

Module 6: Overcoming Personal Challenges

Purpose

To encourage you to recognize and challenge your own stereotypes, biases, and attitudes toward people who are not like you.

Lessons

1. Effects of Privilege and Prejudice
2. Value Systems and Attitudes
3. Self-Awareness Inventory

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Recognize how privilege and prejudice affect attitude.
- Recognize how your own value systems influence your attitudes and impact your work.
- Explain the importance of self-reflection, especially as it applies to supporting crime victims with disabilities.

Participant Worksheets

- Worksheet 6.1, Friends and Neighbors
- Worksheet 6.2, Self-Awareness Inventory

1. Effects of Privilege and Prejudice

The activity illustrates the concept of privilege.

A privilege is essentially a right or advantage. Privilege isn't necessarily bad, at least when it's earned. If someone wins "employee of the month" recognition and as a result, receives the privilege of a prime parking spot for that month, the employee has *earned* that privilege through hard work.

However, *unearned* privilege isn't won through talent or skill or hard work – it's the result of advantages given to someone not because of what they've done, but by virtue of birth, social position, or concession. Unearned privileges may be very subtle and individuals who have them often are completely unaware of having the privilege. On the other hand, those *without* the privilege are often *very* aware of the difference.

The awareness of unearned privilege is essential because its presence in diverse environments can create tension, stress, and frustration. Many of the unearned privileges are reinforced by societal laws and practices. Consider a Hispanic person not being able to get bank loans/other groups getting bank loans easier or a police officer pulling over African-American drivers more frequently than white drivers.

2. Value Systems and Attitudes

Values are an integral part of every culture. People congregate because of shared values. Over time, shared values evolve into traditions that groups of people find important, and they become cultural values. Being part of a culture that shares a common core set of values creates expectations and predictability that holds the culture together and gives its members a sense of identity and worth.

As adults, our value systems are not only a product of our culture; they're a reflection of our backgrounds – how we've been raised, what we've been taught, who we've met, and many other experiences. Along with beliefs and worldview assumptions, values guide our behaviors and form the foundations for our attitudes. Values identify, for each of us, what is good, important, appropriate, beautiful, and so on. Values also determine a person's actions. Values can be positive or negative; some are destructive.

In living our lives, we tend to seek out people who share our values. When people share values, they tend to mirror another in how they live, where they live, and who they live with.

People in general are most comfortable around others who are a reflection of themselves. When confronted with change in their neighborhood, for example, existing residents sometimes react by avoiding the newcomers or moving out of the area. What often happens when one ethnic group moves into a neighborhood occupied by another ethnic group? Or if a group home for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities opens in a neighborhood?

Many of us remain in our own comfort zones all our lives. But when something happens to change that – for example, we lose a job, or become a victim of a crime, or acquire a disability – we find we’re not among “people like us” anymore. We’re *different*. It can be an awkward and unpleasant transition, but ultimately we develop a new image of ourselves. Then we may begin to seek out people who mirror our *new* image.

If we are only around reflections of ourselves, we will never be truly comfortable with those who are not like us. Furthermore, we miss opportunities to learn about the experiences of others.

The problem with interacting only with people like yourself is that you miss out on that “enlightening journey” with the “breathtaking views.” We miss out on tremendous opportunities to learn about the experiences of those who lead lives that are not like ours. We miss out because we don’t know anything about those lives. And we *fear* the unknown.

It’s important to understand that even if you are experienced working with diverse populations, including people with disabilities, there may be times when you’ll be surprised by your own reactions. You may feel anxious – unsure what to say or how to say it. You may feel resentment – the crime victim with a disability may require more time, attention, and/or support. Or you may feel pity – you don’t see the skills and talents of the whole person; instead, you are focused on the disability. In other words, the *disability* becomes the center of attention, rather than the *person*.

When this happens, you lose an opportunity to expand your knowledge about the whole person. Furthermore, you marginalize the crime victim with a disability by not offering comparable supports and services.

3. Self-Awareness Inventory

Crime victim service providers are often ill-equipped to deal with crime victims with disabilities, either because of personal stereotyping based on their set of values and attitudes, because of lack of knowledge, or a combination of both.

Until fairly recently, children and adults with disabilities were often separated from people without disabilities – first at school, then at institutions or group homes. The attitude was that they “couldn’t adapt” or they “didn’t fit in,” or “needed special care.” People *without* disabilities had few chances to become acquainted with people *with* disabilities. They were “different” simply because they were unfamiliar to those without disabilities. And for many of us, until the unfamiliar becomes familiar, we react with awkwardness, discomfort, and even fear.

Some advocates for people with disabilities may feel the same way about crime victims, especially victims of domestic and sexual violence. Or, they may not even recognize signs of violence perpetrated on the people they support. Behavioral changes in a person who has been a victim of a crime are similar for crime victims with and without disabilities. However, sometimes a behavioral change in a person with a disability may be overlooked or dismissed because family members and/or staff don’t see the behavioral change as a result of crime victimization, but as a new manifestation of the disability.

Professionals in both the victim and disability services – as well as those in allied professions such as law enforcement – would benefit from broadening their comfort zone. This means we need to start thinking about the people we support in a different way. It’s important to remind ourselves that we don’t need to be experts in everything. We just need to know what we *do* need.

Discomfort is often good. It’s a signal that something needs to change. To make the personal change to provide better services and supports to crime victims with disabilities, you need information, time to process it, and time to become accustomed to it. You may not be able to do that overnight. Being aware of your feelings about crime victims with disabilities – which was the point of the self-awareness inventory – is a good place to begin. So is being honest with yourself.