

# Building Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence

## A Message Guide



# About this guide

This guide is based on research commissioned by Blue Shield of California Foundation as part of their strategy to address domestic violence and support restorative, community-based options that prevent the transfer of violence across generations.

The research examined people's beliefs, emotions, identities, lived experiences, and values on the topics of domestic violence and restorative approaches to domestic violence. [Wonder: Strategies for Good](#) conducted the research and developed the recommendations and messaging examples contained in this guide.

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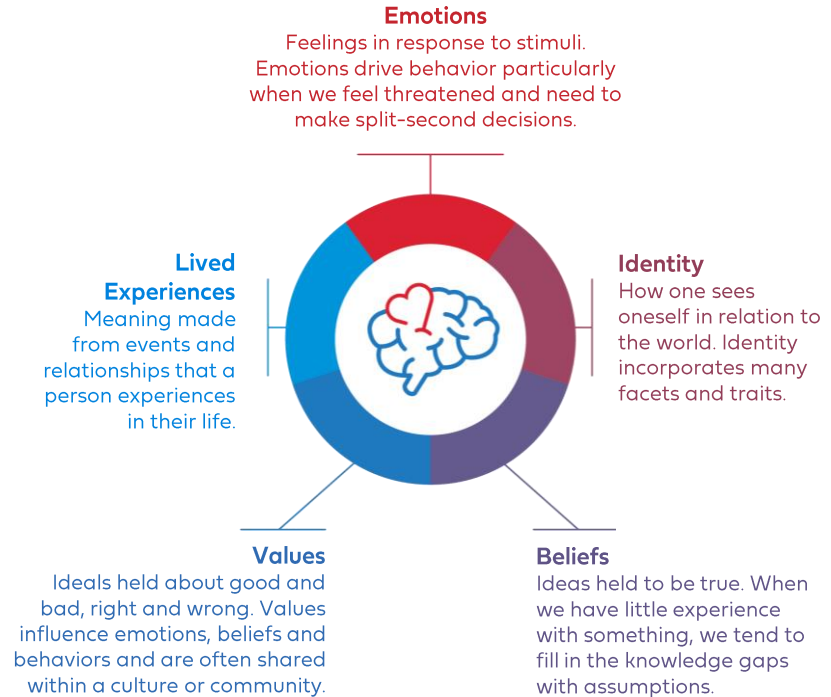
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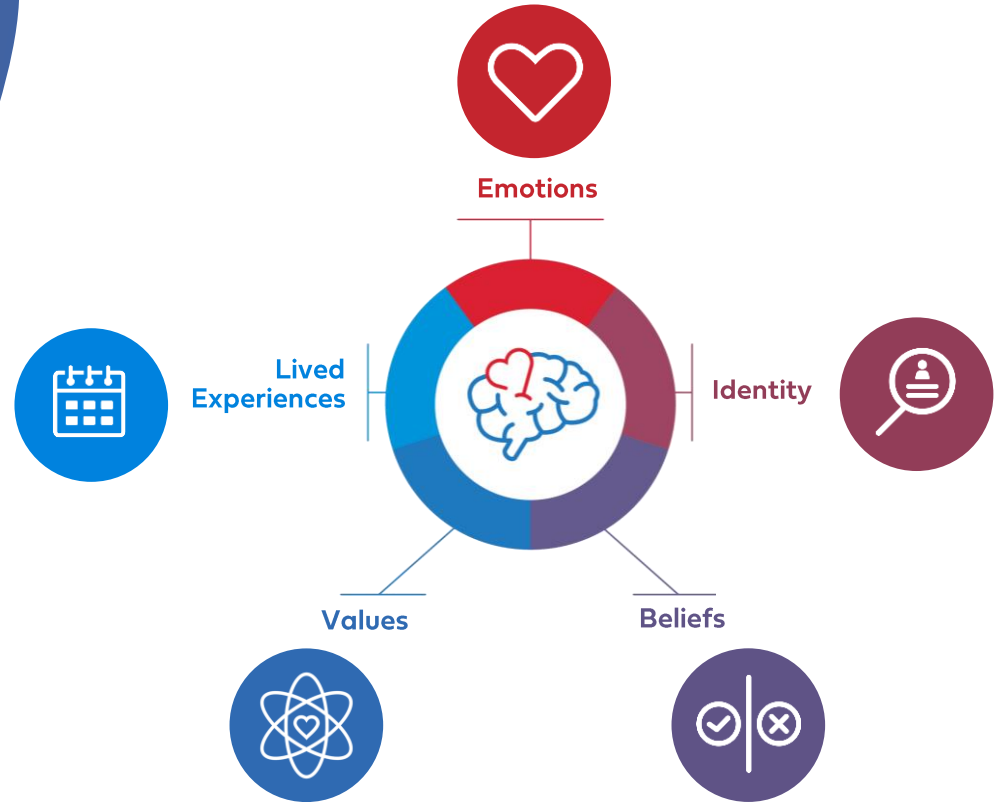
## THE FIVE HEARTWIRED FACTORS:

# What we listen for in the research

When it comes to making emotionally complex decisions, people are Heartwired. Five Heartwired factors – emotions, identity, values, beliefs, and lived experiences – combine and also collide to shape how people think and behave. When there is alignment between all five Heartwired factors, decisions are straightforward. When there are conflicts, decisions can be more difficult.



Our approach to social change: Understanding how human beings are heartwired.



# Blue Shield of California Foundation's Change Goals on Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence

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We are developing messaging to:

- 1 Advance and promote approaches that prevent the transfer of domestic violence across generations.
- 2 Advance restorative, healing approaches that center the needs of survivors and their families while promoting security, resilience, and community-based accountability for ending cycles of violence.

# Messaging recommendations are intended to build public support for restorative approaches to domestic violence:

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Messaging recommendations are intended to help create an “enabling environment” designed to help community-based, restorative, non-carceral programs succeed as a viable approach to domestic violence for survivors and their families.



Messaging recommendations provide guidance for funding and program strategies to consider in early stages of implementation, but are not intended to substitute for funding or programming criteria.

