

FAQ on Reference Service for Sensitive Areas

**PATRONS IN CRISIS ARE HARD TO IDENTIFY
BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO HELP**

It's quite rare for someone to step up to a reference desk and announce that he or she is trying to escape

from domestic violence, that he or she is suffering from a substance abuse problem, or some other personal crisis. Nevertheless, there are some ways to recognize the possibility of abuse or other crisis situations, to feel more comfortable in helping out, and to provide effective service.

How do I know if someone's in a sensitive situation?

You don't. At least, you rarely know. You can, however, be open to the possibility that you're working with someone who has serious health or safety concerns. All those nonverbal cues you look for when helping someone with any personal problem will show up here. How do you know when people need cancer information for themselves, although they're asking about it for a friend? How do you know when a resumé workshop means food on the table tonight rather than prepping for a possible round of layoffs? Here are a few behaviors that could heighten your awareness of a potentially sensitive situation.

- Signaling a need for privacy – quiet voice, minimal eye contact, standing off to one side, keeping an eye on the rest of the room
- Indicating an urgency that seems out of proportion in relationship to the question's depth, such as wanting every bit of contact information on the local bus system
- Low frustration level matched with an expectation of inadequate service. Think of someone who's gone through the worst post office, driver's license service, and cable company delivery and now has to get your help in the next 5 minutes.

As with all patrons, when in doubt, look for ways to help them trust that you respect and will help them.

How do I adjust my reference interview technique?

Pacing – match what you're given, at least initially. A quick pace could indicate that an abuser is monitoring time away from home; a slow pace could indicate someone with such low self-esteem that she anticipates being disrespected or even shut down. Once you've established a rapport (and that can take longer than usual) the two of you may mutually set the pace.

Emotion – a stranger's deeply personal problem can engender empathy or revulsion. You may have the "what can I do to get her out of that awful situation" or the "stop whining and fix your own problem" response. There are many other responses, of course, but these two are really problematic. In both cases, be aware of your response and then set it aside. Regardless of your personal reaction, abuse survivors need to know that they are respected as

individuals and, likewise, that their questions are fully respected. Of course, we do that for everyone, but it's particularly essential for people whose life experience has undermined their self-esteem. Your empathy can too easily be perceived as pity; your revulsion will shut down most efforts to make use of the library at all.

Teaching – in public libraries we often expect people to do their own work after we've showed them how to get started. People in crisis situations, however, often need slow, easily digested lessons with opportunities for application. This needs more than patience. It needs an unobtrusive monitoring of progress. Does the patron appear to gain self-confidence, start making choices/decisions unguided, or develop new information needs? Those are signs that your teaching is working really well.

Fetching – we want people to get their own materials, find their own answers, and do the mechanical work without us. We don't fetch. We guide. Yet when people are not able to understand guidance, we may need to fetch. Just getting to the library and verbalizing a question may have taken so much emotional energy that following your guidance is too much. We often know when someone is not going to follow our directions. Abuse survivors may need active, walk-by-my-side support.

How do I adjust the kind of information I give?

Watch the size -- if an abuser is monitoring your patron's movements, then a library book on abuse is going to be hard to hide. An effective URL, however, can be hidden in a lipstick tube. Offer a choice: "I can get you that kind of information from one of our books or I can show you a good web site on it."

Keep it practical – sometimes the information you provide is all there is. She needs a bus to take her to the women's shelter for counseling. Handing her a complex bus schedule provides far more information than is really needed. She wants one route, not all of them. Take the full bus schedule as a starting point, not an ending point. If the patron or someone close to them is suffering from a mental illness they want more information on, they may not want scientific journal articles, but practical advice on treatment options or local support groups.

Expect to problem-solve – someone who lives in a shelter may need special permission to check out a book or get a library card. Someone with limited time may not be able to wait for an hour to get 30 minutes on a computer. Someone trying to watch three kids while filling out a job application may not be able to be in both the children's section and the computer lab at the same time. None of those is an insoluble problem, although all of them are tricky. Give information that makes the library work for the patron, rather than making the patron conform to the library. That's easier said than done if you're the only one trying, but it's still worth some consideration.

