**Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services**

**Managing Challenging Calls**

Individuals connect our services for a variety of reasons and it is important to not place personal judgments or make assumptions about callers and/or why they might be reaching out.

What if a caller is slurring their words or we cannot understand what they are saying? Do we automatically assume they are intoxicated or high? Maybe they are on medication, or maybe they have a disability. We don’t know unless we are told, or unless we ask. What if a caller is highly agitated and raising their voice? Sometimes people need to yell, swear and vent their feeling to someone safe who is able to listen and hear their feelings of hurt, fear, and hopelessness without taking it personally or censoring them. As long as callers are not yelling at us, or taking their anger/frustration out on us personally, they should be able to speak freely and openly to an advocate.

So, what if a caller is unhappy or upset and begins to target us directly? In these situations we can interrupt the caller and let them know that although it is ok to feel the way they feel, it is not ok to call us names or yell at advocates. If needed, we can saying something like, “*I am treating you with respect and I need you to be respectful of me. If you cannot do that, I will need to end this call.*” or, “*I need you to stop yelling at me and calling me names, or I will end this call immediately*.”

**Yes**, it is okay to hang up on someone who is yelling at you, calling you names, telling you that are a horrible advocate, etc. It is NOT okay for you to continue a call or meeting with someone who is verbally abusing or harassing you. Although these situations are rare they can be very overwhelming and frustrating. Please connect with your staff contact if you experience a situation like this. For staff members, it is recommended that you connect with your supervisor the following business day, or immediately if there is an emergency situation.

Additionally, there may be times when the caller states that nothing is helpful and that you, the advocate, are not meeting their needs or doing what they want you to do. A caller may also not want to participate in healthy grounding techniques or may be reluctant to engage in other forms of advocacy. Keep in mind that this person called the helpline or agreed to speak with us. Advocates cannot solve people’s problems, and should generally not be doing more work than the caller is willing to do.

It may be helpful to ask:

∙ “*What has worked for you in the past?*”

∙ “*What do you need from me right now?*”

∙ “*How can I assist you right now?*”

It may also be necessary to reiterate what an advocate at SAPARS does and what the Helpline is for:

∙ *Advocates listen, provide emotional support, and talk about options.*

∙ *Advocates can help with planning for safety and make referrals to other services.* ∙ *Advocates do not provide counseling and we cannot replace crisis mental health services.* ∙ *The Helpline is a place for people to call when they need short term immediate support or information.*

Ending a Call

There may be times when it is necessary to assist with ending a call. The helpline is designed for short term support and it’s not appropriate for an advocate to stay on the phone with someone while they fall asleep, or for too long a duration unless there is an actual emergency situation. Experience tells us that calls/meetings over 2 hours may need to be ended with the assistance of the advocate unless an accompaniment is involved.

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It may be helpful to say:

∙ “*We have been on the phone for 2 hours. Let’s talk for 10 more minutes. What would you like to talk about in those 10 minutes?*”

∙ “*It is important that the helpline remain open for others who may need to call. Is there anything else you would like to talk about before we end this call?*”

∙ “*You have talked about a lot of important things this evening. Is there something specific you would like to focus on before we end our call?*”

It is important to remind callers that the helpline is available 24-hours a day and that they may call back if needed. If an advocate feels that a caller may be calling too frequently, or that the helpline is not being appropriately utilized, please notify the staff-contact or your supervisor ASAP. Specific boundaries may be placed on callers on a case-by-case basis after careful consideration by the Client Services Coordinator, Associate Director and Executive Director.

There have been times when advocates have felt like they cannot get off the phone or end a meeting with someone because the individual is threatening self-harm or may do something unsafe if the call or meeting is ended. (For example, when there is a plan in place and things are wrapping up, they impulsively begin making end of life statements.) We need to take these situations seriously; however, we also will not be held hostage by individuals. Sometimes people contact services that cannot truly help them (they do not want to call crisis services, LE, etc.) and push the boundaries of an advocate trying to end a call. This is a choice someone may make, but it does not mean that we can replace those other services or go beyond our scope of service.

Advocates may need to say something like:

∙ *"This sounds really hard and we care about you, unfortunately we cannot replace those services or do much for you other than listen to what is going on and support you the best we can."* ∙ *"We have talked about some alternatives to self-injury and some coping skills, and I really hope that you choose not to harm yourself, but that will be your decision and I know that SAPARS advocates cannot make that decision for you. We also hope you will reach out to the crisis line if you feel things are getting worse for you."*

Statements like these might feel frightening or risky for advocates to say; however, they are reflecting honesty and truth. We cannot keep individuals from doing what they ultimately choose to do, and we cannot save people. Although advocates may at times feel like they are responsible for keeping people safe, we are not. Nor can we rescue people from themselves or from difficult situations. Certainly if the situation falls within the mandated reporting laws we must follow SAPARS policies. Although these situations are rare they can be very overwhelming. Please connect with your staff contact if you experience a situation like this. For staff members, it is recommended that you connect with your supervisor the following business day, or immediately if there is an emergency situation.

At the core of advocacy services is “survivor empowerment, which is promoted by protecting confidentiality, believing and validating the survivor, acknowledging the injustice the survivor has experienced, respecting the survivor's autonomy and decision-making, helping to create a safety plan, and promoting access to community resources.” (What is Advocacy, Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=abUeZQ0dRf8&t=82s)

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