# Three phases of research

## LANDSCAPE RESEARCH

Knowledge transfer conversations with experts on domestic violence and/or restorative approaches; Web-based organizational audits of organizations working on domestic violence and/or restorative practices; Media audit analyzing coverage of domestic violence and restorative justice; Social listening of reader comments on media coverage of domestic violence and restorative justice

## MINDSET RESEARCH

Qualitative in-depth interviews with advocates and experts working in domestic violence advocacy, criminal justice, law enforcement, and civil law to understand mindsets about different legal and community-based options to respond to domestic violence

## PERSUASION RESEARCH

Qualitative in-depth interviews with advocates and experts working in domestic violence advocacy, criminal justice, law enforcement, and civil law, to test responses to different fact patterns and stories about women affected by domestic violence

# What we learned from the research

Domestic violence is an emotionally charged topic, often triggering or eliciting a primal reaction.

LANDSCAPE RESEARCH

"I found myself yelling at the screen while reading the passages about the callers, especially. In a loud voice, with lots of swearing...And so I continued, along those lines. I couldn't help my intense emotional reaction. I have to confess also that as a survivor, I am having a very hard time finding anything resembling compassion towards the perpetrators of domestic/intimate partner violence. I admire the effort and the radically different approach, but I cannot feel anything for these monsters."

-READER COMMENT, IN RESPONSE TO "WILL YOU EVER CHANGE? CAN FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS BETWEEN A VICTIM AND AN ABUSER HELP A SOCIETY OVERWHELMED WITH BAD BEHAVIOR?," THE CUT, JULY 2022

In our social listening scan, civically engaged audiences seem to be able to see the connections between domestic violence and other forms of trauma and stress having to do with poverty, racial inequity, and gender-based violence.

LANDSCAPE RESEARCH

"The story of LeLe and the high chair episode would happen exactly the same way before covid too. No one cares. Police show up at your home annoyed you called them out for a DV incident. They tell you to leave the abuser. Women face abject poverty if they leave. You end up taking a beating so you have shelter and food. Domestic violence is much the same problem outside of any pandemic. Mothers cannot afford to leave and arrange a private living situation away from their abuser. Even before covid, living wage jobs were scarce. Apartment rent, food, childcare, transportation, utilities and insurance require a min of 2k a month and that's a shoestring budget in an affordable area. Jobs paying 2k a month were in short supply BEFORE covid. Leaving an abusive predator ABSOLUTELY requires a job."

-READER COMMENT, IN RESPONSE TO "A NEW COVID-19 CRISIS: DOMESTIC ABUSE RISES WORLDWIDE," NEW YORK TIMES, APRIL 2020

# What we learned from the research

In qualitative interviews, those who were supportive or inclined to be supportive of restorative approaches to domestic violence saw the primary value of these approaches as promoting healing and accountability.

**MINDSET RESEARCH**

Those stakeholders who were skeptical about restorative approaches were concerned about keeping survivors safe and were also confused about how such approaches would work.

**MINDSET RESEARCH +  
PERSUASION RESEARCH**

“First and foremost hopefully [a restorative approach] stops the [domestic violence], but beyond that hopefully it stops it from perpetuating either for those partners and parents or for the children that saw it happen as well. Those would be the biggest hopes, but I think you also hope that people learn skills towards resolving conflict outside of domestic violence that they learn that they can be helped, that they can advocate for themselves, that they can have some agency in life.”

— LAW ENFORCEMENT/CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

“I think many times the situation is actually extremely dangerous and may be more dangerous than the facilitator or the parties are really aware of. Domestic violence quickly escalates in some cases from pushing and shoving up to strangulation, very quickly and from there to homicide, very quickly. I think that many people who are trying to do the right thing, I know they are well intentioned, the restorative justice movement, and sometimes I think it is fine. But I think in some cases it is really dangerous, so that is one concern.”

— DV EXPERT IN LEGAL SYSTEM

“Let's say there is a call like the victim calls 911 and says hey, I am safe now but this just happened. My husband shoved me because I forgot to turn the light off—something seemingly ridiculous. You know police have to show up, but then they are already there. The husband is in tears, crying, and not drunk, not doing drugs; just like so sad he did this. In that moment what is the next step? Do you say here is a referral to restorative justice; show up there in a week. Clear your calendar, take time off work, get child care or is there an immediate response of almost like a triage person that comes out and actually starts that conversation right there? Because I think my concern with this, this seems like a week or two out from the event and that is where I think you start getting the victim starts to say yeah, it wasn't that big a— it was just a shove. It wasn't a big deal...They start to make excuses for themselves for what they experienced, and then frankly the perpetrator probably starts to think they kind of forget they did it too because we are back to normal again. But again, what does that look like? So I would just say this still seems like we are pretty far downstream from the actual event happening.”

— CRIMINAL JUSTICE/LEGAL SYSTEM

# What we learned from the research

There is a widely held belief among stakeholders that the criminal justice system is a flawed and inappropriate system for dealing with domestic violence.

MINDSET RESEARCH

“Jail is not the place to punish somebody who is a father of three, possibly providing the food on the table to then destabilize that family further unless this person poses an ongoing risk to them. So I think the courts have to determine is this person -- is the punishment really worthwhile to the family unit and is that just going to come back five-fold on top of the victim and the survivors? And I think that is what I think a lot about with the court system is we punish too much, then we really just punish the victim because they are the ones who pay at the end of the day for removing this person from the family.”

— CRIMINAL JUSTICE/LEGAL SYSTEM

Stakeholders understand that the harm of domestic violence crosses generations and impacts people other than the survivor and the person who caused harm.

MINDSET RESEARCH

“That you have communities of color affected by generational poverty and generational oppression and the police and the court system have been part of that. A lot of women, especially when you grow up in poorer communities there is a much greater police presence and presence of governmental authorities like Child Protective Services. You maybe live in an apartment building in the Bronx and 25 percent of the families there have had kids at least temporarily taken away from them by Child Protective Services and 75 percent of them have had interactions with the criminal justice system. And so you do get a lot of victims and survivors who they want protection and assistance but may not want to involve the police and they may not want to involve the criminal justice system because they have no faith in it and it is just has just oppressed them or their families in the past.”

