

PREVENTION

Module 10: Self-understanding for violence prevention

In this module:

- Self-awareness as an important step on the path to violence prevention competence;
- Reflection as a tool for increasing self-understanding;
- Knowing who you are and what you bring to the helper role;
- Stories from the front lines; and,
- Questions for reflection.

Self-awareness as an important step on the path to violence prevention competence

We learn from our experiences and events that happen to us, the choices we make, and the people who influence us. These factors all contribute to what we believe about the world and how we act in it. These factors, and the meanings we assign to them, merge with our unique human natures and personalities to create our evolving selves.

Self-awareness is an important step on the path to violence prevention competence. When working with or relating to older victims of violence, *how* you make a difference is linked to *who you are* as a human being and a helper. That includes your unique combination of:

- Knowledge;
- Wisdom;
- Understanding;
- Experiences; and,
- Perspectives.

Now add to that your values, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs about people, and you can see why effective helping depends so much on self-awareness.

Personality factors may affect how you respond to situations. These include:

- Openness to change;
- Reasoning ability;
- Emotional intelligence;
- Extroversion or introversion; and,
- Degree of self-reliance.

Various dimensions of diversity may also affect your thoughts, feelings and behaviour in situations. These include your:

- Gender role;
- Cultural background;
- Language skills;
- Citizenship status;
- Physical abilities; and,
- Mental health status.

Information in Module 5 covers a deeper exploration of the dimensions of diversity and their impact on ageism and violence against older persons.

Self-awareness is an essential ingredient for growth and self-understanding. Without awareness, we act only out of habit and conditioning. How you think, feel and respond to situations will be affected by your distinctive style of communicating and relating, along with the following factors:

- Past experiences: Your own experiences with violence and abuse, and how you dealt with them;
- Values: The personal qualities, characteristics or attributes that help you make decisions or set priorities;
- Principles: The ways you think people *should* behave and how things *ought* to be;
- Self-concept: Your beliefs about the kind of person you are or would like to be; what you expect of yourself;
- Biases: Your loyalties, prejudices, likes and dislikes of specific individuals and groups;

- Obligations: What you think others expect of you personally and professionally; and,
- Objectives: What you are trying to accomplish in any given situation.

One way to imagine our multi-dimensional selves is as a ship's steering wheel. The spokes represent the qualities and aspects of who we are. If you tend to function mostly from one section of the wheel, you have only the spokes in that part of the wheel readily available for your use. When you operate from the centre, however, *all* spokes are equally available to you. When you are centered, you are present to yourself and the world around you. Building awareness of self can strengthen the centre of your wheel.

As 90 per cent of an iceberg lies below the surface of the water, an iceberg is another helpful metaphor that can provide insight into self-understanding. For many of us, the largely unexamined parts of ourselves lie beneath the surface of the water. As we become more aware, we increase our level of understanding and gain new insight into who we are in the world and how that affects our thoughts, feelings and actions.

Reflection as a tool for increasing self-understanding

One way to increase your self-awareness is to reflect on your assumptions, judgments and any stereotypes you might be holding. Sentence completion exercises are tools that can be used to help surface your attitudes, beliefs and perceptions about yourself, diverse other people or situations. You can use your increased awareness with intention and openness to make informed decisions.

The following exercises can help you clarify your assumptions and judgments in the areas of self, aging, diversity and violence. Complete the thoughts in each section, writing as many endings for each sentence as you like. You may want to do this exercise alone. You can also share and discuss your responses with your colleagues.

Reflections on self

- I became a helper because . . .
- I do not cope very well with . . .
- One thing people say I do very well is . . .
- I am proud of myself when I . . .
- I could use more skills in . . .
- I have above-average skills in . . .
- An example of my caring about others is . . .
- The bad thing about admitting my fear is . . .
- The good thing about admitting my fear would be . . .

Reflections on aging

- Older people are usually . . .
- Older people cannot . . .
- Older people are good at . . .
- Growing older means . . .
- Older people need . . .
- Older people should be able to . . .
- To me, self-determination (with respect to older persons) means . . .
- When I get old . . .
- The way society treats older people . . .
- The older people in my life . . .

Reflections on diversity

- People who are different from me . . .
- If my elderly father announced that he was gay I would . . .
- People who come to Newfoundland and Labrador from other countries . . .
- To me, poor people . . .
- I would describe myself culturally as . . .
- Aboriginal elders . . .
- I am uncomfortable around people who . . .

