show up for others.  
Being careful about giving information to someone who is reacting in this way.

<b>When someone asks us to intervene with a person who has caused them harm</b>	
We often have no idea what it means to act in situations of harm in order to create repair	
<b>Barriers:</b>	<b>Strategies:</b>
We get trapped in the neoliberal logic that anyone should be able to walk away at any time, and don't see the harm that's caused when someone refuses to engage in accountability (or threatens to)	Focusing on the reciprocal responsibilities and obligations that come with being in community, and insisting on the obligation to invest in repair after causing harm
We imagine any intervention as punitive, and thus feel protective of perpetrators - we think of intervening in terms of causing them harm, rather than encouraging their personal healing and growth.	Reminding ourselves: holding an abuser accountable to engaging in repair work is not being a cop or a court of judgement. We can do this with love, while still firmly centring the survivor.
We believe it is possible to be "neutral" by not engaging	Knowing that in situations of harm, being "neutral" is siding with the perpetrator
We fear we may lose social status if we intervene (and often, this will indeed happen). We feel isolated and confused in situations where others are not also stepping up to insist on repair work.	Acting <i>with others</i> to clearly expect those who harm to be accountable (by <i>all</i> directing them to do accountability, creating community consequences, rather than leaving it up to the most brave to speak up alone)
We fear that the perpetrator will not listen, or cannot be influenced. We prioritize our relationship with the perpetrator over the accountability process (because we think that relationship is needed for the process)	Learning from experience: abusers are rarely convinced to engage in accountability by the people who are close to them. Coordinated community response is what works - prioritize those relationships.
We think we can handle intimate/gendered violence as distinct from organizing, and don't get that movements collapse through <b>not</b> centring survivors	Centring this work at the core of our organizing. When we all have training and skills in how to handle it, it does not derail or drag on, it gets handled quickly and in a way that actively keeps the group together.

**When we are actively engaging with someone who has caused harm**

It is hard to connect without colluding.  
We are going to get confused (like, but not equal to the survivor) and we are going to become targets (like, but not equal to the survivor).

<b>Barriers:</b>	<b>Strategies:</b>
Our perception of people's boundaries is shaped by their power position: we're often highly sensitive to perpetrators' boundaries while hardly seeing survivors' boundaries	Recognizing that we're conditioned to resent survivors for the harm they've experienced. Consciously turn it around and clearly create boundaries with those causing the harm. Be honest with yourself and the survivor about it when you fail at this.
We allow people who have harmed to re-centre themselves and derail accountability processes	Name when evasion occurs, simply point out that the survivor is the one whose needs are important. Be proactive: when you experience confusion or temptation to blame/ silence the survivor, talk to the folks who are most clear-headed and back survivor clearly
We accept insincere parroting from perpetrators, instead of insisting that they authentically own their harm	Do not debate about 'whether' accountability has occurred. It is not up to the abuser to determine if accountability has occurred, it is up to the survivor and the ones who are holding the abuser accountable.
We don't have a sense of how to keep holding a process if a perpetrator leaves, so we sacrifice the integrity of the process to keep them around	Accountability can occur by creating (gentle) coordinated community consequences for the abuser to direct them to do accountability. Ie tell the abuser you expect them to do accountability and cannot in good conscience work with them until the survivor and their pod say the accountability has brought about real change in actions.