— CRIMINAL JUSTICE/LEGAL SYSTEM

# What we learned from the research

Most stakeholders understand and empathize with the goal of family reconciliation, and some believe that people who cause harm can change and be good partners and/or parents.

MINDSET RESEARCH

"I am not making any excuses for [people who have caused harm], but what I am saying is that they can still have positive relationships with their children and their children, vice versa, have positive relationship with them, even dependents. Children can grow up actually looking up to their dads even if they have those acts because they are not committing those acts 24/7. In between those violent acts are tender moments of actual parenting, bonding and good family time. So I can appreciate why a domestic violence survivor would want that kind of reconciliation that believe that the person they are with isn't just defined by those horrible moments that there are some moments that actually outweigh, outnumber those incidents and that feeling of how the children would benefit by having the family intact."

— DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ADVOCATE

Most stakeholders believe that restorative approaches should be 'in addition to,' not 'as a replacement for' criminal justice approaches.

MINDSET RESEARCH +  
PERSUASION RESEARCH

"But I think that perhaps they can be an option sort of like on a menu of ways to deal with things in our existing system of systems. So you have the police come out. You have the social workers come out. You have child welfare come out and then oh look now we have restorative justice on this list and is there a way that we can all work together?"

— LAW ENFORCEMENT/CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

Because stakeholders understand the causes of domestic violence to be multifold and complex, restorative approaches as a prevention tool seems unrealistic.

MINDSET RESEARCH

"I think the prevention part I don't really—besides kind of attitudinal stuff I am not sure how you change the prevention part because it is not something you can predict necessarily with somebody. I think most of the research doesn't say you can really predict domestic violence; you can just kind of at a societal level try and prevent it by changing attitudes but substance use is still substance use and a lot of these things kind of interplay."

— CRIMINAL JUSTICE/LEGAL SYSTEM

# What we learned from the research

It is possible to support restorative approaches in some cases while also recognizing that criminal justice responses are more appropriate for other cases. Restorative approaches to domestic violence always need to be talked about as an option for specific types of cases.

**PERSUASION RESEARCH**

"I think [restorative approaches] can be useful when the level of abuse is very, very low like if it is only verbal abuse or only a little bit of pushing maybe, like that's it. I think they can be helpful where children have not witnessed anything at all either with their eyes or with their ears... I think they can be useful when the survivor is completely voluntarily choosing this and is not pressured."

— DV EXPERT IN LEGAL SYSTEM

Most are already disposed to care for the victim/survivor. Under the right circumstances, and with the right story, some can be persuaded that restorative approaches can widen the circle of care to include others—like children and other family members.

**PERSUASION RESEARCH**

"Restorative justice has been shown to work very effectively in certain settings and with certain factors in place, and in those cases, it is a much better solution than criminal justice. You are building stronger families. You are healing traumatized people, and I think that is much more important than penalizing somebody."

— LEGAL SYSTEM ADVOCATE

Support for restorative approaches to domestic violence increases when the agency and voice of survivors is centered in messaging and storytelling.

**PERSUASION RESEARCH**

"We want to empower [survivors] to make their own decisions and it is our job to educate them on the decisions, but it is their job to make it. So I am not going to feel like, oh this was the right decision for her, or this was the wrong decision for her. This is HER decision and she has the right to make it."

— DV EXPERT IN LEGAL SYSTEM

# What we learned from the research

Support for restorative approaches increases when stories feature the person who caused harm admitting they caused harm and taking responsibility, although these perspectives must always be secondary to that of the survivor's and must feel genuinely remorseful.

PERSUASION RESEARCH

[Responding to a piece of test content]

"I think [the restorative option] was helpful for her because she really feels that Walt listened to her and that is a very important part of the process, that he was genuinely taking responsibility for what he did. Number one, he acknowledged that it happened. Many batterers say it didn't even happen. The fact that he said it did and that he did it and this was wrong is a big part of his healing. It is also a big part of her healing."

— DV EXPERT IN LEGAL SYSTEM

**Audiences are experiencing a deep sense of empathy for survivors — in some cases hyper-empathy.** This empathy stems from: their own direct or indirect personal experiences with domestic violence; or an ability to imagine easily what it would be like to experience domestic violence, or to have someone who they loved experience it.

This hyper-empathy may cause them to flip the question from "Should I support making restorative approaches an option for survivors?" to "If I were a survivor of domestic violence, would I decide to pursue a restorative approach?" We can facilitate support by refocusing stakeholders' attention on the agency of the survivor and allowing them to make the decision for themselves, when a restorative approach is offered as one option among others.

PERSUASION RESEARCH





MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

# General and Specific



# General Recommendations About Messages

In the following pages, we'll share a messaging recommendation and then we'll share several message examples of that recommendation.

### Some things to note upfront:

- **Messages are ingredients, not the whole meal.** In other words, you will need to adapt messages for different forms of communication, like speeches, opinion pieces, and video stories, not have them stand alone. **Messages can also be combined with other ingredients, like data points, stories, and calls to action (for policy change or activism) or requests for proposals.**
- **Who delivers these messages is as important as the messages themselves.**
- **Messages need to be internalized and personalized by the user.** Messengers should express their motivations for speaking out, which helps foster a sense of connection between the messengers and audiences.
- People interested in effective messaging may want to assess both whether their messages are being accurately conveyed through their communications strategies and whether they're being heard and understood by their audiences.



# General Messaging Recommendations to Build Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence

We recommend using a story-based approach whenever possible (e.g., share messages within the framework of a story featuring real people). Stories help skeptical audience members calm their “downstairs brain” by acknowledging the complexity and primal emotions of domestic violence situations.

