

Serving Survivors with Mental Health Disabilities

Strengthening Sovereign Responses to Sex Trafficking in Indian Country and Alaska

January 2023




**Activating
Change's
Mission**

To end victimization,
criminalization,
incarceration and
institutionalization of
people with disabilities
and Deaf people

Activating Change's Goal

Safety and freedom – not
harm and punishment – for
people with disabilities and
Deaf people

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A Note About my Perspective



Goals for Today

- Explore the challenges survivors who have mental health disabilities face accessing safety;
- Examine the complexities mental health disabilities can present; and
- Strategize what you can do to help.

What we know

- According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 51.5 million people in the United States have a mental health disability.
- 80% of women who experienced rape, stalking, or physical violence reported significant short- or long-term effects including posttraumatic stress disorder.
- In one study, approximately 20% of survivors of sexual violence reported experiencing a new onset of psychiatric disorders.

Dynamics of Trafficking

- Sexually exploited
- Oppression
- Trauma
- Dissociative Disorders/Adaptations



Have you worked with a survivor
that had a mental health disability?

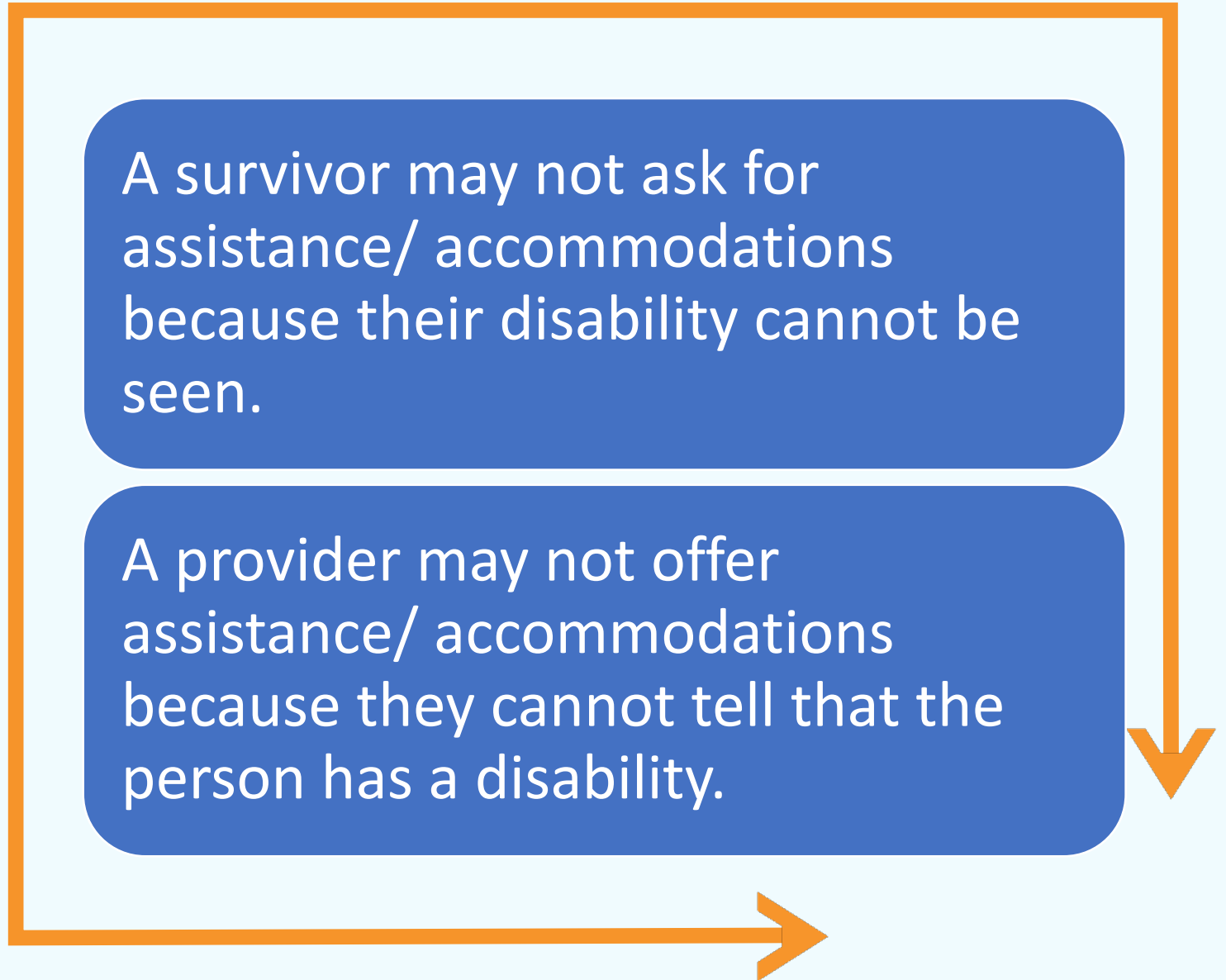


**Survivors with Mental Health Disabilities
Face Barriers**

Mental Illness is Invisible

A survivor may not ask for assistance/ accommodations because their disability cannot be seen.

