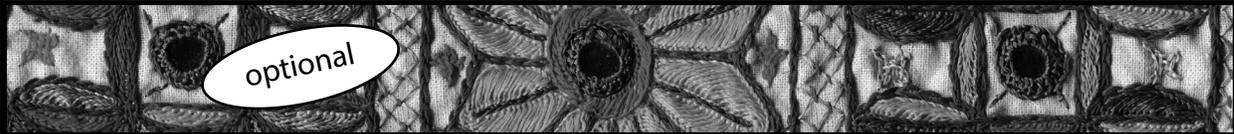


	<b>ACTIVITY</b> <b>6</b>	<b>The Ugly Language of Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence</b>
		

**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 violence and sexual assault 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 the look of shock and horror on our faces. Talking about sexual assault 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 assault 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 assault 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.) But when victims talk to faith leaders, 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 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 abuse 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 what is reported to faith leaders.

Not only can this “disconnect” result in woefully inadequate and/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 assault and domestic violence can really sound like. We’ve compiled two versions (one more graphic than the other) of ten sample sentences that survivors might hear or have heard, just 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. The activity is optional; if it does not fit the sensibilities of your community, modify it (by just talking about minimizing and sanitizing without using the handouts).**

## **GOALS:**

1. To explore and discuss the “disconnect” between what is actually happening in victims’ lives and the words victims 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 assault and/or 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:**

At the end of this activity, participants should be able to:

1. Understand more about how difficult it is to disclose sexual assault and/or 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 compensating for this “disconnect” in future.
6. Explore ways to facilitate disclosures and help victims describe more fully what happened (if that would be helpful to them).

**ESTIMATED TIME:** 30 minutes

**MATERIALS:**

Outline of exercise (below)

Flip chart and markers

One-page handout of “Ugly Language of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.” (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.)

Safe Havens’ rural toolkit: *Hearts and Hands: Piecing Together Faith and Safety for Rural Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence*. Try to have a copy of the faith-based resources in the toolkit for every participant. Safe Havens can mail printed copies of the toolkit to you. Call us at 617-951-3981 or email [info@interfaithpartners.org](mailto: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](http://www.interfaithpartners.org). Please use a sticker to add local contact information to the toolkit resources!



## Facilitator Talking Points

- ❖ Explain to faith leaders that sexual assault 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.
- ❖ Use one of these two scenarios to focus the discussion:
  - ❖ Ask the faith leaders to imagine that a congregant, aged 35, has just asked to meet in their office. The congregant says, “I’m having a difficult time at home. Sometimes, my spouse/partner/significant other says things to me that aren’t very nice.” OR
  - ❖ Ask the faith leaders to imagine that a congregant, aged 62, has just asked to meet in their office. The congregant says, “Things aren’t so good with me. Six months ago, a friend of mine offered to walk me home after a meeting. He pushed me into doing things I didn’t want to do. He wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. He’s very threatening. I don’t know what to do.”
- ❖ Ask the faith leaders to name some of the things that come to their minds when a congregant reports:
  - ❖ “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.”



◇ List their responses on the flip chart.

- 
- ❖ 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. Compare/contrast the language in the handout to the language on the newsprint.

- ❖ Invite the faith leaders to imagine, for a moment, what it feels like to hear these sentences. What would it feel like to hear them screamed in your face by:
    - ❖ a complete stranger? (pause for about 30 seconds while they consider)
    - ❖ someone you know? (pause for 30 seconds)
    - ❖ someone you love? (pause for 30 seconds)
    - ❖ someone who has power over you (e.g., your boss)?
- 



◇ *Debrief for 5 – 8 minutes: how does this language make them feel? How do they imagine it makes a victim or survivor feel? Does it feel different coming from a stranger? From someone they know or love? From someone who has power over them?*

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- ❖ Ask the faith leaders to imagine the impact of these sentences if they are repeated daily, or many times a day, for 6 months. For a year. For many years.
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◇ *Take a few minutes to discuss this and hear from them.*

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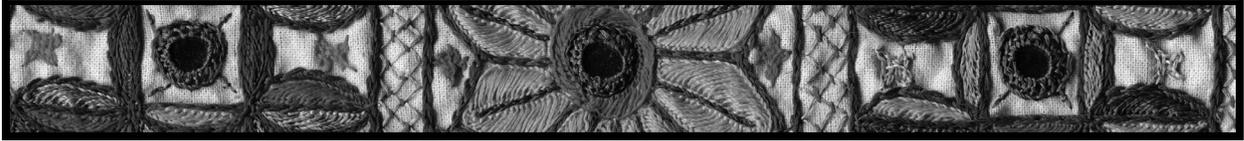
- ❖ Invite faith leaders to consider these sentences the next time they hear, “he/she says things that aren’t very nice,” “he won’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” or “sometimes he/she is threatening.” Refer them to the “red flags” on page 11 of the domestic violence booklet in the Rural Sexual and Domestic Violence Toolkit.
- ❖ Invite faith leaders to discuss (5 minutes) how an awareness of minimizing and sanitizing may make it easier for them to understand and support victims.
- ❖ Invite faith leaders to discuss (3 – 5 minutes) how they could develop a “safe space” for the real experiences of survivors to be spoken and heard.
- ❖ Ask advocates and faith leaders to discuss (5 minutes) how an awareness of minimizing and sanitizing may make it easier for them to understand and support each other and build partnerships with each other.

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## The Ugly Language of Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence



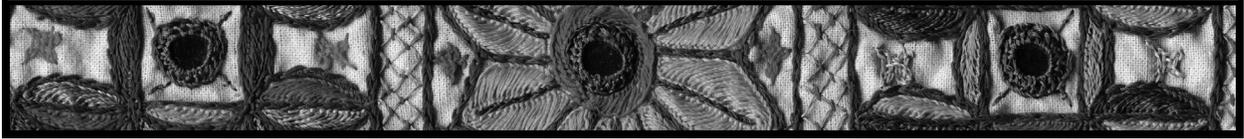
**The following are real-life examples of sentences spoken by perpetrators to victims of sexual and domestic violence. This language is graphic and may be offensive to the reader.**

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!

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## The Ugly Language of Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence



**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!