

THE STRING EXERCISE

UNDERSTANDING BYSTANDER RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- ✓ 1. Learners should be able to identify and address negative attitudes and beliefs that society at large and learners themselves tend to hold about victims of domestic violence.
- ✓ 2. Learners should be able to understand the obstacles that victims of domestic violence face when trying to seek help.

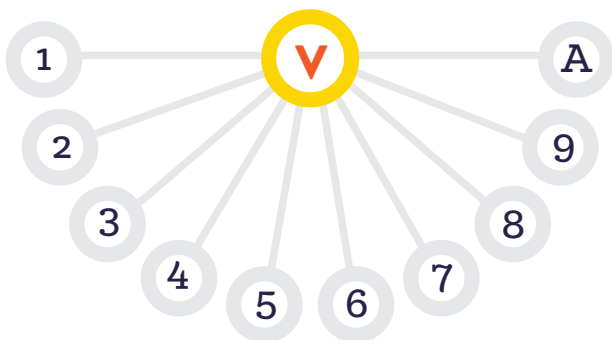
🕒 45 mins - 1 hour

★ Identity cards (provided below)
String, and scissors

PROCEDURE

- 1 The teacher should cut out and fold the identity cards provided below to create ten separate characters.
- 2 Ask for ten learners to volunteer as 'actors' in a scenario. Explain to them that the activity is a role play, and doesn't represent anyone's own behaviour or identity. The role play is intended to illustrate the experiences of many victims the world over.
- 3 Give each volunteer one of the identity cards. Ask them to stand in a semi-circle around the person playing the victim. Hand out a piece of string to each person and ask the victim to hold the other end of each piece of string together in her hands. The victim should be connected to each person, including the abuser, by a length of string.

The abuser should be the last person in the semi-circle as follows:



- 4 Ask the victim to read her identity card and statement. She then turns to the person on her right, who announces his/her own identity and reads their line, creating a dialogue between the two. When the responder (eg. parent, friend etc.) has finished their lines, the teacher then cuts the string connecting the two.
- 5 The victim then turns to the next person and repeats her line: "My boyfriend just beat me, can you help me?". In turn each person in the semi-circle reads their line and the teacher cuts the string connecting the two.

- 6 This continues until the only remaining connection that the victim has is to the abuser. The abuser then announces his or her identity and reads his line: "I told you no one would believe you or help you. I'm the only one who you can rely on."
- 7 Debrief the activity by asking the victim how she felt (in her role as victim) as each of the people she turned to for help rejected her and blamed her for the abuse. The victim will likely report feeling hurt, anxiety, anger, shame, and isolation. If learners struggle to identify these feelings, or seem apathetic, ask them prompting questions such as:
 - a. Did you feel like this person understood what you had experienced?
 - b. Did you feel like you could get help?
 - c. Did you feel like anyone blamed you for what happened to you?
 - d. Did you feel like anyone held the abuser responsible for his actions?
- 8 Wrap up the exercise by emphasising that domestic violence is a social problem and not a personal problem confined to the private sphere. Emphasise that we often engage in victim blaming in the way that we respond to victims, which discourages them from seeking help, and creates the impression that we don't believe the victim. In blaming the victim, we are taking responsibility away from the abuser, and creating the social perception that domestic violence is acceptable. Emphasise that each person, as part of the community has a role in helping and supporting victims of abuse.



TEACHER TIPS

General

This exercise carries a high impact, so be sure to emphasise the ways that we as a community can help and support victims of abuse and point to resources for those who find themselves in that situation. Ensure that learners leave feeling hopeful about their role in enacting positive change.

Making the Link with Gender & Violence

This exercise deals with domestic abuse, which is an extremely important issue for learners to understand. The exercise is also helpful in enabling learners to understand how many of the barriers to **accessing** help which victims of violence face are heavily gendered. Each line spoken by the characters in the exercise represents an obstacle to getting help. Most comments indirectly blame the victim, others are simply judgmental and discount her experience, and some explicitly deny help because of social or traditional values that privilege men, and that define domestic violence as an adult problem.

Assessment Ideas

This exercise should not be assessed because it is intended to help learners reflect personally on their role in responding to a pervasive but difficult social problem. It is intended to build empathy and underscore individual responsibility in assisting victims of **violence**.

