

Guidelines for Making Personal Testimonies of Domestic Abuse in the Media

*Adapted from an original paper by Chorley and South Ribble Domestic Abuse Forum with whom copyright remains.

IMPORTANT

This list is not meant to be exhaustive but give you - as a woman telling her story or a supporter - some pointers in working with media (newspapers, magazines, radio or TV), when speaking out about personal experiences of domestic abuse.

Basic Principles for Women Speaking Out

1. Your well-being and physical safety should be the overriding priority. If you feel your safety is not being respected, you can stop the process or walk away at any time. Your safety (and that of your children) is of paramount importance and must not be ignored. In most media situations, any concerns are best addressed as they occur rather than later so speak up!
2. It should be understood that very personal and intimate details are being disclosed to a stranger and that you may feel very exposed during or after doing this.
3. Establishing respect for you and your experiences is important. Make sure you ask for what you need and don't allow yourself to be pushed into doing things you don't want to. Always remember that media people's first priority isn't you but their programme - no matter how friendly they may be. If in doubt, say no or walk away.
4. You may re-live very troubling memories or thoughts and this has the potential for you to become distressed. Try to think of sources of support beforehand. Take a friend with you for support if you want.
5. If you are still experiencing domestic abuse, there may also be issues of physical safety that the agency worker or supporter should take into account. If filming, you can ask to be filmed anonymously (e.g. in silhouette, from behind etc). In these circumstances, be aware they may film your hands so you may want to remove any distinctive jewellery.
6. Although it can be tempting to want to speak out to help others, you come first. If you think the experience is too recent or still causing you significant problems, it may be better to wait until more time has passed.

Guidelines for Women Survivors

Please read all guidelines (the sections on before, during and after interview), this will help give you a picture of the whole process and you can then make a fully informed choice.

Before the interview

If you are being asked to tell your story by someone else, as opposed to having decided to do this yourself, find out what the information is being used for and where it will go, before making your decision.

Support Networks

- Make sure you are comfortable during any interview. You could ask a friend or another to come with you, make sure you are comfortable with and trust the

person accompanying you. If a worker has asked you to speak out, you can still choose who you want to be with you.

- Make sure you have left time to discuss the interview with your supporter afterwards.
- It may be useful to have identified people (or helplines) to talk to if you feel the need at anytime afterwards (this may be straightaway, hours, or even weeks).

Preparations

- You may want to with some notes beforehand to help you. Sometimes, nerves can make you forget important details.
- It is advisable to pick someone as a go-between to set up the interview, (this will give you time to negotiate details and change your mind while keeping your identity and contact details confidential).
- Establish ground rules and your boundaries (i.e. anything you do not want to talk about).
- We suggest asking for “copy approval” for written articles (you get to see the article before it is printed and make corrections if needed).
- If possible, get written or taped copies of the questions in advance.

During the interview

- You can stop the interview at anytime, either for a break, or to stop completely.
- Make an agreement before the interview with your supporter on how you will communicate to them if you feel uncomfortable and want to stop the interview (either for a break or completely). It may be a sign that you make, a word that you say, or you may agree to say directly.
- You can refuse to answer any questions (you are not obliged to say why).

At the end of the interview

- You can ask for a copy of the publication or tape of the interview (if you want to keep your contact details confidential this can be sent to your supporter).

After the interview

- Congratulate yourself (lots!), you have just done a very brave and courageous thing. Take time to look after yourself, treat yourself, speak to friends/supporters, whatever you think you need.

Possible Consequences

- Be kind to yourself, don't give yourself a hard time if you get upset or feel exposed (this could be at the time or anytime afterwards). Even if you think you have come to terms with your experience, an interview could unexpectedly trigger distress for you. Make sure you have support networks in place as in the section on before the interview.

