

## Double Birdcage:

### A Training Activity for Multidisciplinary Audiences on Supportive Response to Disclosures about Abuse in Later Life

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| <b>Purpose</b>                  | This activity will enhance participants' ability to work with older victims by providing supportive messages and recognizing that many survivors have experienced victim blaming.  |
| <b>Time Needed</b>              | 20–30 minutes depending on the length of the discussion  |
| <b>Target Audience</b>          | Any audience.  |
| <b>Audience Size</b>            | Any size if a microphone is used so that everyone can hear.  |
| <b>Pre-Training Preparation</b> | 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 get a slip of paper with their lines. The strips need to have unhelpful responses on one side and the helpful responses on the other. |
| <b>Equipment Needed</b>         | One chair; one or two microphones; copies of scripts.  |
| <b>Room Arrangement</b>         | Place chair in the front of the room with enough space for 10 people to create two circles of five around the victim. Have one or two microphones and the scripts easily accessible.   |
| <b>Slides</b>                   | No slides are needed for this activity.  |
| <b>Variations</b>               | Single Birdcage using only negative voices of community members to represent barriers many older victims experience when trying to seek help.  |

## **Overview of this Exercise**

The purpose of this activity is to enhance participants' ability to work with older victims by providing supportive messages and recognizing that many survivors have experienced victim blaming.

This exercise requires 11 volunteers: one who will be sitting and 10 who will make two circles of five around the person who is sitting. The sitting person will represent an older victim, five volunteers will represent the victim's "inner voices," and five will represent community members such as family, friends, and professionals.

- The older victim will read the scenario.
- The victim's "inner voices" will each read scripts that represent the negative self-talk many older victims have internalized from messages they receive from family, friends, professionals, and society.
- Next the victim tries to reach out for help by speaking to community members, who respond with unhelpful comments.
- Each time a negative statement is read, the reader turns their back to the victim.
- The exercise ends with each volunteer reading positive responses and turning again to face 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. It can make it easier for participants with speaking parts if the negative inner voices or unhelpful comments are on blue paper. Cut these pieces of paper so each volunteer gets a slip with their lines. The internal voices will not have any comments from Clara. The volunteers who are talking to Clara will get a slip of paper with her line and their response. Then copy the positive internal voices and helpful comments on yellow paper. It can be easiest for the volunteers if the

two slips of paper with their lines are glued together so that they can read the negative comments first (blue paper) and then they can flip the slip of paper over and read the positive comments (yellow paper) at the appropriate time.

Make a space available at the front of the room for one person to sit on a chair and 10 people to create two circles of five around the chair.

## **Recruiting Volunteers 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 10 more volunteers to read short statements. These volunteers remain in their seats. Give each volunteer a copy of one of the scripts representing “internal voices” or a script for community members and assign each volunteer a script number or a community member role. Explain to volunteers that each of the internal voices scripts includes a “positive” and a “negative” internal voice and each of the community members scripts includes an “unhelpful” and a “helpful” response.

## **Facilitating the Exercise**

Invite the volunteer representing the older victim to read a script about Clara, a 72-year-old woman. Let the audience know that the next five speakers will represent Clara’s “internal voices,” the self-talk many older victims have internalized from messages they receive from family, friends, professionals, and society. Volunteers with “internal” statements will stand and read their “Negative Internal Voices” script, each coming forward after reading their statements to stand in a circle around the victim, facing away from her. This first group of 5 volunteers should stay at the front of the room while the next group comes up to say their part.

Next, let the audience know that we will hear some typical responses from community members such as friends, family, and professionals. Invite the volunteer representing Clara to state who she is speaking to (e.g., “I am speaking to my Pastor”). The volunteer representing that person comes and stands in front of Clara. Clara reads her statement. Volunteer responds with their “Unhelpful Responses” script and then turns their back to Clara. Clara repeats this until all five community members are in the front of the room with their backs towards Clara. At this point, volunteers will have made two concentric circles around the victim.

