



"I'm worried about Mary. She just doesn't seem herself these days—she's exhausted, and barely concentrating—I asked her if everything is OK and she said yes—I'm just not convinced—but I don't know what I should do.

Then there's Stephen—he wrote in his journal about how tough his childhood was and how he feels as if he is right back there when we are reading "My Name is Rose." I don't know what to say to him—or whether I should say anything."

If I find out about violence, what should I do?

...but did you know:

Mary might be dealing with controlling and abusive behaviour by a partner, child, another family member, or a caregiver.

Abuse and threats often get worse when a student starts in a program and looks as if they might be able to escape the control. The harassment may be subtle or obvious, may be new or ongoing. It may include stalking and threats, or put downs that make it harder to learn.

Even when we're not told what is happening, there are things we can do.

Silence when we suspect something is going on can make it look as if we think violent behaviour is OK.



Even after years of therapy and healing, past experiences can easily return in the present.

A woman who is being mistreated in the home may have an especially urgent need for success in her education program. She may need to improve her education, and her confidence, to believe that she can cope alone and get a job. This powerful need for success may make success even more elusive as it adds more anxiety and stress—closing down the brain.

Similarly, immigrant students may urgently need to improve English and literacy skills to settle in a new land. Many may come from war and refugee camps. They may have lived through many forms of personal and social violence back home, on their journey, and in Canada. Many aspects of the curriculum—such as families, holidays, and homeland—can remind them of these tough experiences and huge losses.

Like Stephen, many students may find memories of childhood abuse return with the tensions and school-like settings of adult education. Many adults who were abused, hurt, or humiliated in childhood feel they ought to have got over it if it is long past, but even after years of therapy and healing, past experiences can easily return in the present.

When the violence was in school itself, especially in residential and institutional schools, returning to school as an adult may be a terrifying experience that brings back personal, family, and/or community memories of threat and humiliation. Silence doesn't make the feelings go away, but telling the stories is not the answer either. Addressing the current feelings and impact on present learning may make a difference.



What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Help them find the resources they need

- **Provide contact information for the local resources**—counsellors, indigenous elders, shelters, abusers' courses, addictions and substance abusers programs, survivors' groups, and other support groups.
- **Display posters and brochures from agencies that make it clear no one has to endure being treated badly, or memories of bad experiences, alone.** Show where to go for help. Some programs display this information in the washroom so people can see it privately.
- **Bring counsellors and local agency staff you respect into class at the beginning of a group.** Assume all groups will include students who are familiar with violence and mistreatment—make sure people know the resources in case they want to use them.
- **Try not to say “You should...” and suggest we know what another person needs, or judge them for not leaving a violent situation.** We never know the risks and losses someone else will have to face if they stay or leave. But if we are afraid for their safety in the choice they are making, we can warn them.

2. Prepare ourselves and our programs

- **Figure out our own limits.** We do not have to listen to details of violence; instead we can help someone understand they need a good listener and that we can not fill that role for whatever reason. We can help them find the support they need.
- **Become a good “side support.”** Don't just pass a student on to a counsellor. Ask how it's going and whether the counsellor is helpful. Help them find another resource person or program if the first is not a good match.
- **Learn about our program's confidentiality policy.** If there isn't one, think through issues of confidentiality before students confide in us. Make sure that we are clear when we would need to break confidentiality, why, and with whom.

3. Keep our focus on teaching and learning

- **Make it clear that there is never an expectation that anyone reveals their own experiences with hardship and violence.** When a person does tell some of their story try to be careful not to shame, or suggest that it was wrong to tell, or that it is too overwhelming to hear. Help the person find good supports, and don't treat them differently, as if they are fragile or heroic. Remember there may be more still unsaid.
- **Carefully introduce any class content which may remind of harsh experiences.** Describe what is in the material so that students can make their own choice whether to participate or not. It's OK for a student to say that they want to continue an assignment or prefer to opt out of reading a particular book, for example, or watching a video, or writing an assignment. Try not to press for reasons, but be sensitive, and check whether they have the supports they need.



Where can I find more information and ideas?

Each of the six information sheets in this set will look at a learning problem through a typical journal entry and give more information about what might lead to the problems practitioners see.

Go to <http://www.learningandviolence.net>

In **Making changes...Personal Safety:**

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/safety.htm>

and **Making stories of violence known:**

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/makingstories.htm>

In **Helping others learn:**

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpotr/hlpothers.htm> (*look for the pop-up window on working with a counsellor*)

In **Helping yourself learn:**

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpself.htm> ...especially sections on **Finding helpers** and **What to do when you feel bad**

This is one in a set of six information sheets for adult literacy practitioners on learning and violence, written by Jenny Horsman, Spiral Community Resource Group. Funded by literacy coalitions in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, NWT and BC. October 2009. For more information: <http://www.learningandviolence.net/>

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What is literacy?

Literacy is **the** essential skill.

It is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family.

It is the combination of thinking and social skills we need to analyze and use information to control our own lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

How to reach us...



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