Stories should also feature most of the following elements:

- Survivors should be the lead voices/messengers in stories
- Diversity of circumstance and background (kids and no kids; married and unmarried couples; those who pursued restorative approaches and those who didn't)
- Violence being addressed early on, before it becomes chronic or lethal (While programs may choose to quietly address chronic or lethal cases, **stories to build support for restorative options** are more likely to succeed if they do not feature these types of cases. In addition, grantee representatives who reviewed our messaging content were already aware of the need to curate messaging and stories in this way.)
- Person who caused harm taking genuine responsibility — which includes authentic reflections on the harm they cause and accountability for their actions

*Continued on next slide.*

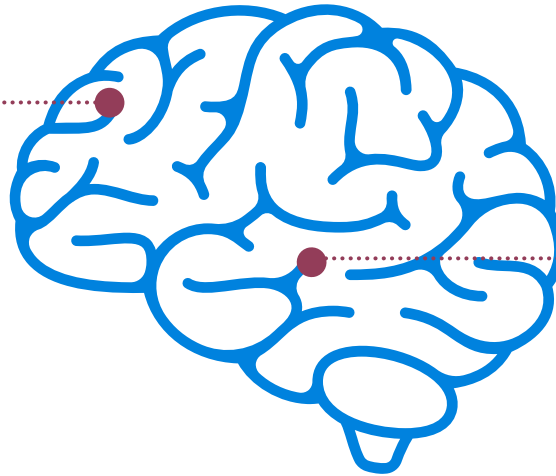


## Upstairs vs. Downstairs Brain\*: Your Brain on Socially Sensitive Issues

### UPSTAIRS BRAIN

Responsible for decision- making and planning, control over emotions and body, self-understanding, empathy, compassion, and morality.

Allows for empathy which is a precursor to compassion.



### DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN

The primitive brain is responsible for basic functions, innate reactions and impulses and strong emotions.

Shuts down upstairs brain to respond to fear and focus on survival.

\* "The Whole-Brain Child" by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.



# General Messaging Recommendations to Build Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence

- Description of how different restorative practices programs actually work — including a definition of the word “restorative,” how programs are recommended to survivors, their ability to exercise agency in deciding to pursue or reject this as an option, what happens in the programs, and what the program does to guarantee physical and emotional safety for survivors
- Clear articulation of who benefits and how from restorative approaches, including positive outcomes for a diverse array of situations, e.g., couples who stay together, couples who decide to end their relationships
- Some mention of follow-up commitments (individual therapy and/or anger management classes for the person who caused harm, couples counseling for those who stay together, etc.)



## What is the Heartwired Checklist?

The Heartwired Checklist is a tool for you to check the specific intent of your messaging with respect to influencing your audiences.

Some things to note :

- Some messages may align with more than one Checklist item (e.g., a message might serve to both build trust with audiences and calm their concerns).
- It's perfectly fine if a particular communication doesn't cover every Checklist item, but it's still a good idea to be mindful of which Checklist items your communication is directly addressing.
- The Checklist items are not intended to be addressed in any particular order, with the exception of Item #1 – building trust with your audiences IS an important prerequisite to effectively communicating with and persuading them.

A HEARTWIRED CHECKLIST FOR MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

# Building Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence

## Building Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence



### Build trust

This recommendation is focused primarily on the messengers featured in stories. When audiences trust messengers, they are more likely to believe and agree with the information and anecdotes they share.

