ACTIVITY:

Raising awareness about how victims and survivors filter information and language when disclosing to faith leaders.

BACKGROUND:

It has been well established that victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence often minimize what actually happened when they disclose. This happens for many reasons, including: 1) reality may be so extreme that they fear we won’t believe them, 2) they may think that if we really knew how bad it was we’d think they were crazy for not leaving, reporting the incident to the police, etc., 3) they may be trying to shield us from what was an atrocious event, 4) they may not want to admit to themselves how bad things really are, or 5) they are hoping to avoid a look of shock and horror on our faces. Talking about sexual or domestic violence makes it feel “more real,” and causes victims and survivors to re-live the trauma. Bottom line: it is really, really difficult to disclose sexual or domestic violence to anyone, even your best friend.

Many victims and survivors, particularly if they are people of faith, feel the need to talk to their faith leader or someone in their faith community about any traumatic event, including sexual or domestic violence. Trauma affects people in body, mind, and spirit, and the support of a spiritual leader can be critically important in the immediate crisis and in the long-term search for justice, hope, peace, and healing.

It makes sense to expect the usual minimizing that occurs when victims first disclose. Advocates have learned to “listen between the lines,” and understand that what they are hearing may be just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Faith leaders haven’t been trained to expect minimizing when someone talks about sexual or domestic violence.

But when victims talk to faith leaders, we think there is something else going on as well. At Safe Havens, we call it “sanitizing.” Sanitizing occurs because people simply don’t talk to their faith leaders using the ugly, brutal language that
generally characterizes abuse and assault. So, although a perpetrator of sexual assault may have said, “Bitch, I want to see you bleed from every pore,” the victim may report this to a faith leader (if it is spoken of at all) as: “he called me names;” or “he was verbally abusive.” This taboo against using ugly or profane language is particularly strong when the conversation takes place in “sacred space:” the faith leader’s study, for example, or the sanctuary.

When a victim is unable to describe what really happened, in all its brutality and immediacy, it is easy for faith leaders, who for the most part haven’t been trained about sexual or domestic violence in the first place, to misunderstand what’s really going on. Far from “listening between the lines” as an advocate would, the faith leader has every incentive to think, “it wasn’t really that bad.”

Unhelpful and unsafe responses can result from this “disconnect” between what actually happened and the way the incident is described to faith leaders.

Not only can this “disconnect” result in woefully inadequate or dangerously unhelpful responses from faith leaders to victims, it also reinforces misunderstandings between faith leaders and advocates. Advocates are asking, “why aren’t faith leaders taking sexual assault and domestic violence seriously?” Some part of the answer may be that faith leaders are simply not hearing the angry, abusive, controlling, threatening, brutal language of assault and abuse.

To overcome this “disconnect,” we’d like to let faith leaders know what sexual and domestic violence can really sound like. We’ve compiled a list of actual language that victims have heard in two versions, one more graphic than the other, to give people who haven’t lived through it an idea of what a perpetrator might say to a victim. This activity contains language that is offensive and can be disturbing. If it does not fit the sensibilities of your community, please modify it by introducing the concepts of minimizing and “sanitizing” and skipping the graphic handouts, or by distributing the less graphic version of the handout. Knowing that they may be hearing the tip of the iceberg may help faith leaders take domestic and sexual violence more seriously and respond more effectively.
GOALS:

1. To explore and discuss the “disconnect” between what is actually happening in victims’ lives and the words victims may choose to disclose.
2. To introduce two concepts: minimizing and sanitizing. To acknowledge why victims may choose to minimize or sanitize and what gets “lost in translation” as a result.
3. To acknowledge how these concepts may affect how faith leaders hear about, understand, and respond to sexual and domestic violence.
4. To hear/read examples of the ugly, brutal language that perpetrators use.
5. To discuss ways that faith leaders can empathize with the victim’s point of view, understand the impact of abuse and assault, and support disclosures.
6. To discuss ways that advocates and faith leaders can work together more closely to support victims.
7. To explore responses that could be helpful or effective.

OBJECTIVES:

After this activity, participants should be able to:

1. Understand more about how difficult it is to disclose sexual assault and domestic violence.
2. Define and understand minimizing and sanitizing.
3. Understand the effect that minimizing and sanitizing may have on how victims disclose.
4. Acknowledge how the “disconnect” between what advocates hear and what faith leaders hear may have, in the past, made partnerships more difficult.
5. Develop ideas for overcoming this “disconnect” in future.
6. Develop open-ended questions that would make it easier to facilitate disclosures and help victims describe more fully what happened if they so choose.
ESTIMATED TIME: 30 minutes

MATERIALS: Outline of exercise (below)

Flip chart and markers

One-page handout of “Ugly Language of Sexual and Domestic Violence.” (Please note that there are two options for this handout; one is more graphic than the other. Please choose the option that best fits the sensibilities of your community.)

