HANDOUT

Supporting Survivors at the Intersection of Mental Health and Gender-Based Violence:
Reflections and Approaches for Frontline Practice
Presented January 13th 2026
This handout was created in compliment to the online presentation on The Learning Network at Western University.

Why This Matters
Survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) are increasingly navigating complex mental health impacts shaped by trauma, fear, stigma, and systemic barriers. These experiences are **not indicators of weakness or lack of credibility**; they are often adaptive responses to unsafe conditions.
Frontline work at this intersection requires compassion, clarity, and collaboration.

Key Understandings:
Mental Health & GBV
- Mental health concerns often emerge **within contexts of trauma and violence.**
- Distress may fluctuate depending on safety, system interactions, and stressors.
- High functioning does **not** mean low risk.

Trauma responses are automatic and protective:
- **Fight**: anger, defensiveness.
- **Flight**: panic, urgency to leave.
- **Freeze**: numbness, silence, shutdown.
- **Fawn**: people-pleasing, minimizing harm.
- **Dissociation**: detachment, confusion.

These responses reflect **survival**, not choice.

Reducing Stigma:
- Mental health concerns do **not** reduce credibility.
- Trauma responses are often misread as non-compliance.
- Stigma can affect safety, trust, and help-seeking.
- Compassionate, trauma-informed responses increase engagement.

Practical Trauma & Violence-Informed Strategies:
Grounding & De-escalation:
- Slow your pace and tone
- Use clear, simple language
- Normalize trauma responses
- Offer choice whenever possible

Your presence can help regulate a survivor's nervous system.

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Supporting Survivors in Crisis:

- Prioritize immediate safety and stabilization.
- Avoid ultimatums or rushed decisions.
- Use collaborative, survivor-centred planning.
- Focus on connection, not control.

Navigating Co-Occurring Risks:

Survivors may face overlapping risks such as:

- Escalating violence.
- Mental health distress.
- Suicidal thoughts*
- Substance use.
- Housing or financial instability.

Hold the full picture. Balance **safety, autonomy, and capacity**.

Use curiosity, not judgment.

* Frontline workers should follow their organizational protocols and consult appropriate crisis or mental health supports when needed.

Collaboration Matters!

- Survivors often engage with multiple systems simultaneously.
- Different mandates can create gaps or inconsistencies.
- Shared language and communication improve safety.
- Collaboration supports both survivors *and* frontline workers.

No single service holds the full solution.

Honouring Survivors

This work is grounded in the courage of survivors who share their experiences and in the lives of those lost to violence. Their voices guide learning, prevention, and change.

A Final Reflection

You do not need to fix the system to make a difference.

Small, trauma-informed shifts in practice can profoundly shape survivor safety, dignity, and trust.

Your work matters.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) versus Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

IPV	GBV
Occurs within intimate relationships.	Can occur in any setting (community, workplace, online, home).
Not all IPV is gender-motivated.	Always rooted in gender inequality and power dynamics.
Often involves patterns of control and domination within a relationship.	Encompasses structural, societal, and systemic drivers of violence.
A subset of GBV when it is gender-motivated.	Umbrella term that includes IPV.

Key Points to Remember:

- IPV refers to violence within an intimate relationship, past or present.
- It can include psychological abuse, coercive control, stalking, technological abuse, physical and sexual violence, or economic control.
- IPV can impact people of all genders, but disproportionately affects women and gender-diverse individuals.
- GBV is a broader systemic category.
- GBV includes any form of violence driven by gender norms, gender inequality, or patriarchal power structures.
- GBV includes IPV, but also sexual violence by non-partners, workplace harassment, trafficking, online hate, homophobic or transphobic violence, and femicide.
- Not all IPV is automatically GBV, although most IPV impacting women is rooted in gendered power imbalances. However, IPV between partners of the same gender may not always be gender-motivated, which is why distinguishing terms matters.
- The distinction helps with policy, resource allocation, and preparing interventions.
- GBV requires societal and cultural change; IPV intervention often focuses on relational dynamics, risk assessment, and safety planning.

IPV is about the relationship context; GBV is about the gendered power context.
When IPV is driven by gender inequality, it becomes a form of GBV,
but GBV extends far beyond intimate relationships.