Variations

This exercise can be altered in many different ways by changing the identity of the **victim** to any victim of **domestic violence** whose behaviour or identity has been **stigmatized** would be appropriate, or anyone who is uniquely vulnerable. For example, a pregnant teenager, a **LGBT** victim or a victim who is **HIV** positive might face similar obstacles to the victim in the original exercise

In addition to the issue of domestic violence, the stigma of that minority or vulnerable identity serves as an additional obstacle to accessing help. So, for example, a **lesbian victim**, would experience **homophobia** and **heteronormativity** in the responses by the people she turns to, in addition to their judgments about her **domestic violence** victimization.



IDENTITY CARDS

Cut these out along the dotted line and fold.



 **VICTIM**

**“MY BOYFRIEND
JUST BEAT ME!
CAN YOU HELP ME?”**



 **PARENT**


**“I TOLD YOU THAT YOU’RE
TOO YOUNG TO HAVE A
BOYFRIEND. IF YOU HADN’T
IGNORED MY ADVICE, NONE
OF THIS WOULD HAVE EVER
HAPPENED!”**



 **FRIEND/PEER**

**“BUT HE’S THE CAPTAIN
OF THE SOCCER TEAM!
HE’S SUCH A NICE
GUY ... SURELY YOU’RE
OVERREACTING.”**



 **SCHOOL
COUNSELLOR**

**“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT
THIS? THIS COULD BE VERY
BAD FOR THE IMAGE OF
THE SCHOOL. WE WILL
HAVE TO TAKE THIS TO THE
HEADMASTER TO DECIDE.”**

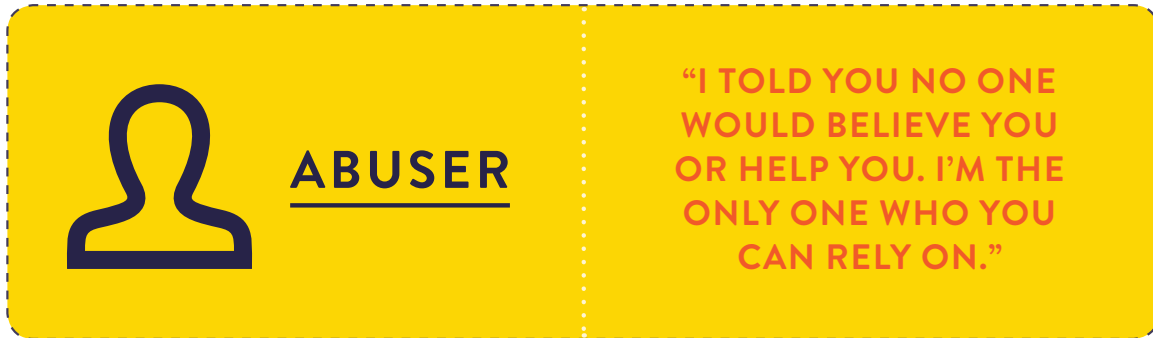



 **RELIGIOUS
LEADER**

**“THE MAN IS THE HEAD OF
THE RELATIONSHIP. I’M
SURE HE WAS JUST TRYING
TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND
YOUR PLACE.”**

IDENTITY CARDS

Cut these out along the dotted line and fold.



 **ABUSER**

“I TOLD YOU NO ONE WOULD BELIEVE YOU OR HELP YOU. I’M THE ONLY ONE WHO YOU CAN RELY ON.”



 **CLINIC SISTER**

“YOU SHOULDN’T BE INVOLVED IN A RELATIONSHIP. YOU’RE GOING TO LAND UP PREGNANT AND STILL IN SCHOOL. WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF THE BABY THEN?”



 **SOCIAL WORKER**

“IT CAN’T BE THAT SERIOUS, YOU TWO SHOULD BE ABLE TO SORT THIS OUT. WHY DON’T YOU TWO COME IN TOGETHER AND WE CAN TALK IT OVER.”



 **POLICE OFFICER**

“I’M SURE THIS IS JUST A MISUNDERSTANDING ... YOU TWO PROBABLY JUST HAD A LITTLE FIGHT THAT’S BEEN BLOWN OUT OF PROPORTION. ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO REPORT THIS – HE COULD GET A CRIMINAL RECORD IF YOU DO SO.”



 **SHELTER WORKER**

“I TOLD YOU NO ONE WOULD BELIEVE YOU OR HELP YOU. I’M THE ONLY ONE WHO YOU CAN RELY ON.”