A provider may not offer assistance/ accommodations because they cannot tell that the person has a disability.



Stigma

Disclosures can be rare because there is a lot of stigma around mental health disabilities:

- The words we use (crazy, nuts)
- Portrayal by the media, movies, TV
- Experience from previous disclosures
- Preconceived notions about people with mental health disabilities from service providers and advocates

Credibility

- Survivors may not disclose a mental health disability because:
 - Their disability has been used as part of their abuse – gaslighting, threats of disclosure...
 - Their credibility and knowledge is often discounted because of their disability

Previous Negative Experiences

A survivor that disclosed their mental health disabilities in the past, may have found that they:

- Faced attitudinal barriers, stigma, and even verbal/emotional abuse
- Received unequal treatment
- Were excluded or otherwise discriminated against

Negative Consequences

→ Survivors with mental health disabilities may also fear other negative consequences of disclosing including:

- Employment
- Housing
- Losing custody or CPS involvement
- Unwanted psychiatric services involvement, including forced medication conditions, and
- The impact disclosure may have on future civil and criminal court involvement



Complexities for Advocates

→ What do you need to know & What don't you need to know?



Things to Remember

- People with mental health disabilities are more likely to be victimized than to be violent.
- The abuse, its aftermath, and trauma may exacerbate a mental health disability.
- Behavior is not always a choice; it can part of the person's disability.

Does Diagnosis Matter?

ADD/ADHD

Anxiety

Bi-Polar Disorder

Borderline Personality

Dissociative Identity
Disorder

Major Depressive Disorder

PTSD

Schizophrenia

Behaviors

- Talking all the time
- Being unable to remember what you talked about
- Being withdrawn
- Not seeming to pay attention
- Getting frustrated and short tempered
- Not following through
- Tensions with other survivors

More Behaviors



Difficulties planning and organizing



Stamina and fatigue (including sleeping and staying awake)



Difficulties tolerating stress



Erratic/inconsistent behavior



It is vital that you develop strategies to overcome these challenging behaviors to work with survivors to provide healing services and justice.

Let's Consider DID

What is DID?

- Dissociative Identity Disorder is a psychiatric condition strongly correlated with a history of chronic and unremitting childhood abuse, characterized by identity alteration or confusion.

What is DID? (continued)

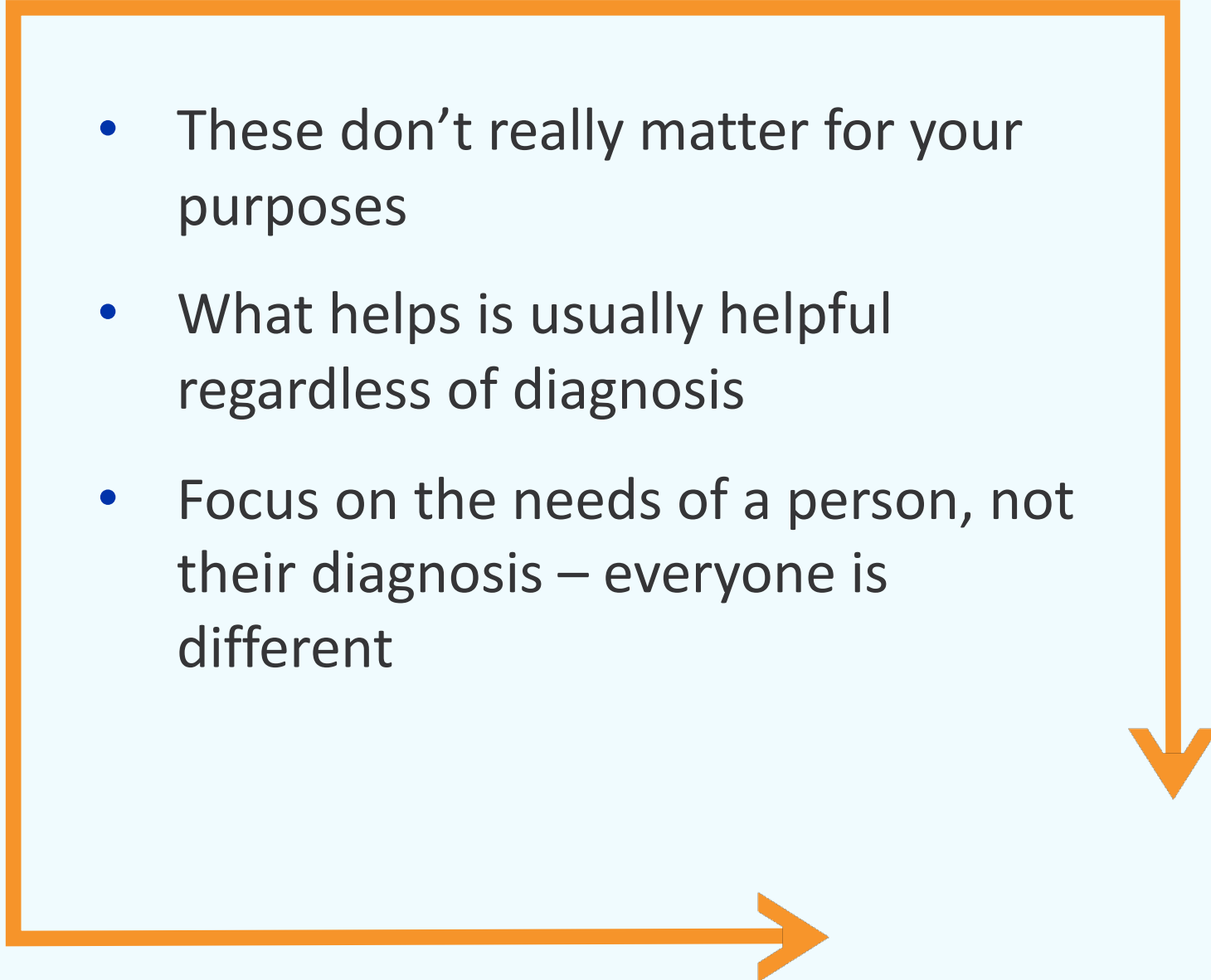
- DID forms as a result of ongoing trauma in childhood
- Forms if trauma begins before the age of 8 or 9 years of age
- Provides an escape cognitively when there is none physically
- A person with DID feels as if they have within them two or more entities, each with its own way of thinking and remembering about themselves and their life.

