

Strategies For Supporting Women

A Journey Of Support

Start Here

Welcome to **“Strategies for Supporting Women: A Journey of Support.”** This resource is part of a broader toolkit about women & HIV disclosure. It was created for people who work with women who are or may be living with HIV. This resource can be used in different creative ways, depending on what works in your local context.



The term ‘disclosure’ in this toolkit refers to sharing someone’s HIV positive status without consent in the context of community or social support roles.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

You can use this tool to identify areas where you are doing well in supporting women who disclose their HIV status, as well as to think about:



Ways to build trust



Ways to provide support



Ways to foster positive health outcomes



As a training tool in a workshop



As a discussion tool with your team

However you choose to use this resource, we hope you find it helpful in your practice.

If you have reviewed the Introduction to Disclosure resource, you are likely now familiar with the policies, guidelines, and laws that protect people’s personal health information and privacy rights, including their HIV status. Building on this knowledge, you can now think about strategies to support women who may share their HIV status with you. In your work with women, you play a very important role when someone tells you they are living with HIV. Your role has the capacity to impact how women feel about disclosing their HIV status and what choices women make about accessing community supports and services. Your role also has the capacity to impact women’s engagement in HIV-related care and, in turn, can have a positive impact on their health outcomes. This resource walks through some of the considerations that may help to foster these positive outcomes.

Let’s get started. >>

Before Disclosure

FIRST IMPRESSION

To foster trust, it is important to show your organization's commitment to the privacy and confidentiality of all the women you work with. This can begin as soon as someone walks through the door; however, some women may need more time to learn about your organization's commitments and build trust with workers. Here are some tips that may help to foster trust:

- consider posting information on the wall about privacy and confidentiality
- consider ways to foster a warm welcome when someone walks in the door.

For example:



Is there coffee, tea, or a drink available?



Is someone available to say hello and welcome people when they arrive?



Are you able to provide basic need items for women? For example, tampons, pads, or other hygiene items?



Are there a range of culturally welcoming visuals such as Indigenous medicines, art, or welcome signs in different languages?



Are there visuals such as posters or images that reflect diverse women to help ensure women who are often marginalized feel welcomed?

These gestures can help someone begin to feel comfortable, create opportunities for quick informal engagement, build trust, and foster a positive experience from the moment someone walks in. Knowing that people may be coming in with many different life experiences is important. Whether someone is dealing with mental health struggles, has just immigrated to Canada, or has faced traumatic experiences, it is important to create a comfortable and welcoming space.

FIRST INTERACTIONS

Respect for privacy and confidentiality can also be demonstrated through your first interactions with women visiting your organization, which build the foundation for the work you may do together.

Here are some tips that may help to foster trust during your initial interactions:



Be thoughtful about what you need to know right away and what can be discussed later, once the person has learned more about the organization and built a sense of rapport with staff. Having a friendly, informal and warm initial conversation can help to build comfort without asking too many personal questions.



During one of the first interactions, consider explaining some of your agency policies. For example, are there ways to use the intake process to share information about the agency in addition to gathering information about what programs or services the woman may be interested in accessing? This is also a great opportunity to inform women how your organization treats confidential information and policies about Trans inclusion, harm reduction, racism, and more. These can be helpful to share up front.



If there are questions you need to ask in order to provide services, it may be helpful to first explain why they are being asked, where and how information is recorded, and who may know about it. Consider giving women choices about the questions that can be answered later, when a stronger relationship has developed.



Rapport can be built by dialoguing with women about any choices they may have to keep their personal information confidential until they feel more comfortable.

By talking about your agencies policies, you are:

- Providing an opportunity for women to make an informed decision about what information they want to share.
- Creating an opportunity for women to ask questions.
- Fostering autonomy and respect.
- Building a sense of trust and safety.
- Encouraging an environment of inclusion for women living with HIV.
- Creating an organizational culture of inclusion and support whereby discriminatory views about people living with HIV are not accepted within the organization.

During Disclosure

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Women may disclose their HIV-positive status for different reasons.

For example, they may disclose because:

- They are looking for support or need help accessing other services
- They fear criminalization and want support and resources to understand the laws
- They feel isolated and need to talk

However, women may also disclose because they believe they have no choice.

For example:

- Women may be under the impression they are required to disclose their HIV positive status in order to access services
- Some shelters require women to hand in their medications to staff when they arrive, which means staff will be automatically aware of their HIV status.
- Because the laws about the legal duty to disclose HIV status in Canada can be confusing and hard to understand, women may be under the impression that they are required to tell other people in all situations or risk being charged for not disclosing, even when their rights to privacy are actually protected by the law.

It is important to know that some people face barriers to disclosure, or may decide not to disclose their HIV status for a range of reasons. The decision to disclose is affected by many aspects of a person's life experiences and social location. These may include race and ethnicity, sexual identity, culture, nationality, immigration status, age, gender, past experiences, or geographical location.

For example, women may decide not to disclose their HIV status because of:

- Fears about the criminalization of HIV or risks to their immigration status or citizenship
- Fears about losing relationships and loved ones including family, financial supports, faith / spiritual communities and more
- Fears about their privacy and confidentiality
- Fears about stigma and discrimination, or the possibility of violence or abuse
- Uncertainty about how to disclose

There are many different barriers that may prevent women from disclosing their HIV status. Building trust, providing support, and sharing information can be important as women make this decision.



