



Authentic Voice Principles

What is Authentic Voice?

Authentic Voice is the voice of a survivor of domestic abuse who has chosen to share what they have learned from their experience. How, when and what a survivor shares is always their choice.

Why is Authentic Voice important?

Authentic Voice is an essential part of a high-quality response to domestic abuse. It requires services and professionals to highly value the expert knowledge, perspectives, skills and strengths survivors bring. It is not an optional extra, or something that is achieved by only listening to voices that agree with you. It is embraced by organisations and individuals aiming to end domestic abuse as it ensures responses to domestic abuse are rooted in lived experience.

How have these principles been created, and who are they for?

These principles have been co-created by survivors (SafeLives Pioneers) and professionals, some of whom also have lived experience of domestic abuse, for:

- People who are working or engaging with survivors (including colleagues with experience of domestic abuse) to safely support the sharing of their voice
- Survivors who are, or are considering, sharing their voice to know what they should expect from organisations and individuals they are engaging with.

Authentic Voice Principles

Do No Harm

- **Harm can occur as a result of what we do, or don't do**
- **Risk is recognised and addressed with the survivor**
- **Authentic voice work is trauma-informed**

Harm can occur as a result of what we do, or don't do

It is essential for everyone involved to be aware of the risk of harm to survivors, their families and communities in sharing their Authentic Voice. Risk and harm varies for every person and may come from perpetrator(s) of the abuse, the community, and also services. A do no harm approach to prevent re-traumatisation and increase the positive impact on survivors sharing their experience and expertise, recognises how what we do, or fail to do, can cause harm. The harm caused by not applying this approach can emotionally, physically, financially and legally harm survivors, their children and families. It is our responsibility to make sure we have considered the wide range of factors that could cause harm and put in place the right conditions for survivors to be able to use their voice safely, to maximise the positive impacts of every interaction.

Risk is recognised and addressed with the survivor

Risk should be assessed with all survivors before engaging in Authentic Voice, and then for each piece of work engaged in. Survivors are likely to be the experts in identifying the potential risks to them and their families. These risks should always be raised with survivors as there may be times where risks or impacts are unexpected. Safety planning should be undertaken with survivors, not for them or on their behalf. Survivors are likely to have their own ways to keep themselves safe, and any extra safety planning should build on these strengths.

Authentic voice work is trauma-informed

Services must seek to understand and respond to the impact of trauma on people's lives, to make sure that they do not cause harm to survivors working with them. For some survivors, engaging in this work will have an emotional impact; however, this may vary on different projects. It is important that we work with survivors in a trauma informed way from the beginning of their involvement. This will mean that support is always available and can be flexible around the needs and strengths of the survivor. This means offering choice about ways to take part, making sure survivors are kept up to date and given a clear idea about what they can influence, the time work will take, and who they will be working with.

Expert by Experience

- **Survivors and professionals bring knowledge which is vital in responding well to domestic abuse**
- **No 'them and us'**
- **Survivors are valued and compensated for their expertise**

"We've walked through fire to get our voices back; we're not going to give them up now" – Safe Lives Pioneer

Survivors and professionals bring knowledge which is vital in responding well to domestic abuse

Survivors are experts from their experiences and should be respected as such. To respond well to domestic abuse, it is vital that services and professionals listen to, learn from, and partner with survivors. By doing this, we can create real change that is rooted in survivor experience and expertise, alongside professional knowledge. When working with survivors, it is important to recognise that every survivor, and their experience, is different.

No 'them and us'

To work together in an equal and authentic way, it is important to remember that there is no 'them and us'. There is great power in challenging the idea of what a survivor of domestic abuse looks like. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone and our responses to domestic abuse must reflect this. The organisation must recognise that it is very likely they will have staff who have experience of, or have been impacted by, domestic abuse. Professionals may be survivors, and survivors may be professionals.

Survivors are valued and compensated for their expertise

In recognising that survivor expertise is as important as professional expertise, it is important that survivors are compensated for their work; ideally this would involve payment but may also involve offering training and other opportunities. This reflects that the survivor is bringing their knowledge and drawing on their own experiences, which in addition to having equal value to professional expertise, may also be emotionally difficult. Always think about how payment might affect a survivor; some people cannot accept payment if it would affect their benefits, their immigration status or create an issue with their employment. Different ways to value their input and expertise should be available.

Speak Your Truth

- **Survivors are not spokespeople for organisations they work with**
- **Survivors can choose what they share, when they share, and who they share with**
- **Survivors recognise the impact their voices may have on others**

Survivors are not spokespeople for organisations they work with

Survivors sharing their authentic voice involves a rebalancing of power, moving away from professionals being the experts in survivors' lives, to recognising that survivors are the experts in their own experiences. For some survivors, using their voice is an opportunity to take back power from a situation where power was used on, over or against them or taken away from them entirely.

Honouring this means that organisations should not expect survivors to stand for their views or agenda. Survivors should not be negatively impacted or have access to services and opportunities taken away from them for speaking their truth when it does not line up with the organisation's agenda. This is different from when a survivor breaches agreed policies, like a Code of Conduct.

