

Creating a welcoming space to accommodate their needs

When a counsellor or worker in any setting thinks they may be in contact with a victim of sexual exploitation or a person who wants to find a way out of prostitution

**(Sexual
Violence
Helpline)**
the source
of resources

1-888-933-9007
sexualviolencehelpline.ca

Table of contents

- 3 Introduction
- 4 Encouraging exploration and receiving a disclosure
- 5 Helpful attitudes
- 6 Resources



Introduction

Victims of sexual exploitation and individuals who want to find a way out of prostitution are not always aware that there are resources that can provide them with support. They are faced with many obstacles when they want to get help. Since people rarely ask them questions, they often sink into isolation.

They may fear reprisals, even legal prosecution, especially if they have been forced to become involved in illegal activities like fraud or drug trafficking. They are afraid that they will be blamed or that no one will believe them. They often harbour strong feelings of guilt. Some fear that even if they manage to escape their current situation, they will have nowhere to go, no money to live on, etc. They need someone to **extend a hand of kindness.**

A person who wants to get out of the milieu of sexual exploitation and prostitution may not say anything unless the counsellor they are talking to brings up the subject first. Unfortunately, counsellors and other workers are uncomfortable doing so or feel they don't have the necessary tools or the right words to broach the subject. Some think—wrongly—that they have to take an abolitionist stance or a harm reduction approach. The combination of the victim's fear and the counsellor's discomfort can create a vicious circle in which the person remains trapped, with no support. To enable them to break free, it is crucial to **focus on their needs while respecting our obligation towards them, especially in the case of a minor.**

Although sexual exploitation affects people of any age—minors as well as adults—the legal implications are different when a minor is concerned. When a person under 18 is a victim of sexual exploitation, for example, we are required to report the situation to the Director of Youth Protection (DYP).

Encouraging exploration and receiving a disclosure

If there are people around you, move with the person to a private space to encourage their trust and ensure your conversation remains confidential.

If you are in doubt regarding their situation, ask exploratory questions, such as “Were you forced to do something against your will?” or “Were you pressured to have sex with someone?” **Encourage them, saying** “You’re not alone. I’m here to help you and provide support.”

If you are speaking with a minor, do not promise to keep what you are hearing a secret. Explain that you are obligated to report their situation to the DYP, and make sure they understand that this is to ensure their protection.

Let the person explain their situation in their own words. Listen to them actively to help them identify which of their needs have been met and which have not. Make a list together of their immediate needs: housing, food, sobering up/detoxification, healthcare (physical and mental), renewing contact with family and friends, transportation, safety, employment, financial assistance, etc.

Inform the person that help and support are available for them. Present different resources that offer a variety of services and can help to meet their needs. Be sure to give them a document containing all the descriptions of services and contact information. If possible, assist the person in making the necessary contacts (telephone calls, for example).



Helpful attitudes

Choose your words carefully

Take your cue from the person you are talking to and use the same words they do to describe their situation. Don't treat them like a victim until you've found out how they identify themselves. For example, if they talk about their "boyfriend," call him a boyfriend, not a pimp. If they refer to their "boss," don't call him a dealer. Don't make assumptions: every person's experience is unique.

Show openness and refrain from passing judgement

Alleviate the person's guilt and normalize their emotions by assuring them that what they are feeling is completely normal and that their situation is absolutely not their fault. Remember: just because a person agrees to an exchange of sexual services does not mean that they are responsible for the violence done to them and the difficulties they have experienced. Pay attention to your body language and tone of voice. Avoid reacting openly to what the person reveals to you, for example. Speak softly.

Understand the person's needs

Be careful that the conversation doesn't turn into an interrogation. The person probably already has a very negative judgement of themselves. If possible, concentrate on their needs by asking open-ended questions in order to clearly understand their situation. Refrain from asking intrusive questions at the beginning of the conversation and avoid questions beginning with "why."

Focus on ensuring their safety and breaking their isolation

With the person's input, draw up a security plan that is based on their reality (i.e., whether or not they want to get out of their situation). If the person is a minor, report their situation to the DYP to ensure their safety. You could ask them if they want to get the police involved, look into other forms of support that are present in their life, suggest that they reconnect with people in their support system outside of the prostitution milieu, etc. Make sure they are not isolated. If they are thinking about getting out of prostitution, it's important that they conceal their intentions from the people in their milieu, as talking to them about leaving could be dangerous for them. Encourage them to open up to people they trust (a counsellor, relatives) if they are able to give them the support they need.

Encourage them to reassert their independence

During your conversation, remind the person that they can ask questions, take breaks, ask for something to drink or end the conversation at any time. They may not be used to asking for what they need or making decisions. Rather than impose a solution, it is important that you encourage the person to begin the process of leaving when they are ready and at their own pace.

Resources

It is important for people to know that getting out of the prostitution and sexual exploitation milieu is a very real possibility. They need to know that support is available and that others have succeeded.

They need access to the right information and to know that resources offering a multitude of services ARE THERE FOR THEM—regardless of their age!

The Sexual Violence Helpline has an online directory of resources for all their needs.

Resources (continued)



Shelter and housing

In addition to providing a temporary place to stay, emergency accommodation resources for people in difficulty also help residents with administrative procedures, such as getting a new health insurance (RAMQ) card or applying for social assistance (welfare). These resources are safe place for victims that offer surveillance, staff on duty 24/7, front door locked at all times, response to victims needs when requested, possibility of a single room, etc. Access is available 24/7 following a short telephone evaluation and provided a space is available. Telephone support is also available 24/7.

Mental health and addiction

Welcoming anyone with mental health and/or addiction needs, offering intervention and emergency shelter 24/7, individual and group counselling for people who are thinking about suicide, support for understanding and managing symptoms of post-traumatic stress, possibility of sobering up or detox, possibility of in-house rehabilitation treatment, health evaluation and follow-up by medical personnel, treatment programs for reducing or stopping substance abuse.

Getting out of the milieu of prostitution or sexual exploitation

Support groups, peer support, support in making a report to the police, obtaining compensation (IVAC), social-legal support. Since 2017, the *Secrétariat à la condition féminine* has been funding resources whose mission is to provide information and support for persons who want to get out of prostitution. A growing number of regions are served by these organizations.

The Sexual Violence Helpline is the source for resources.

Counsellors provide support for victims and their loved ones, as well as the people who work with them. **Call 1-888-933-9007 or chat at sexualviolencehelpline.ca** to learn more about victims' various needs and available resources and recourses. Counsellors can also help you to identify possible intervention strategies or assist you in submitting a report to the DYP. The Sexual Violence Helpline is anonymous, confidential, free of charge and offered in both French and English 24/7.

This guide was prepared by the Sexual Violence Helpline of the Montreal Sexual Assault Centre (Centre pour les victimes d'agression sexuelle de Montréal). It is available in full or summary form on the cvasm.org site, under "Publications."