- Be aware that speaking out may have consequences for you and your family (e.g. is it safe for you to speak out?) - this may influence your decision whether to speak out or not.
- If you are concerned about your identity and any consequences for you of this being known, consider changing your name and any identifying details (e.g. place, names, names of others involved, children's ages). For TV interviews, if you need to remain anonymous, have an agreement on how this will be done.
- You may find that you are approached by publications or journalists after your story has been told (article, radio interview). We suggest you look at this carefully and find out all details of who is asking, for what purpose and which publications. You may want to use a go-between party to do this.
- Speaking out can be incredibly positive, for you to feel better about yourself and for others to learn from your story in a really powerful way. However, also be prepared that speaking out may not have a visible effect in making the changes you hoped for. At worst the interview may not even be used / published. Your story may result in responses from other women survivors, so you will have helped, but you may never know about this effect.
- **Remember that it is always your choice as to when, where, how many times and even if, you speak out. If you feel unable at this point in time, don't give yourself a hard time. There will always be another opportunity and rather than having 'failed' you will have 'succeeded' in learning how to take care of yourself.**

Basic Principles for Everyone Supporting Women to Speak Out

1. The woman survivor's well-being and physical safety should be the overriding priority.
2. Participants may re-live very troubling memories or thoughts and this has the potential for them to become distressed.
3. Establishing respect and dignity throughout the process is paramount.
4. It should be understood that very personal and intimate details are being disclosed to a stranger and that a woman may feel very exposed during or after doing this.
5. If the participant is still experiencing domestic abuse, there may also be issues of physical safety that the agency worker should take into account.
6. Try to be sure that experience is dealt with enough or in the past (as far as is possible).

Guidelines for Agency Workers and/or Supporters

Read guidelines for women survivors.

Before the interview

- Her physical safety / emotional safety must be the main consideration at ALL times. Always thoroughly discuss what this means for her and use the information to inform how you act. Think about how you can make this process as comfortable as possible for her (even the physical surroundings).
- Never, ever pressure a woman to speak out.
- Be aware that there are many ways in which a woman may be subtly pressurized or persuaded to speak out. Please take the following into account:
 1. As a worker or supporter you are in a position of power as a helper. This means you have more power in the situation than the woman.
 2. Women survivors often feel that they want to give back or help others, if she feels that she has been really helped by someone, she may feel obliged to help them in return. Also, some women survivors have had their boundaries and needs completely negated by their abuser, and may not have sufficiently recovered from the effects of this.
 3. Be sure that she is not disregarding her own physical or emotional safety needs and that she has recovered sufficiently from her situation (as far as is possible).
 4. The responsibility never to exploit the power imbalances or vulnerabilities in the helping relationship lies completely with you as a supporter/worker.
- Do not assume that you will be the nominated supporter on the day. If you are not, make sure the supporter reads guidelines. If this is the case, this may mean that there is a degree of mistrust, so double check that the woman really is ok to go through with this. If you have ANY doubts, cancel.

- Have plenty of preparation time available, discuss safety issues, possible use of false name(s), interview practicalities (does she want to talk to a woman?), emotional issues, support networks, establish ground rules and boundaries, e.g. anything she does not want to talk about, plus all points covered in the two sections that follow.
- Act as a go-between or a third party in setting up with the interviewer, without breaking any confidentiality regarding names, situations, etc. Be led by the woman's needs and make sure she has a place or phone number where she can contact you.

During the interview

- Make sure you all stick to the rules previously agreed.
- It is your responsibility to deal with reporter on all issues plus to tackle any distress the process may be causing the woman.
- Be prepared to politely tackle any detachment or patronising/antagonistic attitudes or offensive lines of questioning from the reporter.
- Act on any agreement to step in, on being asked by the woman or by a previously agreed signal from her (these should be agreed beforehand). Consider also acting sensitively if the woman starts to feel and show a strong sense of self-blame, e.g. remind her how difficult it was, or how she does not have to feel responsible for someone else's bad behaviour, etc.
- Remind the reporter that you will need copy approval if the article is written. Proof read any articles together with the woman and correct any mistakes or add important events/parts of the story if they have been missed. Ask for a copy of the interview (tape or video), if wanted.

After the interview

- Congratulate the woman you are supporting, remind her how courageous and brave she has been.
- Debrief: you have to be available immediately after the interview to talk through how it went, and pick up on any support needs.
- Recap: networks to offer longer term support (e.g. counselling), must be talked through, any help to refer should be offered.
- If there are any doubts to the story being used, chase up with the reporter that they must use story if possible, explain how damaging it will be if they do not.

Live interviews

This is a potentially difficult and stressful process to be involved in, we would consider not doing live interviews as a rule. If you do participate in one, these must be set up carefully. Some additional or important issues:

- Ask for written questions in advance.
- Don't answer a question if don't want to. You can refuse to answer on air and you do not have to say why.
- Prepare answers to any possible difficult questions, e.g. have stock answers prepared or written down.
- Establish ground rules in advance, e.g. if they do not stick to the written questions what will you do?