

# RECLAIMING THE RED ZONE

A Toolkit for Post-Secondary  
Students, Student Unions, Clubs and  
Organizations



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# PREFACE, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, AND CONTENT WARNINGS

This toolkit was created largely based on the curriculum, teachings, and wisdom of Viktoria Belle of the former Dandelion Initiative, and its inception and creation is impossible without her.

The contents of this toolkit are broad and encourage opportunities for deeper learning and reflecting on various topics related to sexualized and gender-based violence in a post-secondary context. The toolkit covers preliminary understandings of the Red Zone, drug-facilitated sexual assault, and a basic overview of trauma and triggers.

This report contains statistical data and analysis. While quantitative statistics can be useful, it is important to recognize it fails to capture data about the experiences of survivors who have not reported or have not had their reports taken seriously. In particular, such data may not be representative of marginalized communities or populations of people with multiple/intersectional identities. Furthermore, we recognize that quantitative data does not capture the nuances in the experiences of survivors and can reduce those experiences to a mere number. We recommend anyone working with survivors (which is anyone working in post-secondary institutions) consider the benefits of qualitative data which draw on survivors narratives of their experiences and thus the impact and multiple realities of gender-based violence beyond its statistical prevalence.

Finally, this toolkit was created on unceded and stolen land to be implemented and used within post-secondary schools across Turtle Island or so-called Canada. Many of these institutions are built around Western pedagogy which upholds white supremacy and patriarchal colonial ideologies of knowledge and learning. We cannot ignore the violence fundamentally embedded within these institutions and the ways in which gender-based violence is a tool of colonization. Furthermore, we cannot ignore that Indigenous women, girls, and 2-spirit people are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence and drastically underrepresented within post-secondary institutions. In order to commit to dismantling rape culture and eradicating violence we must commit ourselves to the pursuit of decolonization.



# WHAT IS THE RED ZONE?

According to RAINN, one in five women will be sexually assaulted during their time at university, clearly indicating the epidemic of sexual violence on campus. Vast numbers of studies have consistently proven more than 50% of all campus assaults occur during the start of the school year. Some research has even indicated this number could be closer to 80%. This period of time has been coined The Red Zone.

**The Red Zone is the period of time that typically occurs during frosh/orientation week through to Thanksgiving break (the first 5-10 weeks of school) when the majority of sexual assault occurs on college campuses.** Studies have consistently shown this is when 50% of all campus sexual violence occurs. This period of time coincides with an influx of young students, often in a new environment (sometimes a new city or country) and engaging in party culture for the first time. In some cases, perpetrators of violence who have more experience in the post-secondary environment may see this as vulnerability and an opportunity to harm newer students. In addition, universities and colleges often fail to equip students and student leaders with the knowledge needed to intervene, de-escalate, identify, or respond to gender-based violence. A study from McLean's with more than 23,000 undergraduate responses from 81 campuses in Canada, showed that 11%-46 % of students (depending on the school) shared that no one at their institution educated them on how to report sexual violence or what resources exist. A lack of attention and acknowledgement from institutions further isolates and harms survivors while simultaneously allowing perpetrators to harm students with the knowledge that the institution will sweep it under the rug.

Remember: it is never a survivor's fault. Survivors are often blamed for "being in the wrong place at the wrong time", "wearing provocative clothes" or "drinking too much." The rhetoric surrounding the Red Zone can sometimes create discourses of victim blaming by focusing on partying or drinking when in reality, assault is a choice made by the perpetrator - not the survivor. Sexual assault is never the survivor's fault, regardless of what they were wearing, who they were with, if/what substances they were using, etc. Always believe survivors.

Check out the following downloadable info guides on the Red Zone to learn more:

[The Red Zone: Sexual Violence on College Campuses](#)

[Shattering the Red Zone – PAVE](#)





# *Dear Survivor,*

This toolkit has been created with your safety, well-being, health, and freedom as a central focus of this work. It is important to acknowledge that the Red Zone has always been an intricate and complicated time and space for survivors to navigate. The language around staying safe during the Red Zone, even when spoken with the best of intentions, can produce victim-blaming discourse, perpetuate stigmas about violence only being perpetrated by “strangers,” and present an onus on those at greatest risk of being victimized to be responsible to manage the behaviour of others. The Red Zone correlates with party/frat culture, sorority/Greek life rushing, drinking and experimenting with substances, and possibly gaining independence in living and going out. As survivors, regardless of the time and context, we are often inundated with questions like, “Were you drinking?”, “Why were you there?”, “What were you wearing?”, and other questions and comments insinuating culpability. This is often heightened during the Red Zone or periods of statistically high rates of assault.