DID is NOT the problem

- What happened to us is the problem.
- DID is an incredibly creative survival mechanism.
- Learning to move through the world safely is the challenge.
- The world isn't always safe and we dissociate.
- People have discredited the disorder and those who work with it.

Diagnosis Doesn't Matter

- These don't really matter for your purposes
- What helps is usually helpful regardless of diagnosis
- Focus on the needs of a person, not their diagnosis – everyone is different





What Helps

Create an Accessible Space

It is important that you create:

Physical Safety



Emotional Safety

Create Physical Safety

Physical environment

Who has access to the survivor or their information?

How are survivors treated in your program by staff and other survivors?

Create Emotional Safety

- Intertwined with physical safety but goes further
- A lot of your effort will be spent here
- Build Rapport
 - Be Patient
 - Build Trust
 - Be Transparent
 - Remember people have been telling them they are a problem or hard forever, whether they say it or act like it.

Create Emotional Safety (continued)

- Plan for more time
- Keep things simple
- Limit chaos to the extent possible
- Repeat things as often as needed
- Provide information in different modes of learning

Different Modes of Learning

- Walk them through it
- Use videos
- Provide information in writing
- Use drawings

Other Things You Can Do to
Help

- Help create a checklist
- Provide written or drawn instructions
- Provide reminders
- Provide noise canceling headsets or sound machines
- Suggest the use of calendars or planners

Be Structured...

- Make things as predictable as possible
- Help survivors know what to expect
- Create routines for your work with survivors
- Help survivors create routines

But also, be Flexible

- Survivors with mental health disabilities often experience decreased stamina, or fatigue
 - Flexible schedule
 - Flexible sleeping arrangements
 - Periodic breaks
 - Break tasks down

Plan for Triggers

- Talk with survivors about challenges they experience
 - When they happen
 - How they come about
 - What helps them
 - What you can do to help

Learn about Grounding Techniques

- Help to soothe and calm a person when triggered
 - Practice grounding techniques with others before you need them
 - Discuss beforehand with survivors
 - Common techniques that help

Ask Questions About Needs

- Is there anything we can do to help you while you are here?
- If they disclose help them figure out whether they need to tell others.
- If they want to tell others, is there anything we can do to support you in doing so?
- It can get noisy and busy around here, if you think that will be a problem for you, what can we

Ask Questions About Needs (continued)

- I provided you with our medication policy, do you have any concerns about what it says?
- If you have any concerns about your medications or if you feel that they are not working properly, feel free to talk with one of us and we can try and help.
- I know that medications can have some side effects, like making you tired or feeling sick, if there is anything we can do to help you manage these can you let us know?

Ask Questions About Needs (continued)

- Sometimes we give you a lot of information, let us know if we are giving you too much at one time or ask us to write things down, or whatever you need from us.
- We can have a pretty tight schedule of activities here, if you think that maintaining this schedule will be a problem, can you let us know how we can help?
- I know that at this point you may not be aware of things you may need, I will make sure to check on you throughout your stay. But, remember you can reach out to any of us and ask for assistance

Thank you!

