

How to Create a Safe Space for Conversations with Victims of Violence? – Perspective of a Young Psychiatrist

A safe space for conversations with victims of violence is the foundation of effective support – it allows the person affected by violence to regain a sense of safety, agency, and dignity.

Beyond the victims and perpetrators, third parties often play a role in the phenomenon, acting as witnesses to violent behavior. Witnesses play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of reinforcing undesirable behaviors. It is essential that when we witness violence, we do not remain passive, as showing support can have a tremendous impact on the affected individual. Our response to victims of violence should always be kind and assertive – that is, based on the ability to express our feelings, needs, and opinions directly, honestly, and firmly, while simultaneously respecting the rights and boundaries of others. It is also important to report every instance of violence – even anonymously, if possible. Victims often feel shame, fear, guilt, and anxiety about the consequences of disclosing violent incidents. Therefore, it is crucial not to ask questions that reinforce feelings of guilt, such as, “Why didn’t you say anything then?” Conversations should be conducted in a supportive manner, without judgment or pressure to make decisions. Speak calmly and gently, maintain eye contact without forcing it, and avoid giving unsolicited advice or pressuring for quick solutions. Helpful opening statements include: “You can talk as much as you want.”

A safe space requires appropriate time and setting. Conversations should take place in a quiet, calm environment, ensuring privacy and the absence of third parties. Comfort should be considered – access to water, tissues, and the possibility to pause the conversation at any time. Time should be given without rushing or interrupting the person affected. A helpful tool for conducting conversations with victims of violence is the SPIKES protocol (used by physicians and other clinicians to convey difficult information to patients), which structures the communication process. It includes: **Setting** – providing appropriate conditions and the presence of supportive persons; **Perception** – understanding the victim’s perspective; **Invitation** – asking whether the affected person wants and is ready to engage in the conversation; **Knowledge** – providing information about possible actions and ensuring understanding; **Emotions** –



demonstrating empathy and understanding for the victim's emotions; and **Strategy** – jointly establishing a plan of action and simple steps to take.

Creating a safe space also requires the use of active listening techniques, including:

- Clarification – ensures that we correctly understand the speaker's statements.
- Normalization – shows that experiencing violence is not a reason for shame.
- Metaphors – facilitate conversation about difficult emotions, while summaries help organize key points.

It is important to remember that in conversations with victims of violence, moderation is essential – maintain moderate eye contact, controlled facial expressions, and avoid judgment.

What Should a “Safe Space” for Conversations Also Be Characterized By?

Creating a safe space for conversations with victims of violence in the academic environment requires empathy, assertiveness, and appropriate communication tools. Witnesses, victims, and institutions must work together to break the cycle of violence and rebuild trust. Remember, every conversation is an opportunity to restore a sense of safety and demonstrate that violence is not acceptable.

From a psychiatrist's perspective, three basic psychological principles are crucial in conversations with victims of violence: respect, openness to problems, and the absence of criticism. Respect means treating the person with full dignity, acknowledging their emotions and experiences without minimizing or trivializing them. Openness to problems involves creating a space where the victim can freely talk about their difficult experiences, knowing they will be listened to and understood. The absence of criticism is equally important – judgments, evaluative comments, or questions implying blame only deepen feelings of shame and isolation. Instead of criticism, one should show empathy, provide support, and reinforce the sense of safety, allowing the conversation to become a first step toward regaining control over one's life.

Strengthening Positive Resources

Conversations with victims should begin with listening and showing empathy. The next steps involve identifying and reinforcing the psychosocial resources of the individual – the elements that can become the foundation for rebuilding a sense of safety and agency. Focusing on the victim's strengths helps them regain self-confidence and recognize opportunities that may have been obscured by their past experiences of violence.



American psychologist Stevan Hobfoll identifies several categories of resources worth considering in both therapeutic conversations and supportive peer discussions. The most important types of resources include:

- Material resources – access to basic needs such as housing, financial means, or healthcare. Although often overlooked in conversation, these are crucial for a sense of security.
- Social resources – support from family, friends, colleagues, or support groups. Demonstrating to the victim that they are not alone strengthens their ability to cope with challenges.
- Environmental resources – analyzing the environment for availability of help and support, e.g., psychological counseling centers, NGOs, or institutional structures. Awareness of institutions ready to act provides a sense of real protection.
- Intrapyschic resources – the most important, as they are rooted within the individual. They include psychological resilience, subjectively perceived social support, sense of coherence (capability, comprehensibility, and meaningfulness), coping styles and strategies, dispositional optimism, internal locus of control (“I manage my life”), self-efficacy, and self-esteem.

Why Are Resources So Important?

Resources act as a psychological “buffer” – protecting against the deepening effects of violence and supporting the healing process. A victim who recognizes their strengths and possibilities can make decisions more easily, regain a sense of control over their life, and build psychological resilience. Strengthening resources is therefore not only part of the conversation but also a long-term strategy for preventing recurrences of violence. In summary, creating a safe space for conversations with victims of violence, especially in an academic setting, requires combining several key elements: ensuring privacy and comfort, showing respect and empathy, and using language free of criticism and judgment. It is essential that the conversation takes place in a calm environment, with the possibility of pausing at any moment, and that the facilitator speaks in a gentle tone, maintains moderate eye contact, and listens actively.

In the academic environment, breaking the silence and the normalization of violence through witness intervention and clear institutional procedures is particularly important. Only by combining individual support, active engagement from the surrounding community, and institutional responsibility can a space be created where the victim feels safe, regains control over their actions, and begins the healing process.

Dr. Joanna Smolarczyk, MD, PhD