Survivor organizations may also share advice on staying safe: suggestions like watching drinks, staying with friends, and sharing location. Even in this toolkit, you will see reminders to student leaders and event organizers to not over-serve language such as drug-facilitated sexual assault. The reality, and one of the deepest truths we recognize and hold in our heads and hearts, is that gender-based violence is never a survivor's fault. Never. It is not your fault, it was not your fault, and it will never be your fault. To assume anything otherwise will only serve to take accountability away from the perpetrator. We know parties, alcohol, clothing, etc. do not cause sexual assault. This truth can and does exist simultaneously with the truth that these spaces and substances are taken advantage of and manipulated by predators to cause harm. However, gender-based violence (GBV) is deeply rooted in power, domination, intimidation, control, and systemic structures of rape culture, misogyny, sexism, colonialism, racism, ableism, and homophobia. In a world without those deeply rooted and systemic flaws, this toolkit would not be directed to survivors or those working to prevent GBV. It would be addressed to perpetrators, instructing them not to assault anyone. For now, and until our society and culture can shift, we will continue to stand together and keep one another safe, as survivors, as allies, and as a community.

This toolkit is intended for use in institutions that have a responsibility to create safer spaces for their students and to hold perpetrators of violence accountable for their actions and impact. It is also useful to student leaders and unions who also have a responsibility and commitment to their student body/population to support collegiate wellbeing and education, which can only be done through the formation of safer spaces, intersectional frameworks, and trauma-informed practices. This toolkit is not intended to tell survivors how to stay safe during the Red Zone. It is the hope that for survivors, this toolkit will simply be seen as proof that there are communities and student leaders who care so deeply and profoundly for your well-being and safety that they will do everything in their power to create a safer and more inclusive environment, for you, and for us.



## SECTION 1 → BACKGROUND

### **Why is this knowledge important for students to have?**

One in five students in post-secondary institutions (PSIs) will experience sexual assault. Students and survivors across post-secondary institutions have continually reported challenges with accessing support and resources from their institutions. Research conducted by The PEARS Project and the Dandelion Initiative has indicated many of these barriers have included a lack of cohesion between University Student policy, Student union policy, Staff and University internal workplace policies, lack of transparency about processes, timelines or safety, and the persistent silencing of survivors which often results in students needing to take time off school, drop out, or drop their report/case. Furthermore, Students For Consent Culture Canada released a report titled *Crucial Voices* (2021), which highlighted a severe lack of trust toward administration and discriminatory “support” services for survivors on campus.

Not only is the Red Zone a period of time in which students face the highest rates of sexual violence, but it is also a time when student clubs, groups, and unions are incredibly engaged and active on campus. By equipping student leaders with the knowledge of resources, risks, and intervention methods, we can work to dismantle the pervasive rape culture within a post-secondary culture, not just during the Red Zone, but every single day. The Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (2019) found that “71% of students have witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours either on-campus or off-campus.” The epidemic of gender-based violence is intricately linked to rape culture. Emilie Buchwald, the author of *Transforming a Rape Culture*, defines rape culture as:

**“a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and support violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm . . . In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable . . . However . . . much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change.”**

The 2020 report from the Dandelion Initiative, *Don't Rebuild on our Backs*, also shares in relation to rape culture, "As a culture, we often disregard how violence is fueled by misogyny. We do not label it femicide, and therefore we do not and cannot prioritize prevention or uproot rape culture. This must change."

The following statistics underpin the significance and pervasiveness of GBV on campuses

- One in five women will be sexually assaulted during their time at university (RAINN)
- In 2019, 71% of students witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours in a postsecondary setting (Burczycka, 2020).
- In 2014, 41% of all self-reported incidents of sexual assault were reported by students. (Conroy & Cotter, 2017).

Every single person has the power to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. Every survivor has the power and space to use their voice in preventing or responding to gender-based violence. Students are a powerful and passionate group. Together we can create the environments we need and deserve.

### **This toolkit is intended to provide foundational knowledge to:**

1. Understand the Red Zone and its relevance to students and student leaders
2. Understand gender-based violence and the pervasive rape culture within post-secondary institutions
3. Support survivors with survivor-centric and empowering care & peer Support
4. Recognize the signs of gender-based violence and sexual violence
5. Plan events in trauma-informed and meaningful ways
6. Learn bystander intervention tactics and safer spaces interventions
7. Support survivors to seek resources and supports outside of the university
8. Empower yourself and your community to end gender-based violence and create cultures of consent
9. Safety plan and find resources with survivors



## What is Sexual/Gender-Based Violence?

Sexual harassment and violence affect us all, and disproportionately affects women, girls, trans, feminized and two-spirit people, women with disabilities, and women who are Black, Indigenous, or live with multiple intersections of identity and class.

