

Advocacy: Being and Doing

By Lorraine Lafata, LICSW

The role of domestic violence/sexual assault advocate can be a complex one. Advocacy, at its best, asks a worker to develop a connected and trusting relationship with a survivor. To create a powerful and life-affirming relationship requires finely balancing two different sets of practice skills; practice skills that operate in different relational dimensions. As advocates, we occupy dual realms when we work with survivors. We simultaneously have the relational experience of “being” with a survivor and “doing” alongside of, in conjunction with or on behalf of” a survivor.

The “being” set of skills are about the need to remain with a survivor through their pain, confusion, anger, grief, and the myriad other emotions and events that may arise out of the experience of survivorship. One dictionary definition of being is “a state of existing”. (Merriam Webster) As advocates, we learn to be with the survivors in their current state of existence, to stay in the present moment with our clients.

The other sphere of the work, the “doing” set of skills is more commonly identified with the role of advocate. If one were to look up “advocate” in the dictionary, the definition would say, “one who pleads the cause of another before a court of power” (Merriam Webster). As advocates operate in the realm of “doing”, they support, encourage, sponsor, and promote the cause of those survivors who need to develop their own voice, or make use of a powerful voice to speak for them. Here, an advocate takes an active stance to help make change happen for their clients.

For advocates to do the work effectively in the both “being” and “doing” domains, there are underlying and interconnected sets of practice frameworks that need to be operationally present in both dimensions of the work. These frameworks are: 1) empathy and engagement 2) empowerment based practice 3) having substantive knowledge of the resources available and the systems that survivors will have to move through and master to accomplish their goals.

First, we need to understand how empathy and engagement are crucial in both the “being” and “doing” aspects of advocacy. Those who live with domestic violence and sexual assault can carry heavy feelings of shame and stigma. Perpetrators violate the core integrity of those they abuse in profound and devastating ways. Our society can then re-traumatize a survivor by labeling and marginalizing them.

For these reasons, when one is working with a survivor, an empathic, compassionate, and non-judgmental approach is essential. The development of a safe-enough, trusting relationship between the survivor and advocate is paramount, as restoration of sense of self or change-oriented work cannot take place without it.

Working from a place of empathy and engagement requires that advocates strive to create authentic and honest relationships with survivors. Authentic, honest relationships are grounded in power-sharing, equality in communication, non jargon-laden language, acknowledging power imbalance, creating clear contracts with clear expectations, ensuring informed consent before advocacy is done, establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries, following through consistently on commitments made, as well as, a sense of hopefulness and a belief in the human capacity for change. (Lee, 1994)

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Building connections that encompass all these different agreements and understandings requires both the “doing” and the “being” aspect of an advocate’s skill set. Direct discussion of the relational contract between advocate and survivor falls into the realm of “doing”, as here one is actively clarifying the parameters of informed choice and consent, as well as the survivor’s right to have input into the power dynamics within the relationship.

At the same time, when one sets out to have such a sensitively-oriented conversation of this type with a survivor, an advocate must be present with a survivor and be attuned to their concerns and needs, in order to build a relationship. Here the “being” dimension of advocacy calls for deep empathy, with all its component parts.

Working from a place of deep empathy begins with the ability to listen on multiple levels and layers. The advocate needs to listen to what is happening beneath the surface of the words that are being said. Active and attentive listening asks the advocate to notice content, context, narrative flow and meaning in speaking with a survivor. Listening also extends to paying attention to the ebb and flow of relationship being created between the survivor and advocate, as well as, listening and watching for the moment when change or transformation wants to occur. (Lafata, 2002)

In addition to all the other elements of listening, it is best practice for an advocate to listen inwardly, with an “inner ear” to their own thoughts, feelings, triggers, and beliefs. This type of inner process helps keep clear the difference between the survivors and the advocates goals, needs, internal experience, so there is no projection of the advocate’s experience onto the survivor. Listening with the inner ear simultaneously helps the advocate pay attention to the possibility of over-identification with survivor, which can lead to compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. Keeping clear is an active process of both “being” and “doing”, where the advocate must be alert to both an interior and exterior experience. The advocate is doing double duty, being present and giving constant attention to the relational container being built between advocate and survivor, while at the same time, caring for and contracting with self to provide and follow through with self-sustainment practices. (Lafata, 2002)

An advocate will often be asked to sit witness to an experience that a survivor has gone through or is currently going through. Again, this calls on the advocate to use aspects of self in the realm of both “being” and “doing”. An advocate who sits witness to someone else’s pain from the viewpoint of “being with” needs to bring an unconditional and open acceptance to the experience. We are not choosing what to witness, we witness whatever the person want us to see or hear, and we are not shaping or deconstructing the survivor’s story. Instead, we are there to break through the bonds of isolation, and let the person know that they are not alone.

Some believe that the “doing” aspect of sitting witness is about making the invisible, visible, ...”we make official, the unofficial stories...”(Schmidt, 1995). Bearing witness from this perspective, asks that the advocate reflect back what they have heard, and acknowledge that what has happened was neither right nor fair. In some ways, here the advocate stands in for all the people and institutional structures that didn’t stand up for the survivor, at the time of the abuse.

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Empowerment-based practice has always been an underlying tenet of domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy. Domestic violence and sexual assault exist within a social, cultural and historical context that operates from a hierarchal power-over paradigm. Survivors of partner abuse and sexual violence, interact with perpetrators whose controlling and violent tactics are designed to undermine the survivor's sense of self-agency and ability to control their own decisions.