Safe Havens’ toolkit: *Pieces of a Bigger Picture: Faith Communities and Service Providers Working Together to Support Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence*. Provide copies of the faith-based resources in the toolkit for every participant. Safe Havens can mail printed copies of the faith-based resources in the toolkit to you. Call us at 617-951-3980/3981 or email info@interfaithpartners.org. Also, all the resources in the toolkit can be downloaded in color or black and white from the Safe Havens website at www.interfaithpartners.org. Please use a sticker to add local contact information to the toolkit resources!
Facilitator Talking Points

❖ Sexual and domestic violence are ugly and brutal. The language that describes what happened is also ugly and brutal. The point of this exercise is to look at that language, to examine the language most victims use to actually disclose to faith leaders, and to look at the “disconnect” between these realities.

❖ Often, victims describe what happened to them in vague language. For example, they might say,
  ❖ “he says things that aren’t very nice,” or
  ❖ “he wouldn’t take no for an answer,” or
  ❖ “he’s very threatening,” or
  ❖ “he pushed me into doing things I didn’t want to do.”

◊ Explain the concept of minimizing, and how and why it affects almost all disclosures.

◊ Explain the concept of sanitizing, and how minimizing and sanitizing may cause what victims say to their faith leaders to be “disconnected” from what actually happened.

◊ Refer to and/or hand out the list of “Ugly Language.” Please note that we have given you two options for this handout; one is more graphic than the other. Please choose the option that best fits the sensibilities of your community.

◊ Ask faith leaders to look these 10 sentences over. Explain that you don’t give them this to be shocking, confrontational, or controversial, but rather to try to connect what victims are actually experiencing to what language they use to disclose.

◊ Give the participants time to imagine the impact of hearing these statements repeatedly, and over an extended period of time. How might this impact a survivor spiritually?

◊ Take a few minutes to discuss this and hear from them.

◊ Invite participants to discuss the following questions, and develop a list:
  ❖ How can we as faith leaders and advocates compensate for the disconnect created by minimizing and sanitizing?
  ❖ How can we make it easier for victims and survivors to share the ugly reality of their experiences?
  ❖ What are some open-ended questions that would help survivors disclose what is happening?
◊ Record the list of open-ended questions developed by the group. (Open-ended questions are questions that are answered by more than just “yes” or “no.”)

◊ Close by telling the participants that the next time they hear, “he/she says things that aren’t very nice,” “he won’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” or “sometimes he/she is threatening,” you hope they’ll remember minimizing and sanitizing. Refer them to the “red flags” section of the domestic violence booklet in the Pieces of a Bigger Picture Toolkit.

Alternative Approach to this Exercise

❖ After handing out or referring to the “Ugly Language” handout, break the participants into small groups, preferably with an advocate at each group. Have the small groups discuss the questions and develop lists of open-ended questions. Each group can assign a recorder to write down their group’s list and report back.
The following are real-life examples of sentences spoken by perpetrators to victims of sexual and domestic violence. This language is graphic and may be offensive to the reader.

1. Shut the f--k up, b----. Don’t you know I could kill you if I wanted to?
2. If you leave me you’re going straight to hell, and I’ll make sure the kids come right after you.
3. You’re a f---ing whore. No one will ever want you again.
4. If you report this (or, if you leave me), I will find you and kill you. They’ll have to identify your body by your dental records.
5. I want to see you bleed from every pore!
6. I’ll f--- your face up so bad that no one will ever want you!
7. You belong to me, you f---ing c---. I’ll kill you before I let you leave me!
8. You can’t say “no.” I can f--- you any goddamn time I want.
9. I’m going to choke the sh-- out of you!
10. There is no God for you!
The following are real-life examples of sentences spoken by perpetrators to victims of sexual and domestic violence. This language is graphic and may be offensive to the reader.

1. Shut the fuck up, bitch. Don’t you know I could kill you if I wanted to?
2. If you leave me you’re going straight to hell, and I’ll make sure the kids come right after you.
3. You’re a fucking whore. No one will ever want you again.
4. If you report this (or, if you leave me), I will find you and kill you. They’ll have to identify your body by your dental records.
5. I want to see you bleed from every pore!
6. I’ll fuck your face up so bad that no one will ever want you!
7. You belong to me, you fucking cunt. I’ll kill you before I let you leave me!
8. You can’t say “no.” I can fuck you any goddamn time I want.
9. I’m going to choke the shit out of you!
10. There is no G-d for you!