UNDERSTANDING VICTIM BLAMING

Why Is It Dangerous?
Victim-blaming attitudes marginalize the victim/survivor and make it harder to come forward and report the abuse. If the survivor knows that you or society blames the survivor for the abuse, s/he will not feel safe or comfortable coming forward and talking to you. Victim-blaming attitudes also reinforce what the abuser has been saying all along; that it is the victim’s fault this is happening. It is NOT the victim’s fault or responsibility to fix the situation; it is the abuser’s choice. By engaging in victim-blaming attitudes, society allows the abuser to perpetrate relationship abuse or sexual assault while avoiding accountability for those actions.

Where Does It Come From?
In order to stop victim blaming, it is helpful to understand why people do it in the first place. One reason people blame a victim/survivor is to distance themselves from an unpleasant occurrence and this gives a false sense that this could not happen to them. By labeling or accusing the victim/survivor, others can see the victim/survivor as different from themselves. People reassure themselves by thinking, “Because I am not like the victim/survivor, because I do not do that, this would never happen to me.” We need to help people understand that this is not a helpful reaction.

Victim Blaming in Language
One of the biggest sources of victim blaming is the way we talk about it; Language surrounding abuse and sexual assault immediately puts our attention on the victim instead of the perpetrator. This is a demonstration developed by Julia Penelope and frequently used by Jackson Katz to show how language can be victim blaming:

- **John beat Mary;** This sentence is written in active voice. It is clear who is committing the violence.
- **Mary was beaten by John;** The sentence has been changed to passive voice, so Mary comes first.
- **Mary was beaten;** Notice that John is removed from the sentence completely.
- **Mary is a battered woman;** Being a battered woman is now part of Mary’s identity, and John is not a part of the statement.

As you can see, the focus has shifted entirely to Mary instead of John, encouraging the audience to focus on the victim’s actions instead of the perpetrator’s actions.

What Can I Do About It?
- Challenge victim-blaming statements when you hear them
- Do not agree with abusers’ excuses for why they abuse
- Let survivors know that it is not their fault
- Hold abusers accountable for their actions: do not let them make excuses like blaming the victim, alcohol, or drugs for their behavior
- Acknowledge that survivors are their own best experts and provide them with resources and support
- Reframe the question “Why does the victim stay?” to “Why does the perpetrator abuse?”
- Understand the frequently asked questions that often interrupt accountability.
- Remember if you are aware of abusive behavior and do not speak out against it, your silence communicates implicitly that you see nothing unacceptable taking place.*

EXERCISE TO ILLUSTRATE VICTIM BLAMING

The following exercise for use in a training or classroom is intended to highlight the frequent victim blaming that occurs in cases of sexual assault. Imagine if the types of questions that are asked of sexual assault victims were asked of a robbery victim. It doesn’t happen.

“Mr. Smith, you were held up at gunpoint on the corner of First and Main?”
“Yes.”

“Did you struggle with the robber?”
“No.”

“Why not?”
“He was armed.”

“Then you made a conscious decision to comply with his demands rather than resist?”
“Yes.”

“Did you scream? Cry out?”
“No, I was afraid.”

“I see. Have you ever been held up before?”
“No.”

“Have you ever GIVEN money away?”
“Yes, of course.”

“And you did so willingly?”
“What are you getting at?”

“Well, let’s put it like this, Mr. Smith. You’ve given money away in the past. In fact, you have quite a reputation for philanthropy. How can we be sure that you weren’t CONTRIVING to have your money taken from you by force?”

“Listen, if I wanted —”

“Never mind. What time did this holdup take place, Mr. Smith?”
“About 11:00 P.M.”

“You were out on the street at 11:00 P.M.? Doing what?”
“Just walking.”

“Just walking? You know that it’s dangerous being out on the street that late at night. Weren’t you aware that you could have been held up?”
“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“What were you wearing at the time, Mr. Smith?”
“Let’s see…a suit. Yes, a suit.”

“An EXPENSIVE suit?”
“Well yes. I’m a successful lawyer, you know.”

“In other words, Mr. Smith, you were walking around the streets late at night in a suit that practically advertised the fact that you might be good target for some easy money, isn’t that so? I mean, if we didn’t know better, Mr. Smith, we might even think that you were asking for this to happen, mightn’t we?”

From “The Legal Bias Against Rape Victims (The Rape of Mr. Smith).” Connie K. Borkenhagen, American Bar Association Journal. April, 1975