



# Healthy Relationships Guide

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## What is this guide?

The Kansas BELIEVE Partnership is the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence (KCSDV) and the Self-Advocate Coalition of Kansas (SACK). These organizations talked to self-advocates and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD), and they shared that they wanted more information about healthy relationships.

This guide was written with self-advocates for self-advocates and people with I/DD who would like to know more about:

- The right to control your body.
- The right to have consensual sexual relationships.
- Consent (Permission).
- Different types of relationships.
- Healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Helpful resources.

You have the right to have safe, loving, and fulfilling relationships. You have the right to social circles, sexuality, intimacy, sexual relationships, and your own gender identity (how a person feels about their own gender). Even if you have a disability or are differently-abled, your rights do not go away.

## Who will this guide help?

This guide will help:

- Self-advocates and people with I/DD who want information about their right to have consensual sexual relationships.
- Self-advocates and people with I/DD who want to have information about healthy relationships.
- Self-advocates and people with I/DD who want information about consent (permission) and that it is ok to say NO at any time.
- Self-advocates and people with I/DD who want information about gender identity and sexual orientation.

## About Relationship Rights

Everyone has relationship rights, which do not go away, change, or lessen because you have a disability. You have the right to choose which relationship you want to be in, and the right to define those relationships.

Relationship rights can include:

- The right to be respected.
- The right to be listened to.
- The right to be treated and spoken to with respect.
- The right to be treated in a caring way.
- The right to be treated as a valuable person.
- The right to have someone care about you and who does not make you feel bad.
- The right to feel good and be happy in a relationship.
- The right to feel safe.

## Your Right to Control Your Body

You have the right to make decisions about your own body, health, and sexuality without fear of violence or punishment. This is called body autonomy. Autonomy and self-determination help people with I/DD:

- Be Healthy.
- Be Independent.
- Recognize abuse through education and support.
- Empower yourself to live fuller, safer lives that are self-directed.
- Make informed choices and understand possible outcomes.

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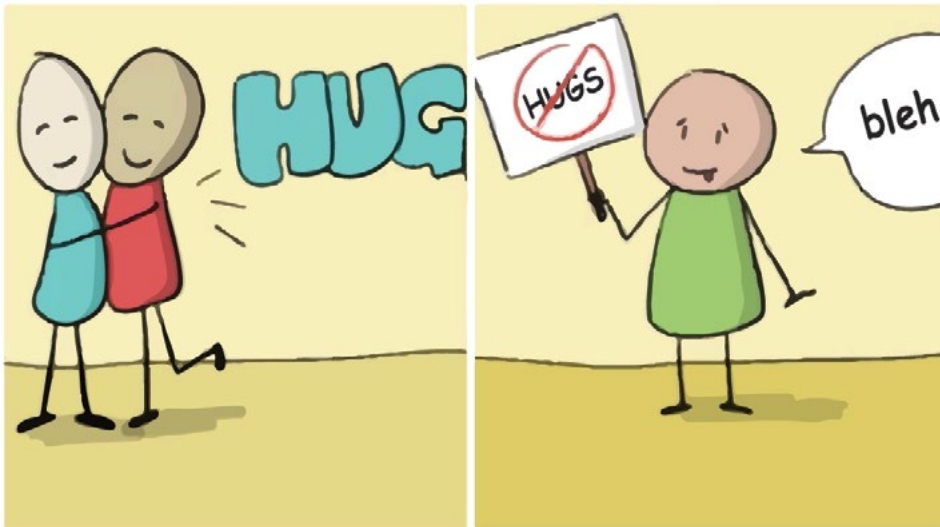
**“To deny the right to make choices in an effort to protect the person with disabilities from risk is to diminish their human dignity.”**

*— Robert Perske, a long-time advocate for people with I/DD*

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## What is Consent?

Consent (permission) is the ability to decide if you want to do something. It is an important part of self-determination and decision-making. Consent is the right to agree or disagree to do something. Consent must be given by you because you want to do something, and it is okay not to consent to something. This means saying “no” to something you don’t want to have happen. If someone wants to hug you, you have the right to consent to the hug (yes, hug me). You also have the right to say “no” to the hug (do not hug me).



### ■ Video About Consent

CampusClarity created a video that teaches the concept of consent. In the video, a woman has a microphone, like a reporter, and walks up to people asking to borrow their cell phone. If she gets the person’s cell phone, she asks if she got their consent to take and use their phone. A pretend cell phone app called consent bot will say “yes” or “no,” if she got consent and explains why she did or did not get consent.



