

**Service, Support and Success:
The Direct Support Worker Newsletter
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**Labour Pains
10 Strategies for Coping When Hurt by Someone You Support**

Cathy Cancilla and Dave Hingsburger
Vita Community Living Services Clinical Team

Caring shouldn't hurt.

But sometimes it does.

In spite of all the training you might receive in recognizing situations that might lead to an aggressive episode, hurt still happens.

It's easy to say that "it comes with the job" or that "you knew what you were getting into," but that just doesn't work. Getting hurt by someone you provide care for always feels personal. It always leads to questions by supervisors, by fellow staff ... and by yourself. Often supervisors ask questions that are supposed to be part of debriefing, but it sounds like they are simply laying blame. Other staff seem to ask questions that make it sound like they would have managed the situation better. And you, your questions usually are about why no one understands how you are feeling and why no one seems to be worried about how you are doing.

The emotions that come from being struck, spat upon, kicked or having your hair pulled are huge. In fact, you have suffered victimization – through no fault of your own. Let's be clear, even IF the situation could have been handled differently, no one deserves to get beat on at work. Let's also be clear that, in human services, we've all got to get better at supporting one another and spend less time blaming one another. It's tough work. It's good work, but it's tough work.

Most likely some of the risks in your job were pointed out to you during your orientation where it was explained that some of the individuals you will come to support present with aggressive behaviours. Even though these are explained, even though you are aware of them, the 'hurt of being hurt' always comes as a shock. There is simply no way that an 'explanation' can prepare you for the flood of emotions that come from being hurt. Layered in with the physical pain is the emotional pain – many get hit by those who they really come to like and believe they have a good rapport with – this makes the physical pain seem worse somehow.

So what happens when you DO get hurt by an individual that you support? Is it possible not to feel resentment or anger about your circumstances? You might not want to admit it, but most of

us who have been in this situation might even resent the individual they support, asking questions like “I don’t understand what I did to upset them” OR “I am always nice and respectful to them – how come this happened?”

The following strategies might be helpful in emotional care and recovery after being hurt. You will see from the get-go that this process is one that takes time. No one, absolutely no one, can be expected to recover from the shock of hurt overnight. It’s a process. Here are some things that you will need the time to do on your journey:

- 1) *Taking time to express yourself:* Having another person behave aggressively towards you can be quite unnerving and down-right scary! This is especially true if this is the first time you have encountered this type of behaviour. Maybe this is the first time this individual has aggressed towards you personally? Or perhaps this is the first job you have worked supporting individuals with disabilities? When this happens, you are bound to be filled with emotions that you need to share! It is important that you are able to talk about this experience openly yet professionally with the rest of your support team. Typically this should be done without the member present and should happen as soon as possible after the incident. You need to be able to do this in such a way that you allow yourself, and are allowed, to feel your real feelings and to express them out loud. It isn’t unprofessional to be angry or fearful or frustrated ...it’s entirely human. Getting those feelings out will allow you to deal with them much more effectively.
- 2) *Taking the time to listen and think:* Mostly likely you will find that your coworkers have at some point experienced the same feelings when something similar has happened to them. Listen to them, talk about the strategies that they’ve used in these situations. This is a horrible experience, but it can also build bonds as you share openly with each other about dealing with the hurt and dealing with the anger. What is import to realize and talk about is that it is not o.k. to take these feelings out on the member. This is why allowing yourself time to debrief and deal with your emotions is recommended, and is part of good self care. If you don’t share these emotions, you run the risk of them building up inside you and possibly causing long-term harm to the relationship between you and the individual. The point of this discussion should be your feelings and dealing with them – it isn’t helpful to make the discussion about the person who hurt you. This is point two, but three steps are recommended: Express yourself. Listen to others. Think about new strategies.
- 3) *Taking time to debrief:* It’s hard to debrief. Really hard. When reviewing the situation to see what happened, why it happened and what can be done differently in the future – something that really needs to be done to prevent further hurt – it always sounds like the supervisor is looking for a way to blame you. But that’s not the point of debriefing. Debriefing is a process of taking the situation that resulted in your hurt and using it as a

learning tool. That sounds heartless, but it's not! It's about trying to find better ways to work with a person so no one gets hurt in the future. Hindsight is 20/20 and that's why people can say – "Oh, I get why this happened!" Debriefing isn't about "last time" as much as it is about preventing a "next time." Try to be open during this process. What is learned here may give you confidence in dealing with the individual or with similar situations in the future.