This also means that survivors should not be expected to represent other voices. They are experts in their own experience, and opinions may and will differ between survivors. There are times when survivors agree for elements of their voice to be shared by another survivor, but it should be clear what they are agreeing to be shared, when and with whom.

Survivors can choose what they share, when they share, and who they share with

Some survivors gain value in sharing details of their experiences of domestic abuse, whilst others prefer to focus on using their expertise to challenge poor practice, highlight good practice, and offer expertise on how responses to domestic abuse can be improved. This should be a choice the survivor makes when they are ready to, highlighting who with and when they do this. Speaking about personal experience at a small training session may be very different to speaking to the media. Organisations must discuss and agree informed consent with the survivor, and survivors must be able to choose to withdraw it if they do not want their voice to be used.

“It was not about reliving my past but about using my past to effect change” - Authentic Voice Panel Member

Survivors recognise the impact their voices can have on others

Survivors have the power to be able to speak their truth in their own way and this comes with responsibility. Survivors have a responsibility to consider how their words and actions can affect others, just as other experts do. It is important to set clear boundaries, developed with survivors, to ensure that everyone is working in a space which is safe for all.

Heart and Start

- **Survivors' voices are included at the very beginning and involved through to the end of all work**
- **Create not rate**
- **Survivors are informed of the impact of their work, and are safely acknowledged**

Survivors' voices are included at the very beginning and involved through to the end of all work

Survivors' voices are vital in creating real change and as such should be involved from the beginning of planning any new, or potential, project. This means all work is built on the knowledge of survivors rather than trying to find a space for it later. Survivors should be involved throughout, in whatever capacity works best for individual survivors, making sure the needs of survivors are at the heart of what the project aims to do. When a project or event ends, survivors should be kept updated on the impact of their work and what happened as a result.

Create not rate

Heart and start is the best practice model of Authentic Voice, and reflects that survivors are partnering with professionals to develop a project together, rather than being asked to rate or 'sign off' the work of professionals which has not been created with survivors. It is important to be clear about what is heart and start (survivors and professionals working together) and survivor-led (a survivor or survivor group

leads a project with the support of the organisation). On survivor-led projects, it must be clear from the beginning what the organisation can and cannot offer in terms of support and resources.

Survivors are informed of the impact of their work, and are safely acknowledged

Survivors should always be acknowledged for the work they have done, in a way that is safe and easy to access for them. Survivors should also be kept updated on how their work has made a difference. Work can make a difference in a number of ways; it might be that another survivor has commented that they were encouraged to act after hearing the story of a survivor, that a professional or service has changed the way it responds to domestic abuse, or that the law is changed.

Equality and diversity

- **Anyone can experience domestic abuse, and our experience is affected by our different identities**
- **Services find ways to access the voices they are not hearing**

Anyone can experience domestic abuse, and our experience is affected by our different identities

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone; it doesn't matter how old you are, what ethnicity you are, whether you have any disabilities, your gender, or any other way we identify or are identified. People's lives are complex, and experiences of abuse will differ depending on individual identities, and the communities we live in.

Society is not equal, and this means there are often barriers preventing some survivors from being able to speak, and to be heard. It is the responsibility of services to ensure that they are providing opportunities and the right support for those with voices that are not being heard. To reach those voices, it may be helpful to work with organisations already working well in the community.

Services find ways to access the voices they are not hearing

People are not hard to reach; systems can be hard for people to find their way around or are not set up to be easy for everyone to access. To hear the authentic experience of survivors, services must remove barriers which stop people from being able to take part. They should also make sure there are enough resources available to do this work and create safe spaces where there is clear guidance for how people work together.

Caring

- **Services and survivors work together to understand the potential emotional impact of sharing their voice**
- **Services give choices in the support they offer survivors; survivors share responsibility in taking care of themselves**
- **Survivors and services learn and develop together – nobody knows everything**

Services and survivors work together to understand the potential emotional impact of sharing their voice

Authentic Voice is personal and calls survivors to draw upon their own experiences. This can be emotionally demanding and may risk a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. It is essential that there are structures available for support. This begins before the survivor starts any Authentic Voice work: have you explored areas that may be triggering, or may be 'no-go' areas? This should reflect the trauma-informed approach we have described throughout.

Services give choices in the support they offer for survivors; survivors share responsibility in taking care of themselves

In recognising the potential risk, services should explore with survivors what support they already have in place before any Authentic Voice work begins, and offer a choice of extra support, for example, peer support spaces, group or individual clinical supervision. This is in addition to a dedicated support person in the organisation. There should be a clear expectation that each survivor will be having some form of support, which is funded by the service, to reduce the possible harm to their wellbeing from the work.

Survivors and services learn and develop together – nobody knows everything

Support and information are offered before, during and after the survivor uses their voice. This gives space to talk about what went well, and what was difficult, and if there are any further supports needed. Together, the service and survivors create a culture which is safe and supportive, which can educate and grow and reflects all the Authentic Voice principles.