Empowerment-based strategies are designed to help "a person rework their relationship to power." (Lafata, 2000) In the "being" realm of empowerment-based practice, an advocate must come from a place of true belief and acceptance in a survivor's right to make their own decisions. It is essential that an advocate stand solidly in alliance with a survivor's right to claim expertise about their own life and relationship. And most, importantly, that the advocate understands that it is the very act of choice-making, and not the choices made, that re-cements a survivor's relationship with self. (Herman, 1997) Working together, advocate and survivor, use these profound and affirmed beliefs to co-create an environment in which the survivor can reclaim their own sense of power and being. Within this relational container, power previously understood or felt to be coming from a place of "power over," i.e., descending from a privileged authority above, is now experienced as emanating from oneself. With this shift in experience, the survivor is able to operate from a place of "power from within," or "power in equal connection to others."

Advocates engaged in the "doing" realm of empowerment-based practice, work alongside survivors to co-create manageable goals and plans of action for short and long term safety and growth. Advocates can come together with survivors, supporting them in identifying their inner strength, courage and accomplishments. Using this type of strengths-based self-assessment, survivor's can begin to challenge the type of negative messages left behind by the perpetrator's actions. (Lee, 1994)

Psycho-educational tools about partner abuse and sexual assault are an important part of the "doing" together aspect of empowerment practice. Exposure to psycho-educational materials can help a survivor name the violence, and find new language to describe their own internal experience. Advocate and survivor, side by side, can begin to reframe and re-contextualize what the survivor has lived through, shifting shame, blame and guilt away from the survivor and to the perpetrator where it belongs. So we see here at the heart of empowerment practice, an advocate and survivor demonstrating relationally based power sharing in action. (Lee, 1994)

Finally, we come to the part of an advocate's practice that is about identifying, encouraging, and helping survivors move through systems and institutions. Human services organizations are often set up as large bureaucracies that can sometimes feel rigid and impersonal. Survivors can be re-traumatized in the process of looking for resources – they can encounter long lines, longer waiting periods and a dearth of actual aid. There are always more people looking for resources than there are resources, so competition is often fierce.

Here, advocates need to access both the "being" and "doing" realms of practice, as they work with survivors to get their practical needs met, while simultaneously supporting their right to be treated with dignity. There are important "doing" skills that an advocate has to

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master when seeking out resources for a survivor. First, learn the resources in your community. Look online, talk to other providers in your field, walk through your community, and attend workshop and conferences.

As you come to know the resources available to survivors in your area, network and build relationships with other service providers. The most successful advocates form positive, personalized working relationships with providers at other organizations. Forming a successful connection with workers in a variety of settings can facilitate linkages for survivors as they interface with and navigate through systems and organizations.

It can be helpful to reassure other service providers that you, as an advocate are committed to working with the survivor on a long-term basis. Workers are often more likely to take on a new client when they know that a client will be getting additional support from another organization.

Learn to negotiate exchanges with other workers. Find out the kinds of services, that workers in other settings might need for their client base, or whether they need staff training on issues where you have some expertise. Figure out what you have to offer their clients and /or staff and then follow through.

Know the survivor's rights. Familiarize yourself with the laws and regulations that pertain to your client's needs. If a worker in another setting occasionally stonewalls you, insist on speaking to that worker's supervisor. Be polite, but be firm. Each survivor is entitled to all their rights.

In this last section, we've discussed how to prepare oneself to do good resource seeking advocacy on behalf of survivors. It is crucial that advocates make sure that they are sharing this information; with the survivors they work with every step along the way. As we stated previously, when talking about empowerment-based practice, the very best advocacy must be done alongside, and in conjunction the survivor's needs and goals. Find out about resources and relationships that each survivor has access to within own their community and the larger human service system. Talk with survivor's about what success's they have had negotiating the social service system. Exchange tips, techniques and strategies that you both may have about how to do effective advocacy with larger organizations.

As we said earlier, while we work to be effective advocates in this area of finding appropriate resources for survivors, we must bring an extraordinary well-integrated use of both "being" and "doing" in practice. This is especially true in relation to one of the most important skills that every advocate has to learn. It is the skill of learning how to tell a survivor's story in an effective and efficient manner.

Providers at other organizations are fielding requests for services all day long. You can persuade other workers that a particular survivor is a perfect match for that agency's service, by directly communicating the survivor's experience. Clearly, there is a "doing" element in learning to represent someone else's story. One must 1) adopt a professional and collegial manner, i.e., get a release of information before exchanging detailed information, 2) pinpoint the specific service that the survivor is seeking, 3) know a survivor's history and give an accurate time line, 4) humanize the survivor's story, 5) explain how hard the

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survivor is working on their own behalf, 6) emphasize the survivor's strengths and resilience.

The "being" aspect of learning the survivor's story harkens back to the advocate's capacity to deeply listen to and for the survivor's, words, emotions, fears and aspirations. Staying truly present and "being" with a survivor as their narrative evolves, changes and transforms over time, makes an advocate more able to recount the survivor's tale with true fidelity to the survivor's experience.

And then the work shifts back to the "doing" mode, as the advocate reflects back to the survivor, the story that they have heard. As the survivor gets to listen to own their story, being told with compassion and coherence, they are encouraged to know and claim their own authentic voice. Within the relational container, continuously "being" built between survivor and advocate, the survivor takes ownership of their own narrative. The survivor can then use this experience, to become a more effective advocate for themselves.

Do not share without permission.