### Students for Consent Culture Canada define gender-based violence as:

“a term that includes sexual assault or abuse, sexual harassment, and other forms of violence and discrimination that draw on gendered stereotypes and power structures. In Canada, these forms of violence have traditionally been understood in the framework of “violence against women.” We recognise and affirm the work of feminist activists who demanded recognition and social change on behalf of women harmed by men and patriarchal power...we understand these forms of violence within broader systems of hierarchy, power, and discrimination...that impacts Queer, nonbinary, trans, and two-spirit individuals, in addition to cisgender women and men. GBV can be physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual, and structural. Fundamental to our understanding of GBV is that it intersects with other forms of violence and oppression in ways that can impact its meanings and effects on victims and survivors, as well as how it is perceived by others. These forms of violence and oppression include:

- Racism
- Colonialism
- Islamophobia
- Homophobia
- Transphobia
- Ableism
- Classism and Poverty



### Students should thrive in a learning environment where their safety and dignity are

**prioritized.** Creating cultures of consent and gender equity begins with education and policies based on best or promising practices that prevent and respond to sexual/gender-based violence in survivor-centric ways. It then is reinforced through systems that are survivor-centric and inclusive. Many on-campus sexual assaults occur during the first eight weeks of classes. More than 80% of rapes that occur on college and university campuses are committed by someone who is known to the survivor/victim, with half of these incidents occurring on dates.

Young women/feminized people aged 15 to 24 experience higher instances of sexual violence in Canada than any other age group, with the rates of sexual assault experienced by this age group being 18 times higher than that of Canadians 55 and under. One in five women studying at a post-secondary institution in North America experience some form of sexualized violence over the course of her studies.

Students and survivors should be protected by their university policies and practices; however, this often is not the case for many survivors in many post-secondary settings. Many survivors do not report sexual violence for many reasons beyond stigmatization and fear. Many survivors do not report to the police because of ingrained systemic racism and sexism, victim blaming and often no protection for the survivors themselves even if official charges are laid.

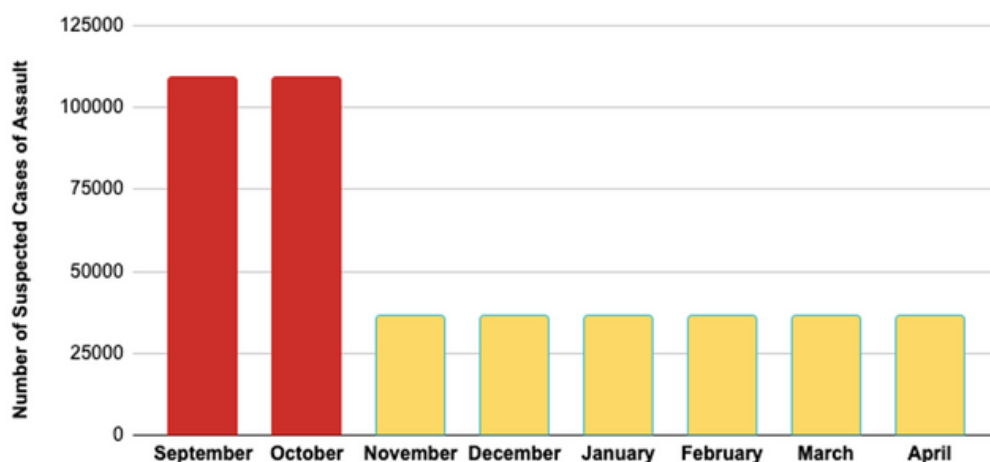
If you need more support or learning opportunities please visit the Dandelion Initiatives website to access their free Learning Portal. You will be able to access more gender-based violence prevention and response learning there. [www.dandelioninitiative.ca](http://www.dandelioninitiative.ca)

## VISUALIZING THE RED ZONE

In 2018-2019 there were 2.18 million students registered in post-secondary institutions in Canada. Based on the previous statistical data provided that 1 in 5 post-secondary students experience gender-based violence, and 50-80% of these occur within the first 8 weeks, the graphs below visually depict this on the scale of all students enrolled in Canadian PSIs. It is important to note that these numbers are estimates, given institutional barriers to reporting are prevalent and very few survivors actually report their accounts of violence. 70% of intimate partner violence and 93% of childhood abuse survivors do not report to authorities. Furthermore, quantitative data can sometimes reduce truths from survivors down to numbers thus missing the contexts of survivors stories. These graphs are intended to support visual learners and provide alternative ways of understanding this crisis.