Expect to explore – at some point, most survivors have to face the fact that the lives they'd expected simply are not going to happen. They have to understand themselves, their relationships, and their plans. All of it is suddenly up for review. Reference questions can be part of that exploration. Stories from survivors, web sites filled with practical advice, parenting books, magazine articles on the relationship between stress and health -- any of that might be unexpectedly useful. Asking open-ended questions, offering two or more quite different types of materials in response to a broad question, and pointing out some interesting new books can be non-threatening ways to help a survivor explore a new life.

Recognizing the Needs of Specific Sensitive Situations

What do I need to know about...

Domestic abuse?

1. There are over a dozen reasons that survivors do not leave their relationships, and it's impossible to know which ones apply to your patrons. So assume they have reasons for what they do and move on.
2. Many survivors try to move towards safer living, not escape. They want to change their relationship, not end it.
3. Their time is often fragmented and quite short so learning even the simplest task can be really hard. You might do more "hand holding" than is common.
4. Virtually everyone with domestic violence problems has other problems as well. Long-neglected health problems, parenting issues, financial illiteracy, inadequate education, no transportation -- abuse is really a constellation of problems.

Homelessness?

1. Many public libraries have had concerns about the homeless discouraging other patrons from attending—familiarize yourself with city and library policies and codes of conduct, and consider how to deal with any potential patron complaints in a sensitive and tactful manner that respects all the library's patrons.
2. There are many reasons a person may be homeless (see "[Causes of Homelessness](#)"), and needs may vary depending on these reasons—a person temporarily homeless because of a natural disaster will require very different resources than someone chronically homeless due to mental illness.
3. Does your library card form require a home address? This could discourage the homeless for applying—consider qualifying any such fields as "if applicable."

Unemployment?

1. Many people face long-term unemployment, for example 28% of those receiving unemployment compensation had been out of work for 27 weeks or more. [Unemployment Compensation. *Gale Encyclopedia of American Law*. Ed. Donna Batten. Vol. 10. 3rd ed. Detroit: Gale, 2010. p153-155. Word Count: 1603.] The greatest proportion, however, can not be considered chronically unemployed. Most are actively searching for work. Many take multiple part-time jobs when possible.
2. Many public libraries have resume workshops that are of great value in this tight job market. Consider expanding your support services for the unemployed. Offer to host your community's job fair or bring the library's services to a booth at the job fair. Make sure that local employment agencies, both governmental and private, know that you have resume workshops available.

Educational needs?

1. The functionally illiterate may not identify themselves as such, so watch for signs that they may need more visual materials, or information on adult literacy programs. Similarly, be aware that for those who speak English as a second language, even if their speech is fluent, their reading ability may not be—consider other media, such as video or audio materials, as well as materials that may be in their native language.
2. The GED/high school diploma is essential for getting a job. Since adult education is non-compulsory, individuals seeking their GED are doing so on their own time, and usually at their own expense. They may be doing so for reasons of self-improvement or, more commonly, to become better qualified for the job market.
3. Education on basic information technology such as email and word processing software is crucial. Since technology is most commonly learned through exposure, the underprivileged are often at a disadvantage that may make them less comfortable with new technology. You can help them bridge the digital divide by being open to a little one-on-one coaching when they appear to be having problems with the online GED study tools or other essential technology. Part of this service may include explaining the necessity of technology applications to those who have gotten along for years without them. If you can find out what they most need technology for—getting a job or studying for a college entrance examination—then you can tailor services to their needs and avoid overloading them with information about software they won't need.

Health concerns?

1. Confidentiality is a concern for all patron queries, but when dealing with health issues, it is even more crucial—be aware of how professional ethics and legal statutes may limit what you can share about what patrons have told you of their medical conditions, even with coworkers.
2. People who cannot afford health care for themselves or their families may turn to online tools (such as WebMD) for diagnoses and treatment options. This is an excellent opportunity to both help them find what they need and develop some skepticism of such web sites.

Those seeking help with life skills?

1. What may seem common knowledge to one person may not be for another—do not take for granted someone's ability to use a computer mouse, or to read a bus schedule—watch for facial cues and body language to make sure the patron follows what you're telling them.
2. Reference help does not always mean providing the answers, but it often requires detailed and customized help for people who are learning to navigate systems that are unfamiliar or confusing. Cultural norms, life experience, education, and other factors are often hidden but when you move toward

solving problems rather than providing answers you can help those who most need your expertise.