Eight Strategies for Doing the Work: Surfacing the Social Context of Sexual Violence in Therapeutic Settings

A counsellor or therapist can intentionally integrate a systemic understanding of sexual violence in the following ways:

1. **Clearly name sexual violence as violence**:
   - *"Even if you had been drinking, you still had the right to say yes or no. If you did not consent, it's sexual assault."*
   - *"If you were a child and he was an adult, this was not a 'sexual relationship'. It was sexual abuse."*

2. **Identify victim-blaming myths and rhetoric in media stories of sexual violence, or other public discussion of sexual violence**:
   - *"This columnist suggests that false-reporting of sexual assault is a common problem. In fact, we know that sexual assault is an under-reported crime, and for many reasons. What reasons can you think of that victims don't report?"*

3. **Challenge victim-blaming myths and rhetoric in counselling sessions:**
   - *"Let's go back a moment, to where you said you 'started things' by agreeing to get a ride home with him. I want to say that agreeing to a ride home is just a ride home: you didn't start anything. What happened was not what you wanted, and it wasn't your fault."*

4. **Be aware of victim-blaming myths, rhetoric or thoughts in oneself -- or one's personal reactions to the service-user/client. Work to recognize and question disapproving or interrogative responses to survivors' stories in yourself. In addition, always consider integrating strategies to support yourself in doing this challenging work!**
   For example:
   - o Regular and as-needed debriefing with colleagues and supervisors
   - o Use of supervision or case management support discussions
   - o Awareness of self-care, vicarious trauma response, or defensiveness/resistance to service-users due to professional or personal fatigue
   - o Planning for respite ☺ such as vacation periods, professional development, and connection with family, friends and colleagues outside of the workplace

5. **Encourage survivors to think critically about how women, girls and femininity are valued (or not valued), and how this impacts social norms about sexual assault:**
   - o *"Too often, "good" women and girls are expected to control their own sexuality, as well as the sexuality of others. But all women and girls have the right to be sexual when they choose to."*
   - o *"We often get the message that if women behave in the right way, they won't get sexually assaulted. These messages are harmful to all women – they are additionally harmful to women who are sexually assaulted."*

6. **Make explicit stereotypes, oppressive stigma and myths about sexual violence in media stories, or in other public discussions:**
   - o *"This magazine story suggests that incest is only a problem in poor families. But we know that sexual abuse affects families from all classes."*

7. **Name and discuss forms of oppression that are present in service-user/clients' personal stories (that is, in their lived experience):**
   - o *"It should not matter that you were a teenager and he was an adult. You still had the right to be believed when you told what happened. All of us have the right to be heard and believed."*

8. **Describe how women's experiences of violence are different than men's experiences of violence – and, where appropriate, sharing examples, anecdotes or statistics to help illustrate this**.

For a fuller discussion read:

Pietsch, N. (April 2014). *Doing the Work: Surfacing the Social Context of Sexual Violence in Therapeutic Settings. Learning Network Brief (19).* London, Ontario: Learning Network, Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children. http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/sites/learningtoendabuse.ca.vawlearningnetwork/files/L_B_19.pdf.