### Visualizing the Red Zone

Across Canadian PSIs





## **Technology Facilitated Gender-Based Violence**

With the rise of social media, online hate and cyber-violence have emerged as extensions of violence against women. These issues are rooted in gender inequality. Cyber-misogyny (coined by Vancouver-based West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF)) is real and rampant, both internationally and locally referred to as online or information and communication technology (ICT) violence against women/girls.

73% of women and feminized people are abused online worldwide, according to the UN Broadband Commission's 2015 report. More than half (52%) of the women polled disagree with this statement: "The Internet is a safe place to express my opinions."

Young women (age 18-24) are most likely to experience the most severe forms of online harassment, including stalking, sexual harassment and physical threats. Women who face multiple forms of discrimination, such as racial or cultural discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia, may be at greater increased risk of online hate and cyber-violence.

At the same time, there are very few post-secondary institutional policies that include online spaces as part of the jurisdiction of their policies. Though some may cover institutionally-controlled spaces such as Canvas within the scope of their policy, this leaves survivors who face violence in online spaces with little avenue for reporting or justice-seeking.

## **What can student leaders do to protect themselves and others against online cyberstalking and gender-based violence?**

1. Ensure that there are campaigns and literature around cyber violence and prevention
2. Ensure drop-ins, workshops or online literature that encourage digital safety and explain the law of consent and online distribution of photographs and videos are available to all students and members of campus. Ensure an understanding that when photos are distributed without the survivor's consent, this is called Sexual Image-Based Abuse.
3. Ensure that there are options for staff and volunteers to access VPNs and other IP blockers if they are required to provide survivor disclosure or reporting support online or on their personal laptops/computers.
4. Report or Call In/Out any behaviours you witness online that perpetuate sexual violence or that directly use degrading or sexist language



# KNOW THE LAW AND YOUR RIGHTS!

Sending intimate images between adults over the age of 18 is legal when each person voluntarily agrees to participate.

In Canada, it is against the law to show an image of someone privately doing a sexual act, who is naked, or who is exposing an intimate part of their body, without the permission of the person who is in that image.

If you threaten to share or show intimate images to others as a way of forcing the person in the image into doing something or not doing something, this is known as extortion.

Secretly taking someone's photo, videoing them, or spying on them when they are exposing an intimate body part, they are naked or engaged in a sexual act is known as voyeurism.

Also, it is considered identity fraud if someone pretending to be you creates fake accounts of you by using your private photos.

## **Peer-to-Peer Learning**

Integrating this education at the start of the year not only comes at a crucial time (the Red Zone), but also sets the tone for the year and enforces consent as a priority and fundamental part of the culture of your PSI is trying to build. From a pedagogical perspective, setting norms and providing this education at the start of the year is most effective.

Educational pedagogies have proven that the norms set at the beginning of the year are heavily influential on the remainder of the year. Teaching policies and procedures to students at the beginning of the year and enforcing them consistently across time increases student academic achievement and task engagement (Evertson, 1985; 1989; Evertson & Emmer, 1982; Johnson, Stoner, & Green, 1996). Effective teaching includes teaching norms, procedures, and acceptable behaviours to students at the beginning of the year. (Leinhardt, Weidman, & Hammond, 1987).

Peer-to-peer learning has been studied and analyzed to show immense value and potential in the types of discourse and learning it produces. This is in part due to the collaborative nature of these learning spaces which form cultures of mutuality and respect while dismantling some existing power structures in traditional teaching settings. Peer-to-peer learning also conforms to some modes of Popular Education methodologies, an "inherently self-reflective, reflexive and non-dogmatic approach." It is said to, "make space for the collective production of knowledge and insight, and builds on what emerges from the experiences of those actively participating." The pedagogical approach of this learning has been said to be horizontal in power structures, linking advocacy and education, rooted in group needs, mutuality, struggle, resistance, and community knowledge.

## SECTION 2 → PREVENTION-BASED STRATEGIES



The 2014 National Summit to End Gender-Based Violence, produced a report which describes prevention as “a range of activities and strategies to create a campus culture and environment that promotes health and safety and prevents violence and exploitation.” furthermore, they posit that effective prevention programs and practices must seek to alter the conditions that facilitate sexual assault, or those which excuse or tolerate it. As such, preventative measures must account for the broader social context, including systems of racism, misogyny, ableism, xenophobia, homophobia, classism, etc. Preventative measures should strive to address the individual, the community, the institution, and the larger society/social context.