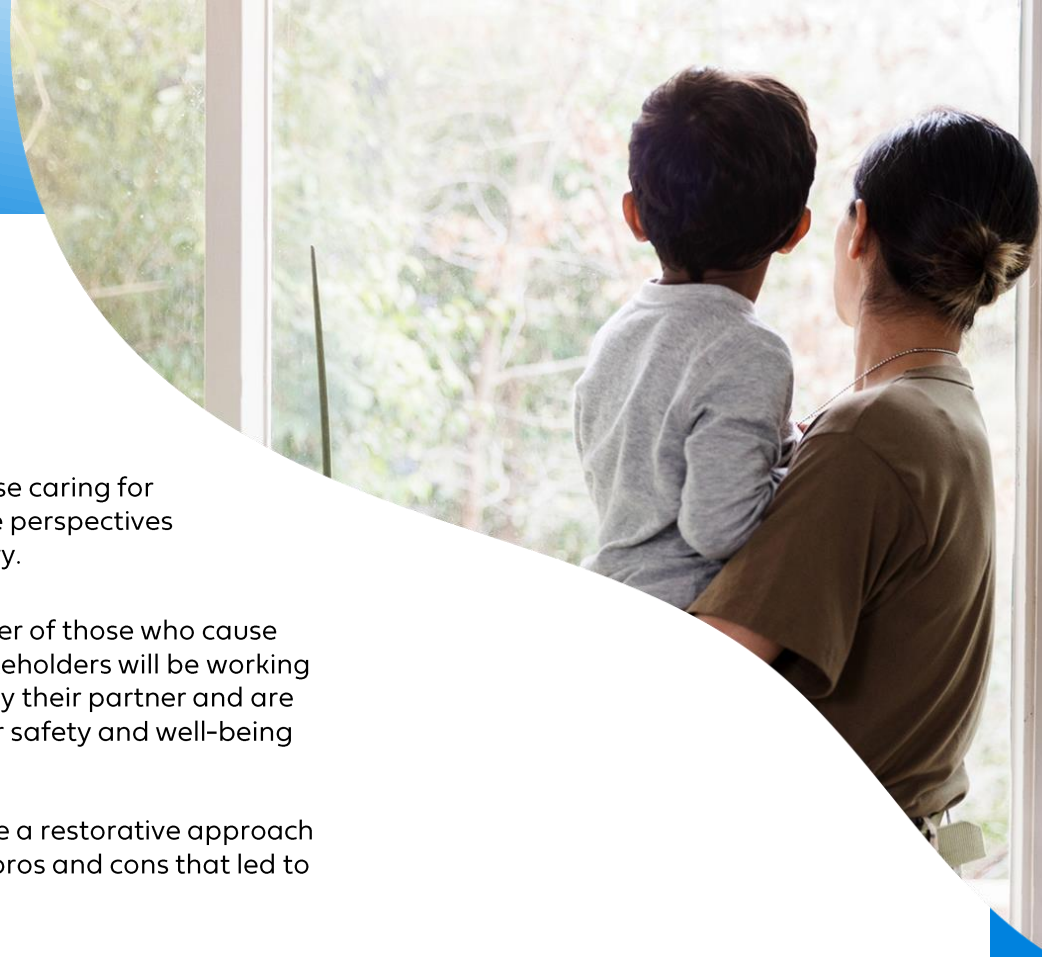


## Build trust

### TO BUILD TRUST:

## Lead with survivors

- Stakeholders will want to hear from survivors because caring for their safety and well-being is a primary concern. The perspectives and agency of survivors should be central to the story.
- Stakeholders often talk about the manipulative power of those who cause harm in domestic violence situations. Therefore, stakeholders will be working to assess that survivors are not being manipulated by their partner and are making decisions that are in the best interest of their safety and well-being (and that of their family if they have children).
- It is not enough to say that a survivor chose to pursue a restorative approach without also showing how the survivor weighed the pros and cons that led to their decision to pursue it.





## Build trust

### TO BUILD TRUST:

## What audiences need from those who caused harm

As noted earlier, it's also helpful for stakeholders to hear from the person who caused harm — though they should always be a secondary character in a story where the survivor is the primary character.

- In hearing from the person who caused harm, they are trying to assess whether the survivor is being manipulated or coerced into pursuing a restorative approach rather than a criminal justice response.
- The person who has caused harm needs to name that their motivation for sharing their story is about taking responsibility for their actions. They need to show genuine remorse and take responsibility for their actions.
- If the person who has caused harm cannot show remorse and take responsibility for their actions, it is better to leave them out of the story.



## Build trust

### TO BUILD TRUST:

Feature  
other voices  
stakeholders  
want to  
hear from

Stakeholders also want to hear from others, including adult family members or friends as well as professional stakeholders like domestic violence advocates, program staff leading the restorative intervention, and those working in the criminal justice field like law enforcement officers or prosecutors.

- Family members and friends should give voice to the same reflective deliberation and conflict of the survivor in deciding whether to pursue a restorative approach. This might include a change-of-heart perspective — their concern at first and what led them to support this approach in the end.
- Program staff leading or recommending restorative approaches need to demonstrate that their primary concern is for the care and well-being of the survivor. They should articulate that a restorative approach is not always the best approach for every incident of domestic violence.





## Build trust

### TO BUILD TRUST:

## Feature other voices stakeholders want to hear from

- Other professional stakeholders can offer a neutral perspective. They are neutral in that they are outside the innermost circles of harm — they are not the survivor, the person who caused harm, or family or friends of the survivor.
- Stories of survivors and families should feature supportive, informed perspectives from experts who are familiar with domestic violence.
- They are more likely to be seen as neutral on whether a restorative approach is appropriate for the circumstances of the people involved in the story you are telling.
- Their trust comes from this perceived neutrality. It will be important to emphasize their neutrality as they share their perspectives.
- Show how they are weighing various factors that include the future safety and well being of the survivor and their family and justice for the survivor as well as possible opportunities to break the cycle of domestic violence and trauma that are often passed from one generation to another.
- By allowing them to voice their one-time skepticism on this approach, they will facilitate identification with other skeptical stakeholders and model how to overcome that skepticism.



## Build trust

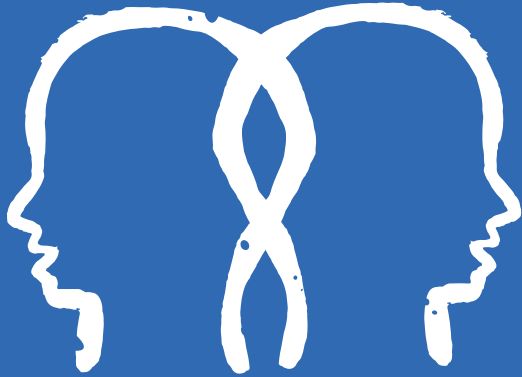
### Messaging examples:

Almost a third of women experience some form of domestic violence. While some forms of abuse warrant a criminal justice or civil legal response, **some survivors want options that promote healing, accountability, and safety and help keep families together and promote healthy relationships.**

Domestic violence can take multiple forms and affect multiple people beyond the victim, such as children and other family members. **All survivors deserve support to make the choices that can help them and their family members heal and move on from the impacts of domestic violence.**

For certain situations, restorative approaches to domestic violence can offer a viable community-based option that advances the healing and safety of survivors and helps break the cycles of generational violence and trauma that many families experience.

## Building Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence



### Acknowledge complexities and calm concerns

We know that when audiences' brains are flooded with big, negative emotions, it is extremely difficult to be reflective and thoughtful about new ideas. This step prevents them from immediately rejecting the idea of using restorative approaches before they have the chance to learn more. The recommendation is focused on helping audiences to hold the tension of opposites in order to remain open to listening and learning.



## Tension of Opposites: Your Brain on Socially Sensitive Issues

### TENSION OF OPPOSITES

Audiences often have difficulty holding two things that seem incompatible at the same time — especially when the question involves questions of morality and protecting those who are vulnerable to harm.



### HOLDING THE TENSION OF OPPOSITES

Modeling for audiences how to hold the tension of opposites — rather than defending a one-sided conviction — serves to relieve ambiguity, anxiety, and threat.



## Acknowledge complexities and calm concerns

### Messaging recommendations:

1

Messaging and stories should **acknowledge the triggers and primal emotions** associated with domestic violence.

2

Messaging and stories should **center the agency of survivors and clearly depict their decision-making** with respect to moving forward and healing from domestic violence experiences.

3

Messaging and stories should model for stakeholders how to hold the tension of opposites — to recognize the need for an ongoing criminal justice approach to many domestic violence cases while giving survivors more **options** to pursue restorative practices when their safety and well-being can be ensured.



