

## Some Suggestions for Sharing Disturbing Material That Can Respect Everyone's Needs

Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D.

*The Witness to Witness Program* | <https://www.migrantclinician.org/witness-to-witness>

We have all had the experience of having seen or heard something that was very upsetting for us. Some of us get bowled over and isolate ourselves when this happens. Others of us reach out towards others, thinking that sharing our experience will be helpful. In a work setting, in the course of everybody's busy day, figuring out how to share in a way that will work for everyone can be tricky.

It's a bit like the Goldilocks problem: what's so much sharing that we spread our distress and what's so little sharing that we get no relief.

Fortunately, there is a strategy that seems to be effective in hitting the sweet spot. Laurie Pearlman and Karen Saakvitne first called it "limited disclosure" and since then the term has been modified to "low impact disclosure." The purpose of a low impact disclosure is to get support in a manner that is safe for you and for your colleagues. We want to lesson and contain distress not amplify and spread it.

Françoise Mathieu<sup>1</sup> proposes that there are four steps to "low impact disclosure." This is my version of the four steps:

- 1. Reflect on the situation:** Consider the situation you are in. Is this a formal debriefing context like a supervision session or a consultation group or is this an informal setting, like the hallway or restroom? In a formal debriefing situation, colleagues are usually prepared to hear a lot of detail. In an informal situation, colleagues usually are not prepared. Now reflect on other experiences you have had. How much detail did you need to provide in order to experience some relief from distress? If it was a lot of detail, are you in a situation right now where you can do what you need? If not, what can you do to access the setting you need?

2. **“Fair Warning”:** Whether you are in a formal or an informal setting, it’s a good idea to give your listener(s) “fair warning.” You may want to preface your sharing by stating at the outset that you have something difficult you want to talk about. In an informal setting, the listener has a choice to tell you whether the time is right or not for her to hear what you have to say. In a formal setting, your colleague will usually do her own mental preparation and tell you to proceed. But,
3. **Consent:** It is still best to get consent. If it is an informal setting, your colleague might say, “This isn’t actually a good time for me.” Or your colleague might say, “I have a few minutes now, so I can hear the outline but not lots of upsetting details because I have to go in with a client myself.” Even your supervisor might say, “Let’s figure out how to talk about the material so that it is safe for both of us.”
4. **Low-Impact Disclosure:** There are two aspects to the disclosure process. There is the content of what we share and then there is the emotion with which we share it. In terms of content, a low impact disclosure tells only the details that are necessary to get across the story of what happened and how it made you feel. There is a difference between telling someone how upset you were by the experience and re-living how upset you were in the present moment. The latter is likely to spread distress not contain it.

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1. Mathieu, F. (2012). Routledge psychosocial stress series. *The compassion fatigue workbook: Creative tools for transforming compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.