

Skills training can improve responses to disclosures of trauma

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New research from the University of Oregon concludes that even brief training can help people learn how to be more supportive when friends and family members disclose traumatic events and other experiences of mistreatment.

"The Impact of Skills Training on Responses to the Disclosure of Mistreatment," by Melissa Ming Foynes and Jennifer J. Freyd was published in the inaugural issue of the new American Psychological Association journal, *Psychology of Violence*. The study examined the effectiveness of skills training to enhance supportive responses to disclosures of mistreatment perpetrated by someone trusted, cared for or depended upon.

"Friends and family are often the first to hear about experiences of mistreatment, yet many people have not received [education](#) or training in how to respond," said Freyd, UO psychology professor and editor for the [Journal of Trauma & Dissociation](#).

Conventional wisdom suggests that disclosure of a traumatic event or abuse is a healthy step toward recovery. And yet, previous research has shown that the way people respond to disclosures can profoundly influence how the survivor heals from the trauma.

"Oftentimes people want to be supportive and are well-intentioned in their efforts, but without training they are not naturally able to provide support in a helpful way," said Foynes, postdoctoral fellow at the

National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder at the VA Boston Healthcare System. "If survivors feel invalidated or hurt by others' responses, they might choose not to share their experiences again, which may make it harder for them to receive help in their recovery."

For the UO study, which was conducted while Foynes was a doctoral student working with Freyd, 110 pairs of university students participated with a friend or family member. First, participants were asked to write about two experiences, not previously disclosed to the partner, in which they felt mistreated by someone close to them. At random, one person was designated as a "discloser" and the other a "listener."

A trained research assistant then selected, at random, one of these two experiences for the "discloser" to share with the "listener." After completing a series of questionnaires about how they felt this interaction went, participants were given a written handout regarding either supportive listening techniques or healthy lifestyle improvements. After studying the written materials and taking a short quiz on the material, the discloser was asked to share the second experience of mistreatment.

Results showed that listeners who reviewed the skills-training materials describing supportive listening techniques demonstrated significantly fewer unsupportive behaviors than listeners in the control group who studied the materials describing healthy lifestyle improvements. In addition, listeners who demonstrated high levels of unsupportive behaviors during the first disclosure benefited the most from these materials.

"These findings suggest that with only 10 minutes of training, supportive responses to disclosures of mistreatment can be enhanced significantly," said Foynes. "At the same time, we do not believe that this training in and of itself is sufficient for helping people provide the level and quality of support survivors often need."

The skills-training handout described supportive listening techniques, including verbal and nonverbal ways of conveying support. Suggestions were given regarding body language as well as verbal responses that would likely be perceived as nonjudgmental and validating and encourage the discloser to continue talking. The skills-training handout for the control group described healthy lifestyle improvements about nutrition, exercise and sleep hygiene tips.

The results were measured by the discloser's evaluation of the supportive behaviors to provide insight into the interpersonal dynamic between the discloser and the listener.

"In this study, using disclosers' perspectives to assess whether the training translated into actual behavioral changes was an important improvement upon past research," said Foynes. "This research is an important step in increasing awareness of the importance of supportive responding and providing guidance that will hopefully make the task of supportive responding more attainable."

Provided by University of Oregon

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