## Acknowledge complexities and calm concerns

### Messaging recommendations:

4

How a restorative program works — and the training and expertise of facilitators and coaches in these programs — **should be made explicit.**

5

When available, comparative data about the safety of restorative programs and participants' views on healing and accountability should be shared.





## Acknowledge complexities and calm concerns

### Messaging examples:

**No one should have to experience the trauma of harm caused by a loved one.** However, domestic violence, which often affects multiple generations of families, is caused by many factors, such as attitudes about masculinity and ongoing stress from poverty, violence, and oppression.

While criminal justice and law enforcement systems fail to address the social and psychological factors associated with domestic violence, **criminal justice and civil legal responses are necessary for the most serious and chronic cases.**

**Many survivors want options that prioritize their safety and healing** while creating space for those who cause harm to take full accountability and for others to participate in healing and moving forward.

**Restorative programs create safe spaces for trained facilitators and staff to work with women who have experienced domestic violence and, if appropriate, to widen the circle of healing and accountability to include the person who caused harm and other family members.**

## Building Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence



### Activate care and compassion

Messaging for many social issues focuses on activating care and compassion for audiences impacted by injustices and other life challenges. When it comes to domestic violence, we have seen in our research that stakeholders already bring a significant amount of care and compassion to survivors. This recommendation is focused on helping audiences to extend the circle of care to others.



## Activate care and compassion

### Messaging recommendations:

1

Most people are already disposed to care for survivors. **Messages should center survivors and widen the circle of care to include others impacted by domestic violence** (e.g., children).

2

Most people recognize that criminal justice and law enforcement do nothing to either prevent generational cycles of domestic violence or help survivors and their families heal. **Restorative approaches to domestic violence should be positioned as a more holistic and healing approach to help families move forward from domestic violence.**

3

**Messages to activate care and compassion are best embedded within stories in which the perspectives and experiences of survivors are centered and those who caused the harm offer honest statements of accountability about causing harm.**



## Activate care and compassion

### Messaging examples:

While survivors are the most directly impacted by domestic violence, **other people are affected too, such as children and other family members.** In many cases, abusers were victims themselves. Restorative approaches to domestic violence can help families address and disrupt these cycles of violence and abuse.

In addition to suffering from the trauma inflicted by domestic violence, survivors also face a complex set of choices about the persons who caused them harm. **Restorative approaches to domestic violence protect the safety of survivors while also supporting the agency of those who believe that healing and reconciliation are possible.**

Restorative approaches to domestic violence provide community-based approaches to healing and recovery for survivors that may lessen our society's over-reliance on incarceration and punishment.

## Building Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence



### Inspire possibilities

This recommendation is focused on inspiring a small glimmer of hope among audiences whose jobs and lived experiences make it extremely challenging to feel optimistic that it is possible to interrupt the cycle of violence and trauma that is often passed from one generation to another.



## Inspire possibilities

### Messaging recommendations:

1

The people most skeptical of restorative approaches to domestic violence are exposed to story after story of abuse and harm, often over many years of their careers. For this audience, **powerful and authentic stories of survivors who opted for restorative programs and found them to be both healing and safe are necessary.**

2

In addition, these audiences require **more research and evidence that restorative programs perform as well as or better than other options when it comes to keeping women free of harm**, and that these programs performed better with respect to healing and accountability.

3

Many people do not understand how restorative programs work – how people can access this option, how the individual and group coaching works, follow-up care, etc. **Restorative programs need to clearly explain what they do and how they work relative to other responses to domestic violence.**



## Inspire possibilities

### Messaging examples:

We need to focus as much on supporting the **agency and healing of domestic violence survivors** as we do on **criminalizing the behaviors of those who caused them harm**.

With domestic violence continuing to affect a third of all women, more domestic violence experts are seeing the need **for options that operate outside the criminal justice or civil legal systems** that promote **healing, safety, and accountability** for families impacted by domestic violence.

Many victims of domestic violence are not given any choice about whether their abusers are arrested and prosecuted. **Some survivors want to be able to make informed choices about how they and their families can heal and move forward**.

Restorative programs for domestic violence center the agency, healing, and safety of survivors. While services may eventually include the person who caused harm and other family members impacted by the violence, **each step of the process is carefully monitored by trained and experienced facilitators**.

## Building Support for Restorative Approaches to Domestic Violence



### Empower people to arrive at their own conclusion

We know from this and other research that we lead on social issues that long-term support for issues, policies, and practices grows when we actively engage the agency of audiences to make decisions based on their emotions, values, beliefs, lived experiences, and identity. This recommendation is focused on communicating in a way that aligns with how audiences are heartwired so they are empowered to arrive at their own conclusion.



## Empower people to arrive at their own conclusion

### Messaging recommendations:

1

Centering the agency and perspectives of survivors within the framework of stories about restorative programs **helps skeptics both hold onto their caring and concern for survivors' safety and respect survivors who may want options outside the criminal or civil legal systems. This allows audiences who might choose a different path, like prosecution, to support the survivor's decision to pursue a restorative approach.**

2

Statistics about the persistence and pervasiveness of domestic violence across race and class and the dearth of options that address healing and accountability may help frame restorative programs as a much-needed option

3

**Naming causal factors that are both common and relatable** (like ongoing financial stress; witnessing or experiencing abuse in previous generations; racism) may help people understand that non-carceral, non-punitive options have a place in breaking the cycle of domestic violence across generations.



## Empower people to arrive at their own conclusion

### Messaging examples:

Women deserve to be free from harm, ***and*** deserve the right to make choices about how to move forward and heal when they are harmed.

We are allowing too many families to be harmed from domestic violence ***without doing anything to address the healing and accountability needed to prevent this from happening to future generations.***

More than half of survivors do not use the criminal justice system or the current shelter system, ***so we are missing opportunities to heal and prevent domestic violence across generations.***

Criminal justice and civil legal responses are necessary in some circumstances. ***But in many others, we should listen for what survivors and their families really need***—and help them access support and services whenever possible.

Our society over-incarcerates and over-punishes Black and brown men.

