

**Manifesto point 3: key staff who frequently interact with students are trained in dealing with topics of sexual violence in a trauma-sensitive manner. We also train staff in dealing with disclosures and the effective referral of students and colleagues who have experienced sexual violence.**

Staff members often do not feel confident in their ability to support a student who approaches them and shares their experience of sexual violence. These conversations are difficult, and staff are afraid of saying the wrong thing despite good intentions. They have concerns about not knowing enough about trauma symptoms, not knowing where to further guide students and issues around confidentiality of the conversation and the student's safety.

All these issues are addressed during trauma-sensitivity training. Having staff trained will result in a safer university environment in which staff are confident in their skills to help and students are not afraid of asking for help.

***What is trauma-sensitivity and why is it important?***

The first conversation someone has about their experience of sexual violence will determine whether they will continue to talk about it or not. Today, on average, it takes a woman who experienced sexual violence 16 years to ask for help and for men, it can take even longer. If the initial response from people is good and trauma-sensitive, it becomes the first step in the process of finding help, justice and healing. However, if people ask the wrong questions, this can add to feelings of guilt and shame, stopping people from speaking about their experiences again. People often feel guilty, ashamed and afraid of not being believed. These first conversations are most likely held with friends, classmates or a trusted teacher or mentor. Therefore, it is important that trauma-sensitive conversation skills are widespread like first aid.

***What are the challenges?***

**Challenge: staff feel insecure about supporting students who experienced sexual violence, because they are worried about making the situation worse rather than better.**

During a discussion about trauma-sensitivity at the conference, staff members who work as confidential advisors or in other roles with frequent contact with students shared their concerns and challenges. The biggest challenge is the lack of confidence in their ability to help. Staff fear hurting people who come for help by saying the wrong thing despite good intentions. For example by making judgements about the story that is presented to them. Or not understanding the symptoms of trauma.

During the discussion, these concerns were acknowledged by trauma-sensitivity trainer Legien Warsosemito-Schenk. She explained that when someone shares an experience of sexually transgressive behavior, they experience a lack of control. Therefore, when they share their story with you, it is important to put control of the conversation in their hands. To let the person call their experience however they want to call it and go along with their wording – e.g., do not explain to someone that what they experienced is rape. If during a conversation this type of

control is removed from them again, they will likely feel less safe and are less likely to open up about their experience again and look for help.

### ***What are the solutions?***

#### **Comprehensive trauma-sensitivity training for all staff that regularly deal with students.**

During the conference, the working groups on trauma-sensitivity were led by Legien Warsosemito-Schenk from Stichting Samen Helen. Legien is a trainer in trauma-sensitive conversation techniques and wrote a [toolkit](#) about how to support people who have experienced sexual violence.

Training such as the ones offered by Legien can give staff the tools to be confident in supporting students. Spreading the skills of trauma-sensitive conversation has the power to give people who decide to seek help adequate support and change how people think about seeking help in the first place.

Talking about sexual violence in a trauma-sensitive manner changes the culture and stigma around it, which can change these numbers and make sure people get the support they need and when they need it. University environments can play a crucial role in leading that change with staff and students who are able to support people who come forward making an impact in their communities and beyond.

It also became clear during the conference that staff need clearer guidance on their legal and institutional obligations regarding disclosures of sexual violence. It can be difficult to navigate the balance between the safety of the student and the wider community and confidentiality. The first step in tackling this issue is clearer guidance from the institution.