Reflections on violence against older persons

- Violence against older persons . . .
- Older women who stay in violent relationships . . .
- Adult children who live with their elderly parents . . .
- Children who witnessed violence when they were growing up . . .
- One thing I believe about violence is . . .
- Most older persons who are victims of violence . . .
- Violence against older persons is caused by . . .
- A good helper . . .
- The best thing I can do to help an older victim of violence is . . .

Knowing who you are and what you bring to the helper role

Most of us, at some point in our lives, have been touched by prejudice, discrimination or violence in some way. Becoming aware of your own experiences with harm and its lasting effects will make you better able to help older victims of violence. Being a helper is most satisfying and effective when we understand and appreciate ourselves and our interests, talents, skills and abilities. Self-understanding also helps us to remain clear about our motives and purpose in helping. This allows us to respond to those we are helping with greater clarity and intention.

Being a helper helps us grow whole. It challenges us to call upon talents and qualities we did not know we had. It confronts us with fears, doubts and old beliefs, demanding that we work them through so that we can get on with the job at hand. There is no better way to help victims of violence than by being clear about who we are and our intentions in helping.

STORY FROM THE FRONT LINES

Ches was a 78-year old widower who lived alone in a small rooming house. One day, as he was crossing an intersection on a busy road, he was struck down by a car. The driver left the scene, but a person who saw the accident happen called an ambulance. Ches was taken to the hospital emergency unit, where he said very little except to repeat over and over, “Some idiot run me down.”

As a result of the accident, Ches suffered many bruises, some minor cuts, a broken wrist and a hip fracture. He was also found to be dehydrated and malnourished. Two days after admission, Ches was still in intensive care and did not seem to be improving. He did not interact with any of the medical personnel who came to check on his healing, and turned his face away from them whenever they would approach. Although meals and snacks were brought to Ches on a regular basis, he was not able to sit up on his own to eat, and no staff came to help. His food was taken away each time, largely untouched. No visitors came, and he did not receive any get-well cards.

The staff thought he did not seem to want to get well. Ches’s condition had become a sort of joke at the nurse’s station. Each day someone would ask, “What happened to Ches?” and, like the chorus of a bad country song, the staff would sing out in unison, “Some idiot run him down, some idiot run him down.”

One morning, a group of nursing students were visiting patients. When they came to Ches’s bed, one of the students named April asked Ches’s nurse if she could comb his hair. The nurse said, “Sure, if he doesn’t mind”. April asked Ches, and, getting no negative reaction, sat down next to him and combed his hair into a neat look. Then she asked Ches if she could shave the week’s growth of beard off his face. He didn’t appear to object to that either. April put the comb and razor in a drawer in Ches’s bedside table, where she noticed a pair of glasses. “Are these yours?” she asked. Ches nodded. She handed them to Ches and he put them on. “Would you like to move to the chair, Ches?” April asked. Ches nodded. With help from a

nurse, April carefully sat Ches up in the chair near his bed, facing the nursing station where Ches could see all the action.

Then an amazing thing happened – as the staff stood there staring and smiling at Ches’s transformation, Ches smiled back. His whole face lit up. After Ches’s hospital makeover, his recovery was rapid. He was moved to a medical floor where he was able to get out of bed and walk around. He gained several pounds and his gaunt face filled out and brightened considerably. Ches provided the social worker with the name and contact information for his son Jim who lived in a nearby community. Jim, who had not been aware that his father had been hospitalized, arrived the next day. Less than a week later, Ches was discharged. Follow-up appointments were made for Ches with the community health nurse and a physiotherapist. Jim invited Ches to stay with him until longer-term plans could be made for his accommodations and care.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Using the story below, read and respond to the following questions.

Imagine that you are in the home of an older woman, a refugee from Colombia. The two of you are sitting at a table in her kitchen. She has just disclosed a devastating experience of physical violence. She has a bruise under her left eye. Her lower lip is bleeding and swollen. She tells you in hesitant English that her son hit her across the face when she refused to give him money. He then left the house. She does not know where he has gone. She does not want you to call the police. How do you respond? Sharing this story must have been incredibly difficult and painful for this woman.

1. How do you understand the situation?
2. What do you say to the woman?
3. What assumptions are you making about her?
4. What assumptions are you making about the son?
5. What attitudes are you showing in your nonverbal behaviour?
6. How well are you listening to what is going on inside you as you interact with this woman?
7. What are you feeling?
8. How are you reacting?
9. *(For professional helpers)* What do you need to do as a professional?