## MESSAGING IN CONTEXT

# Annotated Story

One of our top recommendations to persuade more people to support restorative programs for domestic violence is to share messages in the context of a story.

We tested three different stories with audiences about people who considered restorative programs for their own domestic violence situations. (The stories were fictional, but were based on composites of actual stories of domestic violence survivors and their families and were vetted for accuracy by experts.) Audience members had powerful reactions to different parts of the stories. What follows is an annotated version of the story about Selena and Chris, written in the style of a New York Times article.



New York Times

## CAN RESTORATIVE PRACTICES BREAK THE CYCLE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE?

### Families affected by domestic violence seek solutions outside the criminal justice system

October 20, 2022

*"I was lying there in the emergency room with a fractured arm given to me by my husband, Chris. I was in a lot of pain and then I thought about texting Chris to tell him to give our girls chicken nuggets for dinner, since I wasn't home. It was crazy."*

—Selena, survivor of domestic violence

Houston, Texas—In June of 2022, Selena\* found herself sitting in a large conference room, directly facing her husband and the father of their son and daughter, Chris\*. There was no table in the conference room—just a circle of chairs, half of which were empty. The other seats were occupied by Chris's mother; Selena's mother; their son and daughter, ages 13 and 15; and two trained facilitators.

#### What do restorative programs offer to domestic violence survivors and their families?

The conversation with Selena and Chris took place as part of a series of facilitated dialogues organized by Families Together, a program run by a nonprofit organization based in Houston. The program works with survivors of domestic violence and the people who harmed them as a non-criminal option focused on healing, accountability, and in some cases, reconciliation. Selena and Chris had each met separately with both facilitators several times; the June conversation was the first time Selena and Chris had met together with the facilitators. One of the requirements for the joint meetings is to have other people present: friends, families, or other people impacted by the violence.

*\*To protect their family's privacy, the names of Selena and Chris have been changed.*

Centering perspectives and agency of survivors: Throughout this piece, Selena's perspective and thoughts are much more prominent than anyone else's in the story. Yet in testing this content, this opening quote caused some people to be triggered and to over-identify with the survivor's perspective, to the point where they couldn't take in other parts of the story. So recommendation would be to open with something less dramatic.

Those who were skeptical of restorative programs as a way to keep people safe were confused about how these programs worked. This piece describes the process in fairly granular detail.

Before coming to the program, Selena and Chris had been married for 16 years. When COVID hit in 2020, a lot of things seemed to go wrong at once, including their marriage. Selena lost her job as a hotel events manager and Chris's contracting business was slowed by the pandemic. "We had some heated arguments, especially in the early years of our marriage," said Selena. "But when things got tough, Chris got mean in a way that I hadn't seen from him before. He started telling me I was gaining weight, that I was being lazy about getting another job. And then..."

At this point in the interview, Selena paused and took several deep breaths, and her eyes filled with tears. What happened next was that starting around January 2021, Chris started physically abusing her. At first the abuse was emotional. But then Chris began slapping Selena and shaking her. Then one day in early January 2022, Selena threatened to walk out and opened their front door. Chris pushed her and she fell down their front steps. Although Chris claimed the steps were slippery and that he hadn't intended to harm Selena, Selena ended up in the emergency room with a fractured arm.

Mandatory reporting laws in the state of Texas require medical staff in the emergency room to report suspected abuse in Selena's case. Selena suddenly found herself caught in a web of talking to social workers, the police, and prosecutors about criminal charges against Chris. "I'm lying in a hospital room with a fractured arm, and I'm suddenly faced with the prospect of whether to send my husband and my kids' father to prison?" she said today. "Who would help pay the bills? What would our families think? I had no idea what to do."

Tania Brown, the social worker who initially came to see Selena in the emergency room, works for an agency that counsels and shelters domestic violence victims, and is closely affiliated with the district attorney's unit that prosecutes abusers and sex crimes. Since the pandemic started, she has seen an increase in domestic violence. "Violence in families always happens behind closed doors, and COVID closed a lot more doors, so a lot more bad stuff could happen in private," she said matter-of-factly.


Part of building trust with the audience is about locating the issue in familiar circumstances--audiences can understand the pressures of financial stress and a pandemic on a relationship (although they are easily triggered by stories of one person responding to those stresses with violence).

## In a world of not-good options, choosing restoration and healing

During one of the first conversations between Tania and Selena, Tania mentioned a new program, Families Together, run by a community-based organization nearby. The new program utilized a restorative approach for domestic violence survivors using structured dialogues, trained facilitators, and supportive family members and friends. Sometimes the process even involves older children when it is deemed appropriate and safe to do so. "I was just going through all the options with Selena," said Tania. "If I'm being honest, they're not great. We don't have the resources to give survivors new houses, new jobs, new identities. At the same time, I'm really skeptical that programs like this one can truly help keep women safe, especially if their abusers say they love them, but keep on hurting them—I've seen this more times than I can count. And a lot of the time, these situations involve generations of trauma and abuse that can't be dealt with through one intervention."

Something about the Families Together program sparked Selena's interest, however. "She left me a brochure about the program and I had to really pray and search my heart about what I should do next. I saw it as a way to get some breathing room before deciding whether Chris should go to jail or else I'd end up even more seriously hurt."

"Restorative offers a path forward for families impacted by domestic violence to heal," said Carolina Huerta, who worked as a domestic violence advocate for 12 years before becoming a program director at Families Together. "Programs like this can help break the generational cycle of domestic violence. That's because abusers are far more likely to have suffered from abuse themselves than other people." Domestic violence experts caution that more evidence is needed about the safety and long-term outcomes.



These quotes from the social worker go directly towards acknowledging the complexity of the issue of domestic violence to calm people's concerns by a neutral third party--someone who is themselves skeptical but more open-minded towards the end.

