

Single Birdcage:

A Training Activity for Multidisciplinary Audiences on the Impact of Unhelpful or Victim Blaming Comments

Purpose	This activity will enhance professionals understanding of the impact of unhelpful or victim blaming comments that are often made to older victims when they attempt to reach out for help. The exercise highlights coded disclosures and missed opportunities to provide information and support to older victims.
Time Needed	Approximately 20 minutes depending on the length of the discussion.
Target Audience	Any audience.
Audience Size	Any size if a microphone is used so that everyone can hear.
Pre-Training Preparation	Make three copies of the scripts. One script is for the facilitator. One script is for the volunteer who is playing the older victim. The final script can be cut into strips so volunteers with a speaking role gets a slip of paper with their lines.
Equipment Needed	One chair; one or two microphones; copies of scripts.
Room Arrangement	Place chair in the front of the room with enough space for eight people to create a circle around the victim. Have one or two microphones and the scripts easily accessible.
Slides	Slides are not needed for this activity.
Variations	The Double Birdcage is a scenario where the adult son is the abuser. This activity includes hearing the victim's inner voices/concerns, victim blaming, or unhelpful comments. Positive responses are modeled to give participants sample language to use when working with older victims.

Overview of this Exercise

The purpose of this activity is to enhance professionals understanding of the impact of unhelpful or victim blaming comments that are often made to older victims when they attempt to reach out for help. The exercise highlights coded disclosures and missed opportunities to provide information and support to older victims.

This exercise requires nine volunteers: one who will be sitting and eight who will make a circle around the person who is sitting. The sitting person will represent an older victim, eight volunteers will represent the victim's community members such as family, friends, and professionals.

- The older victim will read the scenario.
- Next the victim tries to reach out for help by speaking to community members, who respond.
- After the response is read, the reader will turn their back to the victim.

This exercise is effective to use following some discussion of the definitions and dynamics of abuse in later life. After hearing about domestic abuse in later life and possibly watching a video of a survivor telling their story, many audiences have questions about why victims don't leave. This exercise can move participants from victim blaming to understanding the complexity of victims' lives and understand the impact of our responses to a victim's efforts at seeking help.

Prior to Running the Exercise

Prior to the training event, make three copies of the script. Take one of the scripts and cut the speaking parts into strips so the volunteers with speaking parts will have slips of paper with the older victim's comment to them and their response.

Make a space available at the front of the room for one person to sit on a chair and eight people to create a circle around the chair.

Recruiting Participants and Giving Them Their Roles

Ask for one volunteer to come forward and sit in the chair. This volunteer represents the older victim. Give the volunteer a copy of the script to review silently. While the volunteer reviews the script, recruit eight more volunteers to read short statements. These volunteers remain in their seats. Give each volunteer a copy of one of the scripts representing community members and assign each volunteer a role such as Sibling, Landlord, Long-Time Friend, etc.

Facilitating the Exercise

Invite the volunteer representing the older victim to read a script about Gladys, a 70-year-old woman. Let the audience know that we will now hear some typical responses from community members such as friends, family, and professionals. The volunteer representing Gladys states who she is speaking to (e.g., "I am speaking to my Landlord"). The volunteer representing that person comes and stands in front of Gladys. Gladys reads her statement. Volunteer responds by reading their script and then turns their back to Gladys. Gladys repeats this until all eight community members are in the front of the room with their backs towards Gladys.

Thank the participants and invite them to return to their seats. Engage in a discussion with the audience using the sample questions found at the end of the script.

Single Birdcage: Script

Note to Volunteer: Please read at the beginning of the exercise:

My name is Gladys. I am 70 years old. I was married to Harold 48 years. Harold was a wonderful husband and a good provider. We had four children, all who now live in different states. Harold died last year from lung cancer.

Ten months after Harold's death I met Oliver, who is 68. Oliver is funny, caring, compassionate, and romantic. I introduced him to my children and grandchildren. They all love him. My friends thought I was lucky to have found someone who was so charming.

Before we got married, I sold my home. We planned to live in Oliver's apartment until we could find a place of our own. Once I moved in, we never went to look for another place.

Sibling Response

Gladys to her Sibling:

"Oliver isn't like he was when we were dating."

Sibling:

"You are so lucky to have found him. I'm so lonely since my husband's death."

Landlord Response

Gladys to Landlord:

"I have some questions about my lease."

Landlord:

"I got a call from the neighbors complaining about a loud argument last night. If you can't keep Oliver quiet, I will evict both of you and you will be financially responsible for any damage to the property."

Longtime Friend Response

Gladys to her longtime friend:

"I have to cancel lunch again this week. Oliver likes to have me stay at home."

Longtime friend:

"It isn't like you to cancel plans so often. We used to have lunch every Monday. But I understand you and Oliver are still newlyweds, so I guess I will forgive you this time."

Bankers Response

Gladys to the Banker:

"I am interested in getting some information about protecting my finances."

Banker:

"I can understand wanting a joint account so you don't have to worry about your financial affairs. You're so lucky to have Oliver around to help you. He seemed to have a good handle on your finances."

Clergy Response

Gladys to Clergy:

"My husband seems to have a problem with anger. What should I do?"

Clergy:

"I have explained to you that second marriages can be a struggle at first. I suggest trying harder to please your husband. It must be difficult for him to adjust to marriage after living alone for so long."

Doctors Response

Gladys to Doctor:

"I have been having chest pains lately."

Doctor:

"Your heart checks out fine. I think you're just nervous and depressed. I am going to prescribe an antidepressant."

"I also noticed you have some old and new bruises. I am concerned about how often you are falling and your diet. I would like to talk to you about seeing a specialist."

Law Enforcement Response

Gladys to Law Enforcement:

"I'm afraid he is going to hurt me."

Law Enforcement:

"Unless there is physical proof, fear alone is not sufficient for us to intervene."

In-home Worker Response

Gladys to In-home Worker:

"I don't know what is wrong with me lately. I'm so nervous and easily irritated these days. Whenever Oliver walks through the door my heart starts to beat faster. He came home last night angry and I was just so afraid."

In-Home Worker:

"I've known you for years. You do seem off. And I've noticed you have lost weight. I could contact your case manager, they could do an assessment and see if we could get you into a nursing home."

Single Birdcage:

Potential Discussion Questions/Talking Points

When done, ask for general observations. Guide conversation as follows:

- What did you physically SEE?
Elicit: The victim is trapped, can't get out, there's no opening; all the presumable helpers had their backs to her, etc.
- Person representing the victim, how did you FEEL?
Elicit: I felt trapped, in a cage, there was no opening, they all have their backs to me, etc.
- Role players, what do you FEEL?
Elicit: I wasn't helpful, I should have said X or Y.

Ask specific role players:

- Banker: Is a joint account really such a great idea?"
- Police officer: What is standard practice when investigating a complaint?
- Doctor: Do you have direct conversations with patients when you are concerned about what might be going on at home?
- Consider other discussion questions with professionals.

Point out that this case is unusual ONLY in how many attempts Gladys made to reach out for help. Often one or two people minimizing, ignoring, or becoming impatient with a victim can cause a victim to give up and not ask for help.

- What kinds of protocols, policies, and training are needed to change their procedures, assumptions, etc.?
Elicit: Additional training on the dynamics of abuse in later life, talking to the victim alone, respecting privacy and autonomy, services that help victims feel like they are not alone, such as support groups and regular contact from professionals.

Close the discussion by pointing out that each of us has an opportunity to listen closely for coded disclosures and to respond with compassion and support to older victims both in our personal and our professional lives.