Since we know education and awareness play a significant role in preventing violence and harassment, the first section of this toolkit is foundational learning and should be followed up with additional teachings such as those listed above and below. Education and awareness should also be made available and provided to the entire student body.

### Foundational learnings for student leaders

1. Familiarize yourself with your college/university’s sexual violence reporting process, centre, and policy.
2. Familiarize yourself with community resources for survivors (helplines, shelters, crisis centers, hospitals, affordable counseling, etc).
3. Review The Dandelion Initiative’s overview of supporting someone who is triggered, or offering trauma-informed care: <https://dandelioninitiative.ca/gbv-101#recognizing-violence>
4. Educate and inform yourself about Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women/Girls/2 Spirit people.
  - a. Take at least ONE recommendation from Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and apply it to your personal/professional work.



# FROSH WEEK PLANNING

**Remember:** For many students, frosh/orientation week events, will be the first time at a party, away from home, going out without friends/on their own if they have not met anyone at the PSI yet, or their first time drinking or being around drinking, first time engaging with older/younger students, etc. It is important to keep this point in mind when organizing frosh/orientation week events.

Any event you hold has survivors present, considering one in three women has experienced gender-based violence. As such, all events must be planned with a trauma-informed lens. By using trauma-informed practices, you utilize a framework which allows you to include and support the needs of individuals who have been impacted by trauma.

Furthermore, two out of three Canadians do not understand what consent means according to a recent survey. Therefore, you will also have people who do not understand consent in these spaces. This speaks to how integral it is that consent is embedded and demonstrated in everything you do.

## Best practices to ensure events are safe spaces for all

1. **Have designated peer supporters at events** who can support with de-escalation, peer support etc. Ensure this is well advertised and these people are easily identifiable.
2. Have **clear and accessible policies** surrounding gender-based violence, including policies and practices which result in removing participants who engage in violent or harassing behaviours
3. Review your sexual assault and harassment policy and **commit to using survivor-centric practices and processes** for disclosures or reports of sexual harassment or gender-based violence
4. **Ensure staff have received this policy and have received training to understand** the specific policy and your group's understanding of what consent means in theory and practice
5. **Integrate cultures of consent** into your events by ensuring there is always choice and pre-informed consent about the event/activities.
6. Confirm the event location has **accessible and gender-neutral washrooms**
7. Ensure that there is a **quiet and accessible space at the event where survivors or students can disclose or report** incidences of harm.
8. **Have a code of conduct** to give to contract workers, security, guest bartenders, guest artists, and any external partners
9. Be prepared - have conversations, example scenarios, and check-ins with security before events.

10. Have **posters and signs** in the space that encourage consent and safety.
11. Have a plan for **de-escalating fights or conflicts**.
12. Have **designated space for staff to provide feedback** or incident reports.
13. Make sure to go over all incidents and protocols during **debriefs or staff meetings**.
14. Have **emergency funding** set aside for anyone who needs to Uber or take a cab home.
15. Be aware of the **nearest public transit locations/lines**.
16. **Do not victim blame** and have a strict policy to take sexual assault and harassment disclosures seriously. This means believing survivors.



## Environmental Scan

The following environmental scan has been developed by Viktoria Belle and is available on the [Dandelion Initiative Learning Portal](#).

“We use the term “**safer space**” to recognize that different people need different things to feel safe, so it can be hard to make recommendations that cover everyone’s needs to make a space truly safe for everyone all the time at the same time. This is why ongoing training and collaboration with trained facilitators are so critical. You don’t have to know everything yourself. It is unrealistic to aim for perfection; we are aiming for prevention.

**“The term safer space also recognizes that we all have the capacity to harm and be harmed. Accountability, transparency, resolutions and restitution for survivors are imperative”** (Belle, 2021).

We often say that our environment is the third teacher. Therefore, if you want to create a safer space, start with your environment. This means that people, clients, and community members can read non-verbal cues about what is acceptable in the space and what isn’t. Our environment can set the tone for the culture in our space. You may not have control over it but, familiarizing yourself and the team contributes to a collaborative approach to mitigate violence.