- 4) *Taking time to recharge:* While it is important to demonstrate your commitment to your job and those you support, it is just as important to take care of yourself and know your own limits. Everyone reacts to a crisis differently; some people may find that they need to take a few minutes to themselves to regroup and calm down. Others may need to ask to be relieved for the remainder of the shift. The important thing to know is that you should not feel guilty if you need to take a bit of time in order to recharge. Especially since this will put you in a better position to do your job. After all, if we can't take care of ourselves then how can we expect to provide the best support and care for others! Keep your emotions in check – be aware of your feelings towards the member after the aggression. If you are finding it too challenging to support the individual and remain objective immediately after your injury, then you should consider asking your supervisor for a temporary break from working with that member. On the other end, if you find that you need more than a temporary break, it is worthwhile sharing this with your supervisor. Perhaps there is an option for you to transfer to another home?
- 5) *Taking time for empathy:* Once you have had some time to remove your immediate emotions from the event, it is important to reflect on the perspective of the other individual. Most of the individuals you support have non-traditional ways of communication. For example, communicating through vocal sounds, gestures, body movements, signs or picture symbols. Many of these individuals also encounter barriers or difficulty in building and maintaining healthy relationships with others. Think about how many different people they need to communicate with on a daily basis. Try to imagine how frustrating it might be to not be able to communicate what you want so that others will listen and understand. Consider the possibility that perhaps the aggressive behaviour was their attempt at trying to communicate something. This might help you recognize that, although their means of communication was certainly not appropriate, their intention behind it was not purposely malicious. It might help you come to de-personalize the attack if you can rationalize that it wasn't about you – in fact it was more likely about them and their needs!
- 6) *Taking time for your own support:* It is important that you understand that it is o.k. to communicate to your colleagues if you need extra support following your injury. If your injury means that you cannot provide the same level of support in the same way, then it is

important that you feel comfortable enough to share this with your team members and supervisor, especially if this impacts their shifts as well. If you find yourself fearful or hesitant, it may prove helpful to work with coworkers to practice and role play de-escalation strategies and agency-approved physical intervention techniques.

- 7) *Taking time to rebuild:* After the incident, it is important to plan how you will handle your first shift back with the individual. For some people this may be easier than others. In most cases, it is usually better to move on and avoid spending too much time discussing the incident with the individual. Treat it like it is “a new day and a chance to start over.” It’s a good idea to aim to set up the session for success as much as possible. Perhaps take an opportunity to accompany the individual on a preferred outing. This may provide a chance for both of you to focus on each other’s positive qualities and start to rebuild a rapport with one another.

Hold on!!

Just wait a minute.

There are supposed to be ten! Well actually there are three more.

Sometimes the hurt isn’t physical. Sometimes the hurt is very different. People with disabilities don’t just throw fists, sometimes they throw words. Racist words. Sexist words. Homophobic words. Fatphobic words. All of them said in the heat of anger and with the intent to hurt. Again, as with physical pain, emotional pummeling can cause trauma. The trouble is people have bought into the myth that “sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt you.” That’s probably one of society’s biggest lies. Words hurt. We know that, but don’t often acknowledge the fact.

Much of what is said above kind of doesn’t apply does it? We don’t debrief or discuss emotions about these sorts of things. But maybe we are making a mistake. Here are some thoughts:

- 1) *Take it seriously:* There are three reasons for this. First, it does hurt. Being hurt at work in any way isn’t acceptable. And, until we take this seriously, it will be allowed to continue. Make sure that, if this is happening to you, you bring it up to a supervisor. The feelings you have are real and you need support. Let the supervisor know that you are bringing it forward for several reasons. You are being hurt and need support is the first and most important of these reasons. There are two others though. The individual is engaging in behaviour that is repugnant in society in general. This is behaviour that will get in the way of future friendships and relationships – without fixing, this person is going to live a lonely life. That’s not OK. Too, the person needs to learn alternate and acceptable anger management strategies. Using words this way, when angry, simply doesn’t work in the long term. Bringing it forward is showing responsibility on several different levels.

- 2) *Beware of old insecurities*: Most of us experienced bullying and teasing when we were younger. Name calling is always vicious – it leaves scars and insecurities and fears. In fact, it might be easier to heal from being struck with fists than being struck from words. Perhaps this is because the bruises left from childhood are still tender. Self-loathing or a slow-burning anger can destroy self-esteem. By taking it seriously, by bringing it forward, by talking to others – we can begin the process. But it’s the internal language that matters. It’s what we say to ourselves about what happened and what was said that really matters. Develop a personal mantra where you can replace old thoughts with new healthy responses, “I’m in control, they’re out of control” or “This only hurts me if I let it” or “I choose not to be hurt.” All of these things are true. It’s important to control the inner dialogue we have with ourselves, about ourselves. If we control the inner dialogue, then we can control our outward reactions.

- 3) *Breathe!*: Controlling breath controls both anger and fear. Well, not completely, but enough to give you the edge. When the tension mounts and you know that words (or fists) are going to fly, slow down your breathing. Panic breathing leads to panic behaviour. Stay on top of the situation by actively working on staying calm. This will give you something else to focus on, but it will also allow you time to think. That extra second can determine how the whole thing progresses. That extra second gives you a little tiny bit of power over the flow of time and that may be all you need. It’s such an easy thing to do, and yet, most often forgotten.

There, that makes ten!

Summary:

At the end of the day, and at the end of the article, hurt hurts. There’s not too much that can be said about that. What is important though is what happens after the hurt – what process is used to deal with the emotions that come from pain. This article simply gives some ideas but, as said earlier, talk with other staff, develop the “dialogue of coping” which can be a healthy part of your team approach. We all have ways of dealing with situations – others who have experienced or are experiencing similar feelings may have wonderful techniques – learn to lean on each other. That, ultimately, may bring the team together and bring you the support you need.

Support, Service and Success: The Direct Support Newsletter invites submissions for consideration. For information about criteria for articles or to discuss your idea, please contact the newsletter editors:

Dave Hingsburger at dhingsburger@vitacs.org

Or

Angie Nethercott at anethercott@handstfhn.ca