# Responding to Family Violence

**What is response?**

Response – also known as tertiary prevention – supports victim survivors who are experiencing or have experienced family violence. It aims to prevent the recurrence of violence by supporting victim survivors to keep safe and by holding perpetrators of violence to account(Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth, 2015).

All workforces and workplaces have a role to play in responding to family violence, whether it is being experienced by your clients or your colleagues.

**Principles of response**

There are several principles that guide an effective good practice response to someone who is experiencing family violence.

* A human rights-based approach recognises the woman’s right to be secure, free from discrimination, to have her privacy respected and her right to life upheld.
* Working with the woman to support her to make her own decisions and have choice and control based on what she needs to feel safe.
* A person-centred approach means listening to a woman to understand what her needs, goals and wishes are.
* Strengths-based practice means focusing on the woman’s strengths, skills, and resources to support them to feel in control and have agency.

**Best practice in handling disclosures**

A ‘disclosure’ is when a person tells someone else about something distressing that has happened to them. How someone reacts to the disclosure can determine if that person feels confident or safe enough to take action, or if they don’t feel safe to disclose to another person again. Findings from the 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence found that responding appropriately improves victim survivors’ recovery (State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations, 2014 – 2016).

Women with disabilities can face additional barriers to disclosing or reporting their experiences of violence. If they do disclose, they are less likely to be believed (Woodlock, Western, & Bailey, P., 2014). As a support worker, you have an important and trusted role in your clients’ lives. It is vital to understand and respect that trust, and to always listen to and believe women with disabilities.

A woman may disclose violence that is happening now, happened recently, or happened in the past. The effects of violence can have long-term impacts on victim survivors and it is important to listen and offer support, regardless of when the violence occurred.

A disclosure is an act of trust – it means the woman trusts you and thinks you might be able to help. Responding appropriately to a disclosure is an essential step to supporting her.

**Responding to disclosure checklist**

### Listen

* Ensure her communication requirements are met
* Listen supportively to what she wants to share
* Be patient and let the woman use her own words — avoid leading questions
* Avoid quizzing about specific details of the abuse and let her decide what she wants to tell you

### Believe

* Make sure she feels that her story is heard, believed, and validated

### Reassure

* Reassure the woman that it is good she told you and express that you understand how difficult it must have been for her to do so
* Make clear that she is not at fault and any form of violence is never acceptable
* Identify and address any immediate concerns about her safety or the safety of others such as children

### Respect

* Respect that she may only disclose some details
* Acknowledge her bravery and strength
* Avoid making promises you can’t keep

### Referral

* Talk through her different options for what happens next, including explaining the different support services she can access (for instance, a family violence service, refuge, or the police. See Additional Information and Support in this handout)
* Support her decision on what she would like to do next and explain any mandatory reporting requirements you are required to adhere to
* Seek secondary consultation from specialists, if required, and provide a warm referral of requested

Different states and territories have different rules about responding to critical incidents, including abuse and violence. You must read, understand and follow your organisation’s policy and practice guidelines about responding to serious incidents. Good policy and procedures should include the following steps:

* Ensure the safety of the woman you support, yourself and other family members such as children. Make sure everyone in the situation is safe and supported.
* Check the woman’s immediate safety and protect her from any further harm.
* Dial an ambulance if anyone is injured. If in doubt, still call an ambulance.
* Contact the police if there is risk of further harm.
* Contact your supervisor or manager as soon as it is safe to do so.

Remember, it is important that you respect her decision on what happens next. It can take time before someone feels ready to seek further support and it is important that you show her that when she is ready, you will be there to support her as she needs.

**Secondary consults and warm referrals**

Just like in the video, one of the best ways to support someone is to seek a secondary consult with a specialist family violence service. These services can provide information and advice to practitioners and support workers as well as friends or family who are concerned about someone experiencing family violence.

* 1800RESPECT, the national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service. 1800 737 732 or [www.1800respect.org.au/](http://www.1800respect.org.au/)
* Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre (Victoria). 1800 015 188 or <https://www.safesteps.org.au/>
* The Orange Door (Victoria) <https://orangedoor.vic.gov.au>[/](https://orangedoor.vic.gov.au/)
* The Lookout (Victoria) [www.thelookout.org.au/](http://www.thelookout.org.au/)

You might also provide a ‘warm referral’ to these or one of the other services listed at the end of this handout. This means you have your client’s consent to contact the organisation on her behalf and assist her in connecting to their services.