- Know your team, check in with the members, Have some survivor-centered resources ready ahead of time
- Know some harm reduction and prevention approaches to mitigate drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA - see the following section for more information on this)



# THINKING THROUGH DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE

## For events where alcohol and substances may be consumed

Harm reduction approaches should always be considered when planning events, as harm reduction fundamentally prioritizes the autonomy, health, well-being, and justice of all people. A harm reduction approach can take many forms, including policies, practices, or beliefs. It is any practice that aims to reduce harm while also acknowledging and respecting bodily autonomy in relation to things like substance use. Harm reduction destigmatizes substance use and saves lives.

**TIP:** If you are not familiar with harm reduction approaches or practices please seek support, training and learning. Harm reduction destigmatizes substance use and saves lives.

- [Good Night Out](#) in Vancouver
- [Ontario Harm Reduction Network](#)
- Breakway's [Pieces to Pathways](#)



RAINN, [states](#) that “**Drug-facilitated sexual assault occurs when alcohol or drugs are used to compromise an individual's ability to consent to sexual activity.**”

Not only can these substances make it easier for a perpetrator to commit sexual assault by reducing a person's awareness, ability to resist, consent, or consciousness, the residual effects may reduce the survivor's memory, leaving them confused or unable to recount places and people. Oftentimes survivors will feel increased blame or shame surrounding DFSA, it is important to remember that *it is never a survivor's fault*.

## Drug-facilitated Sexual Assault can occur in two ways:

1. Opportunistic: when the perpetrator takes advantage of a victim's voluntary use of drugs or alcohol
2. Proactive: when the perpetrator intentionally forces a victim to consume drugs without their knowledge.

## How can I tell if someone has been drugged or dosed?

What you may see: shock, sweating, trembling, inability to concentrate or answer questions, stumbling, slurring, drowsiness, vomiting, unconsciousness.

It can be very hard to determine if someone has been drugged or dosed. Do your best to show overall curiosity and empathy towards people in your space regardless of any preconceived notions you may have about how such a state was achieved.

## Tips for preventing drugging/dosing & DFSA

1. Don't over-serve and be mindful of how much you have served.
2. Have a selection of non-alcoholic drinks (seed lip + mocktails)
3. Have water for FREE and in containers with tops
4. Don't be a matchmaker
5. Coasters and napkins are your best friend -these can be used to cover drinks
6. Remove unattended drinks
7. Ensure adequate lighting
8. Have trained volunteers & staff and ensure they consistently rotate through the whole location and nearby (washrooms, outside, etc) to monitor safety (**note** this is not policing - this is mutual aid)
9. Have code words that people can tell your bartenders or servers that can be a signal that this person may be experiencing harassment or have concerns that they have been drugged
10. Have a trained volunteer/event staff who says goodbye to people as they leave and can intervene if things feel sketchy
11. Take incident reporting and data collection seriously



## Supporting Survivors of Drug-Facilitated Sexual Assault

The next section of the toolkit has tips for survivor-centered support, but we wanted to take this moment to discuss the importance of having policies in place that do not stigmatize or marginalise Survivors of Drug-Facilitated Sexual Assault. Some called **immunity policies**, this is an exemption from discipline for a student who makes a disclosure or report of sexual violence relating to their campus community and where prior to the incident, the survivor engaged in prohibited or illegal behaviour.

Some of these behaviours might include:

- Underage drinking or illegal drug use
- Drinking/drug use in an alcohol or drug-free area (such as residence or on dry campus)
- Participating in an illegal activity such as sex work
- Gathering in violation of public health order (COVID-19 pandemic)
- Engaging in sexual behaviour that violates school covenant (faith-based institutions)

**For more information about alcohol, drugs, and sexualised violence please visit:**

- This [student-led resource](#) from PEARS at the University of Toronto about Drug-Facilitated Sexual Assault, Education, Awareness, and Support
- A [Brief](#) from the Learning Network about Drug-Facilitated Sexual Assault

## SECTION 3 → SURVIVOR-CENTERED RESPONSE



No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest'

- Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1998.

### A Survivor-Centric Approach Introduction to Framework

Survivor-centrism recognizes that everyone, regardless of their gender or other identities, can experience sexual violence and has the right to processes and aims to put the rights of each survivor at the forefront of all actions and ensure that each survivor is treated with dignity and respect.