Discuss the internal and external barriers faced by victims. Describe how many victims feel, including the feelings of self-blame, guilt, and shame, and feelings of being trapped. Then discuss how we can change our language and the messages we give to victims.

Invite the “internal voices” to turn one at a time to face Clara, speak directly to her by reading their “Positive Internal Voices,” script and then return to their seats.

Next, invite Clara to read the same statements to the community members. Each community member should turn and face her as they respond with their “Responses that Encourage Discussion” script. At the end of this section, the five community members will be standing around Clara, providing a circle of support.

## **Double Birdcage:** **Script**

***Note to Faciliator:*** Make one copy for volunteer representing older survivor.

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

I am Clara. I am a 72-year-old widow. I have lived a full, active life. I was an elementary school teacher until I retired 10 years ago. I am active at church and in a bridge club. Unfortunately, eight years ago I was in an automobile accident. A drunk driver hit me and now I must use a wheelchair to get around. I have friends and neighbors who help me with groceries and housework. My son, Thomas, also helps around the house. Lately, some of my friends are more reluctant to come over if Thomas is home.

Thomas is 53 and has many talents so he has held a variety of jobs. My husband died when Thomas was 12. Thomas has lived with me his whole life, except when he was in the army. That is where he developed his fascination with guns. I don't mind the army magazines that come to the house as much as the ones with girls in them. Sometimes he yells at me or gets out his guns and teases me with them. I've been thinking it is time for him to move out and get married.

## **Script for Clara's Internal Voices: Negative Internal Voices**

**Note to Facilitator:** Make five copies, one for each of the “internal voice” volunteers.

**Note to Volunteers:** After reading your statement, go to the front of the room and stand with your back to Clara. We will be creating a circle around Clara.

### **#1 Negative Internal Voice:**

If I had raised him right, he would be married and on his own now.

### **#2 Negative Internal Voice:**

I don't know how I would take care of things without Thomas. Lately I've been misplacing or forgetting things. Thomas says I must be getting Alzheimer's. Sometimes, I do feel like I am going crazy.

### **#3 Negative Internal Voice:**

What would my friends think if they knew Thomas watches pornographic movies —and makes me watch them too? I hate it when he pins my wheelchair in the room when the videos are on so I have to see and hear that stuff. Usually, I just close my eyes and try to sleep.

### **#4 Negative Internal Voice:**

What if Thomas really leaves me this time? I need some help to cook and clean. They'll probably put me in a nursing home and I would rather die than go there.

**#5 Negative Internal Voice:**

If I make him leave, what will happen to Thomas? Without a job or money, he might end up in jail or on the streets. And it would be my fault.

## **Script for Clara's Internal Voices: Positive Internal Voices**

**Note to Faciliator:** Make five copies, one for each of the "internal voice" volunteers.

**Note to Volunteers:** Turn to Clara and read your statement to her. Once you have read your statement, please return to your seat.

### **#1 Positive Internal Voice:**

I was the best parent I knew how to be with my son. Every mother makes mistakes.

### **#2 Positive Internal Voice:**

I am a strong, competent woman. Everyone forgets or misplaces things.

### **#3 Positive Internal Voice:**

I do not have to watch those movies. It is my house. I can have a safety plan to avoid getting pinned in the living room again.

### **#4 Positive Internal Voice:**

I have friends and neighbors who will help me. There are also programs such as home health or chore services that can help me. I will do what I can to help Thomas, but I cannot take care of him anymore.

**#5 Positive Internal Voice:**

I can love my son and not be responsible for what happens to him. He is 53 years old. It is time for him to be responsible for his own actions.

## Script for Community Members: Unhelpful Responses (Page 1 of 2)

**Note to Faciliator** Make six copies, one for the five volunteers representing someone in the community and one for Clara.

**Note to Volunteers:** Once Clara announces who she is speaking to, go to the front of the room and face Clara. After Clara reads her statement, read your response and turn your back to her. We will be creating a circle around Clara.

### **Pastor Unhelpful Response**

**Clara to Pastor:**

I am concerned about Thomas.

**Pastor to Clara:**

I have been praying for Thomas too. I have not seen him in church for years. You are his only hope for salvation. You must get him back to church.

