

Using Victim-Centered Language

IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ONLINE SAFETY

When discussing any type of victimization, it is important to use victim-centered language. With cyberbullying, online harassment, and sextortion there are specific considerations that can help avoid misconceptions and empower victims. This document includes guidance on language that you should be aware of when talking with any audience about online safety.

Imagery & Sensationalism

Sensationalizing online safety threats like cyberbullying or sextortion can distort public understanding of the real risks and dynamics involved. Overblown or dramatized portrayals, especially in media or social platforms, often spread misinformation, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and give rise to conspiracy theories or moral panic.

To foster a more informed and responsible discourse:

- Evaluate the credibility of information you encounter in the news or on social media. Always consider the source, intent, and evidence presented.
- Be respectful and protective when sharing survivor stories or images: Only use photos or personal accounts with the individual's clear, informed consent, or ensure anonymity by concealing identifying details.

By promoting responsible messaging and safeguarding the dignity of those affected, we help create a safer, more supportive online environment for all.

Empowering Victims Through Strength-Based Language

In the context of cyberbullying, online harassment, and sextortion, language plays an important role in shaping how individuals are perceived and how they experience support. While the term "victim" is commonly used in legal and criminal justice contexts, some individuals may prefer to be called "survivors", while others—especially those providing subject matter expertise—may identify as "lived experience experts."

It is best practice to:

- Avoid language that places blame, reinforces stigma, or undermines a person's autonomy.
- Respect their language preferences in all communication, whether in reports, educational materials, or public-facing content.
- Ask individuals how they prefer to be identified.



Create an Empowering Environment Through Correct Terminology

To create a safe, inclusive, and empowering environment, steer clear of the following terms and phrases:

- “Chose to engage,” “put themselves in that position”, “should have known better”, or other words or phrasing that place blame on victims
 - These phrases imply that the person’s actions invited or caused the abuse, which perpetuates victim-blaming. In cases of sextortion or online harassment, the responsibility lies entirely with the offender, not the individual targeted.
- “Helpless,” “voiceless,” “broken,” “damaged,” or “disenfranchised”
 - While often well-meaning, such terms are disempowering and can reinforce feelings of shame or powerlessness. Instead, focus on resilience, agency, and support.
- “Sexting,” when used to describe non-consensual image sharing or coercion
 - This term can minimize the seriousness of sextortion or digital abuse. Instead, describe the behavior accurately (e.g., “coerced image sharing,” “non-consensual distribution,” or “digital sexual abuse”).



Your words can shape narratives, build trust, and support healing. Always center the individual's experience and dignity, and refrain from reinforcing stereotypes or using sensational language.



Incorporate Survivor Stories

When addressing issues like online harassment, cyberbullying, and sextortion, it is important to engage individuals with lived experience as partners and subject matter experts, not merely as storytellers. Their contributions should be valued as meaningful and compensated fairly.

Do not partner with individuals simply for the purpose of having a survivor involved or sensationalizing their story to capture audience’s attention.

Consider diversity – survivor experiences are not all the same; working with survivors who bring different perspectives can expand our understanding of the topic.

Do not speak on behalf of the survivor experience or imply that they should feel a certain way.

Lived experience experts offer unique perspectives and working with them can help ensure that messaging is impactful to other victims and survivors.