The definition of a survivor-centered approach developed by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) defines a survivor-centered approach as a method that “**seeks to empower the survivor by prioritizing [their] rights, needs, and wishes.**” Survivor Centric approach is rooted in intersectional feminist theory and empowerment-based practices that are non-clinical or diagnostic. This means:

- providing survivors with options, choice, control and power.
- Using a survivor-centric practice requires people to become culturally attuned and practice anti-racism and decolonized approaches to best serve 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC survivors.
- Using a survivor-centric approach means empowering the survivor to safety plan and access resources
- Using a survivor-centric approach means providing informed choice and consent
- Using a survivor-centric approach means coming together in mutuality and respect

### Remember:

- You are here to support, listen and
- Our environments can support us or hinder us.
- We are all accountable to one another through shared experience, allyship and humanity.
- We are here to support survivors and believe them





## Trauma Responses 101

Viktorija Belle offers the following insight into trauma responses:

If you are new to gender-based violence prevention and response learning, you may notice that you get uncomfortable, filled with uncomfortable emotions, or maybe even questioning or disbelief as you learn about sexual/gender-based violence.

It's okay to feel uncomfortable from time to time, especially when learning new content and a new language. We can sit in that discomfort and learn valuable things. Push past the discomfort of hearing something new or opposing your beliefs with some deep breaths, an empathetic ear and a critical mind.

There may be times you are triggered by this content and there are times when you feel uncomfortable. There is a vast difference between feeling uncomfortable with this content and feeling triggered by this content because of your lived experience with gender-based violence.

When we are triggered, we are no longer in a state that allows us to learn. There are tools and ways to build diverse skills to meet or mitigate the impact of these triggers, AND they are still symptoms, survival responses, implicit memories or defence mechanisms that destabilize or disconnect us. There is no shame in being triggered, you only deserve compassion and understanding.

### What does it mean to be triggered?

Triggering is an embodied and active occurrence in both our brains and bodies. This occurs chemically, physically, and emotionally. It is a feeling of re-experiencing trauma(s). Popular and social media culture in 2020 often presented the idea of being “triggered” as a meme or joke. It is not a joke, meme, or way to ridicule what seems like an overreaction to something inconsequential. It is a real and very painful symptom of living through trauma or living with mental and physical health challenges because of trauma.

Survivors of sexual/gender-based violence often have long-term physical, mental and spiritual adverse effects/symptoms after surviving an assault, including but not limited to C/PTSD and anxiety.



## What is a trigger?

A trigger is like a memory tape; it sends signals to our brains through our limbic system and to our Amygdala that we are in danger and need to either:

Fight - Fight for your life mechanism

Flight- Run for your life mechanism

Freeze- Immobility or numbing

Fawn - People pleasing, abuser appeasing to survive, avoidant of conflict to survive

When people and spaces are not survivor-centric or trauma-informed, the people and space can further harm or re-traumatize survivors. Creating trauma-informed systems and survivor-centric spaces can support everyone including survivors.

## What does being triggered look or sound like?

There is no one reaction to look out for. Triggers can look like so many things to so many people depending on the person, the past event or events and a multitude of other factors that we will explore throughout this learning.

Survivors of sexual/gender-based violence may react and respond very differently when they seek support from you. You may see signs of clear distress, anxiousness, fear, or anger, or you may see someone who looks “zoned out” or is numb. All reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal event that has happened.

## What can you do if you notice someone is/may be triggered or activated?



Practice Empathy: Demonstrate empathy with the tone of your voice - and remember non-verbal communication is powerful communication.

Check-in & Give Space: Ask them how they are feeling. Ask them what would help at this moment. Encourage them to harm reduce if they do so.

Have resources, solutions, options, affirmations, or just hold space and listen if the person asks for or needs that.

Encourage their autonomy and choice: Do not rush someone to give you an answer right away or a decision right away; they may need more time to think or regulate.



Don't keep asking “Are you okay?” Sometimes we are okay, and we just need to adjust and tune in with ourselves or check out.

Remind them that their trauma is real and they are experiencing normal reactions and emotions to events that were not their fault.

Do not touch unless the person asks and you are okay with this. Some people want to hug or comfort a person, especially if it is a friend or loved one. We encourage you to refrain from this unless the survivor initiates.”

# BYSTANDER INTERVENTION



Bystander Intervention is recognizing a potentially harmful situation or interaction and choosing to respond in a way that could positively influence the outcome. Bystander intervention can be **both a response and prevention-based mechanism**.

**Bystander:** A person who is present at an event or incident, but does not take part in it directly.

**Bystander Intervention:** When someone acts to prevent or interrupt harassment, violence or injustice.

## Before you Intervene!

Do not put yourself in a dangerous situation - this will only increase the number of people experiencing harm! Do a safety assessment before jumping to intervention.