### **Relative Unhelpful Response**

**Clara to Relative:**

Thomas brought home another gun yesterday.

**Relative to Clara:**

Why is he fascinated with guns? You need to tell him to grow up and stop playing with guns and get a real job.

### **Doctor Unhelpful Response**

**Clara to doctor:**

The headaches I mentioned at our last visit are getting worse.

**Doctor to Clara:**

(Ignoring the bruises on her back and arms.) I see the pain medication is not working. Let's try a stronger dose. You may find this medication makes you drowsy and slows your reflexes but it should fix your headaches.

## **Script for Community Members: Unhelpful Responses (Page 2 of 2)**

**Note to Facilitator** Make six copies, one for the five volunteers representing someone in the community and one for Clara.

**Note to Volunteers:** Go to the front of the room and face Clara. After Clara reads her statement, read your response and turn your back to her. We will be

### **Banker Unhelpful Response**

#### **Clara to her banker:**

I want to come in to develop a financial plan for my future.

#### **Banker to Clara:**

Thomas was just here yesterday saying the same thing. I understand you are getting forgetful and not keeping good records anymore. It may be time to sign over your financial decision-making power to Thomas. Then he can control your Social Security, pension, and the title to your house.

### **Senior Center Activity Director Unhelpful Response**

#### **Clara to Senior Center Activity Director:**

Do other people have problems with their children?

#### **Senior Center Activity Director to Clara:**

Of course, dear. Why, I can't get my daughter to stop buying expensive gifts and taking me on cruises. I tell her enough is enough but she just loves me so much.

creating a circle around Clara.

## **Script for Family, Friends, and Professionals: Responses that Encourage Discussion (Page 1 of 2)**

**Note to Faciliator:** Make six copies, one for the five volunteers representing someone in the community and one for Clara.

**Note to Volunteers:** Listen for Clara to announce who she is speaking to, then turn to Clara and listen to her read her statement below. Read your reply to Clara. Continue to face Clara as we build a circle of support.

### **Pastor Response that Encourages Discussion**

**Clara to Pastor:**

I am concerned about Thomas.

**Pastor to Clara:**

I'd like to hear more about your concerns about Thomas.

### **Relative Response that Encourages Discussion**

**Clara to relative:**

Thomas brought home another gun yesterday.

**Relative to Clara:**

Clara, I am afraid for your safety in a home with so many guns. Is there anything I can do to help you?

### **Doctor Response that Encourages Discussion**

**Clara to doctor:**

The headaches I mentioned at our last visit are getting worse.

**Doctor to Clara:**

I am concerned about your headaches and the bruises I noticed on your arms and back. Often when I see bruises like this, a family member or caregiver is hurting my patient. Has Thomas or anyone else hurt you, Clara?

## **Script for Family, Friends, and Professionals: Responses that Encourage Discussion (Page 2 of 2)**

**Note to Faciliator:** Make six copies, one for each individual representing someone in the community and one for Clara.

**Note to Volunteers:** Listen for Clara to announce who she is speaking to, then turn to Clara and listen to her read her statement below. Read your reply to Clara. Continue to face Clara as we build a circle of support.

### **Banker Response that Encourages Discussion**

**Clara to banker:**

I want to come in to develop a financial plan for my future.

**Banker to Clara:**

I am glad that you are planning for your future, Clara. I want to hear from you how things are going now and what you might want to do in the future. I will describe your options so you can understand your rights. These are important decisions for you to make.

### **Senior Center Activity Director Response that Encourages Discussion**

**Clara to Senior Center Activity Director:**

Do other people have problems with their children?

**Senior Center Activity Director to Clara:**

Of course, many people have problems with their adult children. Are you having some problems with Thomas that you would like to talk about?

## **Double 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. Now I feel like they have my back; I have a support system.
- Role players, what do you FEEL?  
**Elicit:** I wasn't helpful, I should have said X or Y.

Ask specific role players:

- Financial advisor: Should you have only listened to the caregiver? 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 Clara 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.