

USING VICTIM-CENTERED LANGUAGE IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING



When discussing any type of victimization, it is important to use victim-centered language. With human trafficking, there are specific considerations that can help avoid misconceptions and empower victims. This document includes guidance on language that you should be aware of when talking with any audience about human trafficking.

IMAGERY & SENSATIONALISM

Sensationalism can misrepresent what human trafficking actually is – it perpetuates misinformation, stereotypes, and false conspiracy theories.

The media may sensationalize human trafficking stories to maximize the emotional impact. Thus, it is important to evaluate the source credibility of information that you see in the news or read on social media.

Refrain from using terms like “modern slavery” and “abolition” during TraffickSTOP meetings and activities.

If using images of survivors, ensure that you have the person’s consent or are obfuscating their identity.

EMPOWERING VICTIMS THROUGH STRENGTHS-BASED LANGUAGE

Victim, Survivor, or Lived Experience Expert?

- ▶ In the criminal justice field, “victim” is commonly used, and may be used interchangeably with “survivor.”
- ▶ Some victims are fine with being referred to as “victims.” Others prefer to be referred to as “survivors.” Those who are providing subject matter expertise from their experience should be referred to as “lived experience experts.” It is helpful to ask victims what terminology they prefer.

Do not use victim-blaming language or language that may demoralize victims. Here are a few examples of words and phrases to avoid:

- ▶ *Choose* or *choice* – there should not be any implication that human trafficking occurred due to choices that the victim made, or that there was something they could have done to avoid being victimized. The trafficker is at fault, not the victim.
- ▶ *Voiceless, helpless, disenfranchised*, or similar terminology – language like this is disempowering.
- ▶ *Escort* or *prostitute* – victims of human trafficking should be distinguished from those who may be engaging in commercial sex.

INCORPORATING SURVIVOR VOICES

Work with survivors as partners or subject matter experts with meaningful contributions and compensate them accordingly.

Do not partner with individuals simply for the purpose of having a survivor involved or sensationalizing their story to capture audience's attention.

Collaboration with survivors during TraffickSTOP meetings or activities should be centered upon the goals of the survivors as well as your goals for including them in the curriculum.

Consider diversity – survivor experiences are not all the same; working with survivors who bring different perspectives can expand our understanding of the topic.

Do not speak on behalf of the survivor experience or imply that they should feel a certain way.

Resources

[Glossary of terms from OVC's Model Standards for Serving Victims and Survivors of Crime](#)