

5 STRATEGIES TO CREATE COMFORT AND SAFETY WHEN DISCUSSING HARM

1 Attend to the physical space you're in.

Assess the environment you are in when discussing harm. Is the space you are in private? How close are people sitting to each other? Are folks sitting face-to-face or side-by-side? What is the room temperature? Where are the exits in the space? Are there objects such as tables offering space between people? The **way that physical space is set up** and how people are expected to occupy it **can impact how comfortable people may be**, including how comfortable they may be discussing harm.

Explore this great, brief read about [making a physical space for difficult conversations](#) that offers thoughtful considerations to contemplate when setting up physical spaces, and this fantastic overview of how to facilitate [accessibility, inclusion, and safety](#) when providing education about interpersonal harm.

2 Develop comfort with and create space for silence.

It is not unusual to experience discomfort during bits of silence in a conversation. Importantly however, when supporting someone who has experienced something difficult, **sometimes silent pauses may be necessary for processing or reflection**. This may hold for you and/or for the person sharing their experiences. It is helpful in conversations of this sort to try to avoid what for many, is a default need to fill gaps of silence with talk. It can be useful to learn how to offer and hold silent spaces in conversation.

Take a peek at this insightful article about [the subtle power of uncomfortable silences](#), that describes why silences can be productive.

3 It's okay if not everyone participates in a conversation about harm.

In educational or group settings, sometimes we encourage and expect others to participate in conversation, regardless of the topic. When discussing matters involving harm such as sexual and/or gender-based violence, it can be a good idea to offer participants the right to pass on conversation, or to choose not to verbally contribute to a discussion. **It is helpful to remember that we can never know how (and how many) people may have been impacted by the issues we are discussing**. Creating space for people to choose how much—or how little—they engage in conversations about harm is essential. It signals respect for their autonomy and supports their ability to care for their own well-being.

For examples about how to facilitate safety in these sorts of discussions, see this short but helpful guide on [creating a safe space for discussion and dialogue in a training session on gender-based violence \(online & offline\)](#), with tips, examples, and considerations.

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4 Content warnings are critical.

When facilitating conversations on challenging or sensitive topics—whether in a discussion, workshop, or course—**providing participants with advance notice about what will be addressed is essential**. This kind of preparation supports both individual and collective comfort and safety. Offering participants advanced notice so that they can best prepare themselves for the matters at hand also fosters trust. While we cannot fully prevent all triggers—since they are personal and often unpredictable—we can offer clarity about the content and timing of what will be covered. This allows participants to plan for any supports they may need and to engage in ways that feel right for them.

For more information on approaches to and use of content warnings in academic settings, see [using content warnings in your course: a trauma-informed approach](#), and check out this [content warnings good practice guide](#) for examples, templates, and strategies.

5 Offer choice as much as possible.

Discussing harms like sexual violence can be difficult for people. Statistics tell us that almost 1 in 2 Albertans have experienced some form of sexual violence during their lifetime ([AASAS, 2020](#)). If you are supporting someone who has been harmed by somebody else, you can help contribute to restoring their sense of choice and control. You can do this in a variety of simple ways: by offering them options throughout the conversation (e.g., *Is it okay if we discuss this next?*), demonstrating support for their choices (e.g., *Thank you for telling me what you need. Can I help with that?*), and by being transparent (e.g., *I'm not sure how to answer that question. Could I gather more information and get back to you by the end of the day?*). Providing options, choice, and transparency can also look like offering someone a cup of tea and letting them know that you'd like one too!

See this quick read on [trauma informed care: the healing power of choices](#).