It is important to understand why someone has disclosed their HIV positive status so you can provide appropriate support. This may include providing information and referrals, suggestions about how to access services or maintain privacy, providing social support, or providing a listening ear.

After Disclosure



LISTEN.



APPRECIATE.



SUPPORT.

When someone discloses their HIV-positive status to you, it may be helpful to listen with empathy, compassion, and respect. Express appreciation and respect their decision to share this information with you. Compassionate and non-judgmental support is critical.

Here are some tips about what you could say:

"I really appreciate that you trusted me enough to tell me."

"Thank you for telling me. It takes a lot of courage."

"Sharing this information is important. Thank you for being open."

TALK ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY

After listening, and appreciating the value of what they told you, it can be helpful to talk about how this information is treated in your organization. Here are some tips about what you could discuss with women:

- Talk about how your organization works to protect confidential information. This could include information about how private information will be protected and any instances where it may be shared. This can also include information about what to do if they feel the information is shared inappropriately. Providing this information can help to foster a sense of trust and transparency.
- Consider giving women choices about how information is shared, and time to make these decisions. For example, if other staff have access to this information, ask if she has preferences about who shares it initially? Does she need some time to think about this before making decisions? Does she want to play a role in sharing it? Providing choices and time can help to create a sense of trust and autonomy.
- If there is an organizational policy or practice that may result in her HIV status being shared, talk about what this policy or practice is and how it applies (for example, shared case file). Sharing the policy or practice rationale and other relevant background information can provide a context for women to make informed decisions.

CONNECT THE WOMAN TO USEFUL RESOURCES

In many cases, women have thought a lot about who they tell about living with HIV and why they would tell them. If someone is disclosing their HIV status to you, it's often because they feel comfortable to talk to you. While it is important for you to be prepared to handle this information and respond with support and compassion, there are also a lot of helpful resources about disclosure available to refer women to.

These can include, for example:



health care services
specific to people
living with HIV



social supports
and counselling



legal supports



cultural supports
relevant to the
woman's life, family,
and community



family supports



relationships and sexual
health information



housing supports

Being connected to supports and resources can have a positive impact on women's health outcomes. If relevant, share these resources with the women you work with.



See the  **More Information** section included in this resource for more details.



At your Workplace

SHARING INFORMATION IN YOUR WORKPLACE

It can be challenging to know whether information should be shared with your staff team, or should be kept confidential. Here are some considerations that can help guide how you treat this information within your workplace while fostering respect for confidentiality:

- It is important to be thoughtful about who in your organization knows about the woman's HIV status. Use your workplace policies, and any relevant laws about privacy and Human Rights to inform how information is shared between staff. If you are part of a professional college (e.g., Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, College of Nurses of Ontario), there are policies that protect people's health information. These can be used to inform your work and also provide guidance on storing personal health information.
- If you or your staff team members are unsure about your obligations to share information, gather information and educate your team. Sometimes personal health information is shared that does not need to be, which may lead to breaches in trust, and may also be against a woman's legal rights. Being educated can help you and your team to make sound decisions that respect a woman's right to privacy and their confidential information, and also allows you to build a positive and supportive relationship with the women you're working with.
- If you are required to write someone's HIV status down anywhere, ensure that the document is safely handled and stored in a way that meets your obligations to keep this and other personal health information confidential. The document might need to be treated differently than other documents you might have in your office. Consider any relevant organizational policies, professional or other legal obligations. You may choose to write the word "confidential" anywhere someone's HIV status is written as an ongoing reminder to treat the information with confidentiality.




Some questions you can consider include:


- ☐ Is the information something that needs to be discussed with the entire team, or only those working with this person?
- ☐ Are there ways you can protect the information or foster confidentiality?
- ☐ Did you discuss the organizational policies and practices related to personal health information with the woman ahead of time?
- ☐ What are the women's preferences? Did she give consent for her information to be shared?
- ☐ What are your professional needs? Do you need to debrief with someone or ask for support about your professional role? How can you do this while protecting and respecting the privacy of people living with HIV?

If you need support or to debrief with someone about HIV Disclosure, it is important to get support. Think about ways you can get the support you need while also respecting privacy. For example, are there ways you can talk about your concerns or professional needs without sharing identifiable information?



HOW DO I SUPPORT THE MANAGEMENT AND OTHER STAFF AT MY ORGANIZATION TO DO THIS WORK?

Management teams may be very well prepared to deal with disclosure of HIV at some organizations, and at others, it may be a new topic of discussion. There are many resources about how to develop agency policies about HIV Disclosure and how to increase capacity to work with women living with HIV from a positive and supportive perspective. Check out the Ontario Organizational Development Program (www.oodp.ca) or see the  **More Information** section included in this resource. You can also contact your local Women & HIV / AIDS Initiative Worker to work with your organization.

 Go to whai.ca for more information.



Conclusion

As a community worker, you can play a very important role in someone's disclosure journey. These are some tips about how you can set up a positive experience, respect women's autonomy and privacy, and support women through the disclosure process. This can impact how women make decisions moving forward, and can play a pivotal role in what other services and supports women may access in the community - ultimately impacting their health outcomes and helping to create a positive path forward.