### Things to consider:

1. Are you physically safe?
2. Is the person being harassed physically safe?
3. Does it seem unlikely that the situation will escalate?
4. Can you tell if the person being harassed wants someone to speak up?
5. Do you have allies in this space who can support you?

Intervening early can avoid a small problem from growing into an even bigger, more harmful problem. For example, it is easier (and safer) to convince your friend to stop drinking early in the evening than calling for an alcohol transport later.

## Distract

Distraction is a subtle and creative way to intervene. Its aim is simply to derail the incident of harassment by interrupting it. If you're someone creative or shy, or if it seems like the person doing the harassing might escalate their behaviour if you speak out openly against it, then Distraction can be a great, subtle option for you. The keys to good Distraction are:

- Ignore the person who is harassing, and engage directly with the person who is being harassed.
- Don't talk about or refer to the harassment that's happening. Instead, talk about something completely unrelated.



**Spill or drop something.  
Make a big sound.  
Encourage people to help  
with clean up**

**Ask the person being  
harassed if they have the  
time**



## Direct

If it's safe to do so, confront the situation. When safe, being direct is the most immediate way to intervene in a situation - again **do a thorough check for your own safety** before engaging in direct intervention. If you do, be firm, clear, and concise.

- “They’ve made it clear they’re uncomfortable. Please leave them alone.”
- “Hey, stop that.”
- “I can see you doing that, stop right now.”
- “I don’t want to hear that in this space.”
- “That kind of behaviour is not welcome here.”
- “I can’t be the only one who thinks this is not OK.”

“They’ve asked you to leave them alone and I’m here to support them.”



## Delegate

If you do not feel comfortable intervening yourself, you can ask someone else to help who may be more equipped. When you delegate someone to help you, try to tell them as clearly as possible what you’re witnessing and how you’d like them to help.

***“I think the person with the red hat is making Tyler uncomfortable. Can you help me get them out of the situation?”***

We could also consider this form of intervention as **“Don’t Act Alone.”** This could be peaking to someone near you who also notices what’s happening and might be in a better position to intervene. Work together to come up with a plan to intervene!

## Delay

Even if we can’t act in the moment, we can still make a difference for someone who’s been harassed by checking in on them after the fact. Many types of harassment happen in passing or very quickly, and it’s not always possible we’ll have a chance to intervene in another way. But we don’t have to just ignore what happened and move on.

I saw what happened earlier, but couldn’t step in at the moment. Do you need anything now?



## Document

Keep a safe distance, record the date and time, who is present, and film or screenshot incidents and/or landmarks.

Note: Always ask the survivor what they want you to do with any documentation and LISTEN TO THEM. Never share it without their consent



## A final note on Bystander Intervention

If you are a survivor, we encourage you to check in with your triggers and boundaries, in a supportive or private space. It is so vital that we prioritize our own safety first. Survivors are often helpers or healers; they can also be people who think they are doing what someone else needs, but really they are just meeting their own trauma needs and responses. This is both okay and normal, in an empowered bystander intervention role, we want to ensure we stay within our current and ever-changing threshold. Visit [www.dandelioninitiative.ca](http://www.dandelioninitiative.ca) and click on [Survivor Supports](#) to try our "Managing Triggers" and "Safety Worksheet" activities.

# FOR THOSE WHO HAVE CAUSED HARM



We all make mistakes. This means we are learning and entering into new teachable moments. We validate that this is vulnerable work. We also recognize that this is vital work.

We know mistakes can harm people. It is important to honour this truth and make space for folks who tell you they have been harmed by your actions. Listening, learning, and adjusting our behaviours to be less harmful is continuous work that we are all practicing. Harm supersedes intention.

Accountability practices are so significant that they have been described as and looked to as reasons society functions.

Accountability and reflection are closely intertwined. Take time to consider

- Who am I accountable to?
- What does corrective action look like to me?
- What are my goals?
- What are my own lived realities, experiences, pieces of knowledge, and when may I overstep?
- Are there people in my life who will help to call in/call out behaviour I need to be held accountable for?
- How can I be proactive in holding myself accountable through education, goal setting, boundaries, acknowledging my limitations, and developing networks to hold me accountable?



# CONCLUSION

Survivors have advocated tirelessly across PSIs for change and support. The Red Zone, the beginning of the year where students are made disproportionately vulnerable to gender-based violence, is a time during which student leaders and unions have a great deal of engagement and influence on the norms, values, culture, and practices of the institution on a student facing level. **Meaningful collaboration is essential between students, survivors, and student leaders in order to reduce institutional barriers to support, education, and reporting, whilst dismantling rape culture embedded in post-secondary information.**

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