

Ethical Engagement of Survivor Advocates

Tip Sheet for speaking engagements

Preventing family and gender-based violence means engaging a range of audiences to raise awareness and encourage people to take-action. Organising events and having a survivor advocate talk about their lived experience can be powerful ways of engaging audiences and sharing messages to promote change.

But how can we ensure that these forums are effective, safe and ethical?

This tip sheet is drawn from an interactive panel with survivor advocates that was held during the PreventX conference in March 2024. The workshop was focused on the ways in which prevention practitioners can safely work *with* victim survivors of family violence to inform prevention messaging and activities. This tip sheet also responds to a growing need identified through Safe and Equal experiences during the 16 Days of Activism.

Around significant annual events, such as the 16 Days of Activism and International Women's Day, there is an increase in organisations holding events to raise awareness and engage more people in action.

Based on the [Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework](#), Safe and Equal has developed extensive guidance for engaging survivor advocates in a range of work – including a great checklist in [Planning Best Practice Engagements with Survivor Advocates](#).

This tip sheet adds to these resources, with a focus on speaking engagements and events. It has been developed in collaboration with survivor advocates and reflects the things that they felt were most important to remember when organising events.

Top Tips for ethical engagement of survivor advocates

Be clear on purpose and aims

The first thing to check is about the purpose of your event and whether it is actually appropriate to invite a survivor advocate to speak.

It is really important that survivor advocates are asked to speak and share their lived experience in ways that build an ongoing body of work – rather than just being asked to share their personal story or details of violence for ‘shock value’.

Changing attitudes about violence is long-term work, and you should only invite a survivor advocate to speak as part of a commitment to this change process.

Best practice is to involve the survivor advocate before your event is fully planned and designed, engaging them on their views about the topic, title and questions – rather than just asking them to slot into something that has been planned entirely without their input.

Equally, be careful about your expectations of what you would like a survivor advocate to say. Ask what they want to share and do not expect them to support your organisations’ policies or work.

Know your audience

When you are asking a survivor advocate to speak at your event, knowing your audience and their baseline understanding of the topic is key.

If your audience is completely new to the topic of family violence, putting a survivor advocate in that space might not be safe for them. Ask the survivor advocate if they are comfortable engaging in this way, and if not, consider engaging a different survivor advocate, or a non-lived experience family violence speaker to take your audience through more introductory content instead.

If your audience understands the basics of family violence and you have planning in place to ensure their safety, you will need to brief the advocate on the audience so they can think about how to apply their own lived experience to your specific context.

Be open to input and feedback

When you engage with a survivor advocate, it's really important to listen to them. They are experts in this work and will have plenty of ideas about how to make the event more impactful and safe for them.

You should ask for their input into the format – including things like length, questions, audience participation, other speakers, etc.

You need to make sure that the survivor advocate has agreed how they will be profiled and introduced, and check that they are ok with all the formats in which their experience will be used (e.g. promotion, recording and distribution).

Consider your Resourcing

Make sure you have the resources available to pay the advocate for their time, including enough to cover pre-briefing, preparation, travel time, delivery time and debriefing.

In addition to paying for their time, you also need to make sure you have the resources to provide a safe, inclusive and accessible environment.

It's really important to ask the survivor advocate what this looks like to them, and do what is required to provide this.

You should ask about things like pronouns (rather than assuming gender based on appearance) and check in about any safety and accessibility supports required (length and timing of breaks, interpreters, hearing loops or transport costs for a support person).

Plan for things that might go wrong

While everyone hopes that things go smoothly, it's best to discuss plans and processes in case things go wrong. Having these conversations upfront will help you to respond in the moment. It also helps the survivor advocate to feel safe if you show you have thought about this ahead of time.

Things to cover might be about triggers and boundaries for the survivor advocate, how to deal with hostile or invasive audience questions, what to do and who to go to if they feel their safety is threatened in any way, how any disclosures related to violence will be dealt with.

Discuss with the advocate in advance if they are comfortable responding to disclosures, and if not, ensure they will not be put in a position where they are required to do so.

Go for it!

These are just some tips to help you create a safe and ethical engagement with a survivor advocate, and allow you both to get the most out of working together. The key thing is to ask, be brave and ready to listen and learn.

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