**Looking after yourself**

Hearing disclosures and talking about family violence can be confronting and may trigger distressing feelings, including about violence experienced by yourself or others.

It is important for workers supporting victim survivors of family violence and other trauma to acknowledge and validate these feelings, and to seek support. This does not mean that you are unprofessional or unable to do your job – in fact, accessing debriefing and support is an important tool for support workers to reduce the risk of burn out, compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma and to assist in the sustainability of your career(The Look Out, 2020).

**There are a range of supports available:**

* Debrief with someone, such as your manager, a trusted friend or colleague, a counsellor, or another support person.
* Access your employee assistance program (EAP) and request someone experienced in supporting people who work with trauma.
* 1800RESPECT provides 24-hour telephone or online counselling services for professionals to discuss the personal impact of working with people who have experienced violence.
* Practice good self-care – do things that help you ‘turn off’ or rest from work, such as exercise, seeing friends, or creative activities.

## Where to go **for additional information and support**

**Support for someone experiencing family violence**

In an emergency, always call **Victoria Police** on 000.

**1800RESPECT** is the national family violence counselling, referral and information service and is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week**.** Phone 1800 7377 328 or [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

**Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre** is Victoria’s family violence support service and is open 24 hours, 7 days a week.Phone 1800 015 188 or [www.safesteps.org.au](http://www.safesteps.org.au)

**Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA House)** provides sexual assault counselling and crisis support. Phone 1800 806 292 or [www.casahouse.com.au](http://www.casahouse.com.au)

**Djirra** provides information, referral, support, legal service, and workshops for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Victoria who are experiencing family violence.Phone 1800 105 303 or (03) 9244 3333 or <https://djirra.org.au/>

**InTouch – Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence** supports women and children from migrant and refugee communities who are experiencing violence. Phone 1800 755 988 or <https://intouch.org.au/>

**With Respect** provides specialist LGBTIQ family violence support and counselling.Phone 1800 LGBTIQ (1800 542 847) or <https://www.withrespect.org.au/>

**WIRE** offers a free information and referral service for all Victorian women**.** Phone (03) 8346 5200 or email [support@wire.org.au](mailto:support@wire.org.au) or [www.wire.org.au](http://www.wire.org.au)

## Additional information and resources

**Our Watch** is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. [www.ourwatch.org.au](http://www.ourwatch.org.au/)

**Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS)** is the national research organisation on addressing violence against women and their children.[www.anrows.org.au](http://www.anrows.org.au/)

**Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV)** is a statewide Victorian organisation working to build the capability of professionals, organisations and systems to prevent and respond to violence against women.[www.dvrcv.org.au](http://www.dvrcv.org.au/)

## Women with Disabilities Victoria **information and resources**

A range of additional fact sheets and resources can be found at [www.wdv.org.au](http://www.wdv.org.au/)

You can also find out more about Women with Disabilities Victoria’s **Workforce Development Program on Gender and Disability.** The program is a primary prevention strategy which aims to:

* prevent violence against women with disabilities
* improve gender and disability responsive service practice, and
* improve the status and opportunities of women with disabilities.

The Program works with women with disabilities, social service and government organisations and workforces to increase awareness and capacity to prevent violence against women with disabilities. It does this by implementing cultural change strategies and delivering gender and disability equitable, responsive and inclusive services.

The program is supported by the Victorian Government through the Office for Women as an initiative under the Family Violence Industry Plan.

For more information about the program or to engage Women with Disabilities Victoria to provide training to your organisation please contact (03) 9286 7800 or email your inquiry to [wdv@wdv.org.au](mailto:Bianca.Evans@wdv.org.au)

## References

Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth (2015) Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia, p.15.

State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations. Parl Papers No 132 (2014-16)

Woodlock, D., Western, D., Bailey, P. 2014. ‘Voice Against Violence Paper Six: Raising Our Voices – Hearing from with Women with Disability’, Women with Disabilities Victoria, Office of the Public Advocate and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria.

The Look Out (2020), ‘Vicarious trauma and burnout’, <https://www.thelookout.org.au/family-violence-workers/self-care-family-violence-workers/vicarious-trauma-burnout>.