## Finding a way forward out of domestic violence

At first, Selena and Chris found the program to be time-intensive, and awkward. However, after persevering through some hard, painful conversations, some involving their family members and kids, Selena believed that Chris was taking accountability for the abuse and pledging to work on himself. "He was very committed to the process," she said. "He admitted what he had done and he apologized for the harm without blaming me, the kids or anyone else, including the fact that his own father had harmed his mother during Chris's childhood. I felt that he was listening to me and to the perspectives of our support people in ways that really mattered."

"For me, the big moment was hearing my kids talk about the impact of my abuse on them," said Chris, his voice breaking. "I always wanted them to see me as a role model. It was devastating to know that I was responsible for breaking their trust and love."

Today, Selena and Chris are still together, although Selena admits that the reconciliation is conditional on the family continuing with counseling, and Chris participating in his own individual therapy.

Tania Brown, the social worker who gave Selena the brochure, admits that she is surprised by where Selena and Chris are now compared to that initial visit with Selena in the emergency room. "It's not so much that they are headed towards a good, happy-ever-after outcome," she said. "What's surprising is that it may not be a bad outcome. Like maybe there's a chance that their family might come out of this intact, without more heartbreak in their future."

Centering the agency and decision-making of survivors is important. However, some people remain skeptical until they can be persuaded that agency can only be activated if there are viable options available to survivors. (In many cases, survivors aren't given a choice about criminal justice responses.)

While the piece shows Chris's involvement in the restorative program, this is the only quote from him taking accountability. Our recommendation is that audiences find the perspectives of people who caused harm to be powerful, but only when it doesn't interfere with the agency of the survivor and the person who caused harm is genuinely remorseful and committed to ongoing accountability and work. This quote was considered insufficient for those purposes--another story, with a longer account of the person who caused harm taking responsibility, did much better.

This quote, from the neutral third-party perspective of the social worker, goes directly towards acknowledging the complexity of the situation while also opening the door to inspire possibilities and empower people to arrive at their own conclusions. Having someone who started as wanting to help and was skeptical about restorative approaches to becoming less skeptical (not entirely on board) about these options was persuasive to audience members.

## OUTLINE

# Video story

### ● ACT 1

**BEGIN** by introducing a survivor with an opening quote from her—an emotional outtake that signals to viewer that she is about to share something painful.

Then introduction continues with name and a few details about survivor. She should be directly facing the camera in close-up.

Person who caused harm should only be shown at first from the perspective of the survivor—either through photos or B-roll.

Person who caused harm should not speak during the first part of the video.

As noted throughout, we believe that powerful, authentic, descriptive stories are the best way to increase support for restorative approaches to domestic violence. Here are recommendations for constructing a video about this topic:

### ● ACT 2

**STATISTICS** can be shared via text slides to illustrate how common domestic violence is, how many women are affected, and how few options exist for survivors

Present restorative program from survivor's perspective—how she heard about it, why she chose it. Include any internal conflict the person might have had in making a decision about how to move forward and document the nature of the conflict.

Then feature person from restorative program, introducing herself, the program, and how she heard about the survivor's situation.

If space, add domestic violence advocate/expert, who talks about restorative program as a viable option

Survivor talks about experience of restorative program. (B-roll of facilitation spaces, her greeting facilitators)

Text slides: outlining features of restorative programs (like separate counseling sessions before inviting others to join)

**INTRODUCE** partner's story if the person who has caused harm is willing to speak and to do so from a place of genuine remorse, reflection, and accountability.

**INCLUDE** (if possible) other family members involved in the program (not the children, except through B-roll)

### ● ACT 3

**CONCLUDE** with survivor's perspective on whether program helped with healing and recovery. If couple has decided to stay together, have partner come on-screen but not say anything. B-roll of survivor in her daily life; not overly cheerful or rosy, just showing her living her life (with or without partner) and interacting with other family members and friends.

## OUTLINE

# Opinion Editorial/Blog Post

Opinion pieces vary widely. In more local media outlets, such as a regional newspaper, they are quite short (800-1000 words) and are usually aimed at policymakers in relation to pending policies or bills. Longer opinion pieces are sometimes connected to current events or trending topics in the media or uncover "hidden" or less-considered aspects of a topic. All opinion pieces should have a clear news "hook" (they are very difficult to pitch and place when not connected to a trending topic) and they should also end with a clear call to action.

### Key ingredients usually include:

- An author who is very well-known on the topic, or who is very famous through some other means. (e.g., Angelina Jolie talking about breast cancer screenings)
- A very direct and gripping opening paragraph stating exactly what the op-ed is about. "Last year, X number of women experienced some form of domestic violence. These numbers represent a disturbing trend..." or, "Last July, I found myself in a hospital emergency room. As a police officer, I thought I knew how to protect myself, especially in a profession that is still overwhelmingly dominated by males. But I was still harmed by my own partner, in my own home."
- A few paragraphs that pull back the lens and talk about the scope of the issue. The tone here should be sober, almost dispassionate, as a contrast to the primal emotions evoked by the issue.
- The introduction of a possible "solution" – in this case, restorative programs for domestic violence – and why these programs might work to facilitate healing and accountability and break the cycle of multigenerational violence and trauma.
- A call to action, e.g., "More research is needed," or, "More funding is needed," or, "Bill XXXX actually contains provisions for non-incarcerative responses to domestic violence which can be used for support and services and we believe that..."

## MESSAGING GUIDE

# What's Next

While insights and messages from research are powerful, many people often wonder how to get those messages out into the world to their intended audiences.

**Here are some possible next steps to consider after completing a message effort:**

- How will these messages be disseminated? How will they show up in your communications/content strategy?
- How will your lead messengers learn how to effectively deliver these messages, either in oral or written form? (Some organizations will organize message trainings for staff and/or grantees, with opportunities to practice delivering messages across a variety of contexts.)
- How will you know whether your messages are being delivered and heard by your audiences? (For example: placing an opinion editorial in a media outlet familiar to your target audiences is an indicator that you've successfully operationalized your messages. Whether or not your messages have been heard and been influential usually requires a longer time period and a more detailed assessment method.)
- What opportunities or barriers are you encountering to disseminating your messages? Which ones are actionable and which ones are not?