You can watch the video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJOKRYbgDh8&t=1s>

Used with permission from USF. CampusClarity., & USF. (CC 2014). *What is Consent?* [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJOKRYbgDh8&t=1s>

## Creating Strong Boundaries

Boundaries are likes and dislikes that are defined by you. Boundaries help you to decide what you are comfortable with and how you would like to be treated by others. Setting and respecting boundaries empowers you in all types of relationships. You can set boundaries, maintain boundaries, or change boundaries.

Examples of boundaries:

- I want quiet time to myself.
- I want to spend time with my friends and family.
- I am ok to follow each other on social media.
- I am ok texting with each other, but I may not want to text a lot.

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**“These are a continuous thread to keep healthy relationships connected.”**

— *Colin Olenick, Self-Advocate*

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## Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Sexuality and sex should be positive parts of our lives. All of us have the right to explore that part of life in a healthy and safe way. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same things. Gender identity is how you see yourself, either as a woman, a man, both a woman and a man, or neither. Sexual orientation is your emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction towards another person. This can include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Two Spirit (LGBTQIA2S, LGBTQ+ or LGBTQIA+).

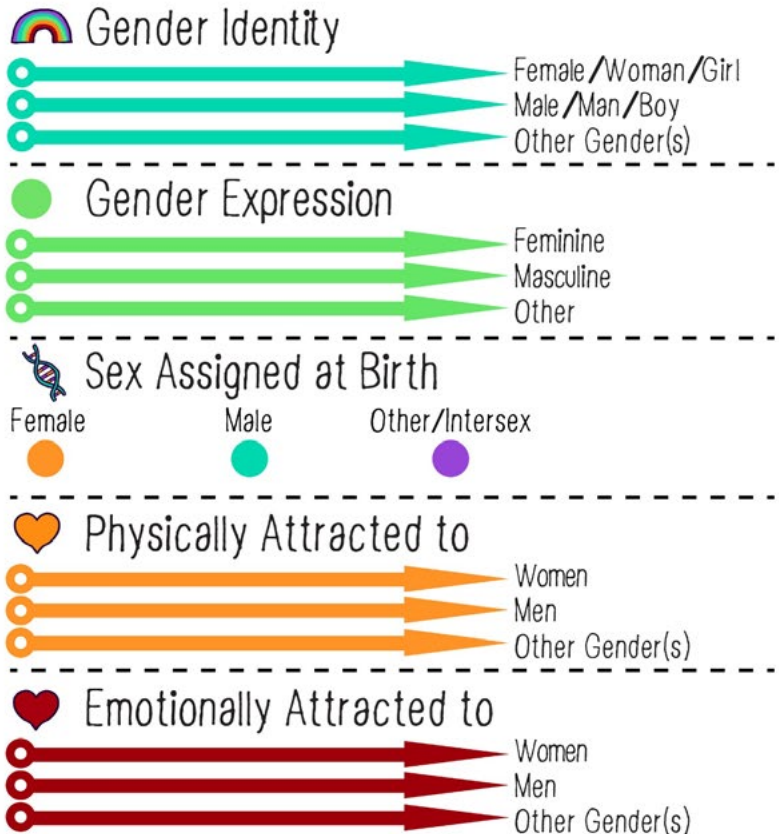
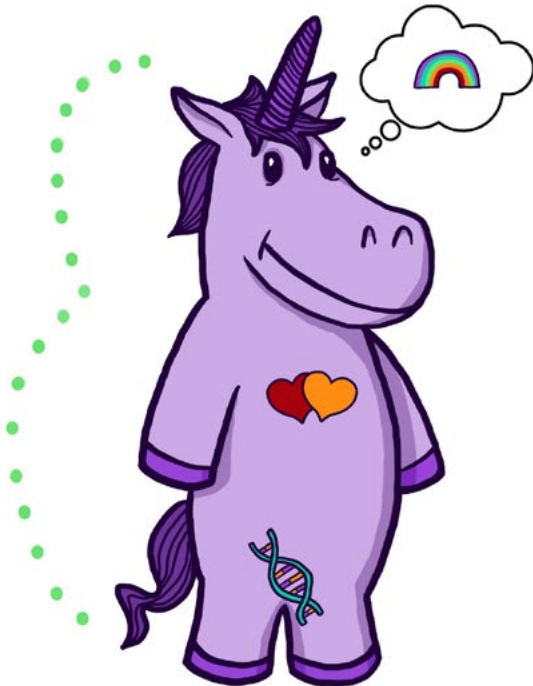
Examples of these attractions are:

- Same gender as you.
- Different gender than you.
- Women and men equally.
- All genders.
- Neither.

The Gender Unicorn chart can help show the differences between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex (sex you were when you were born), and physical & emotional attraction.

# The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by:  
**TSER**  
Trans Student Educational Resources



To learn more, go to:  
[www.transstudent.org/gender](http://www.transstudent.org/gender)

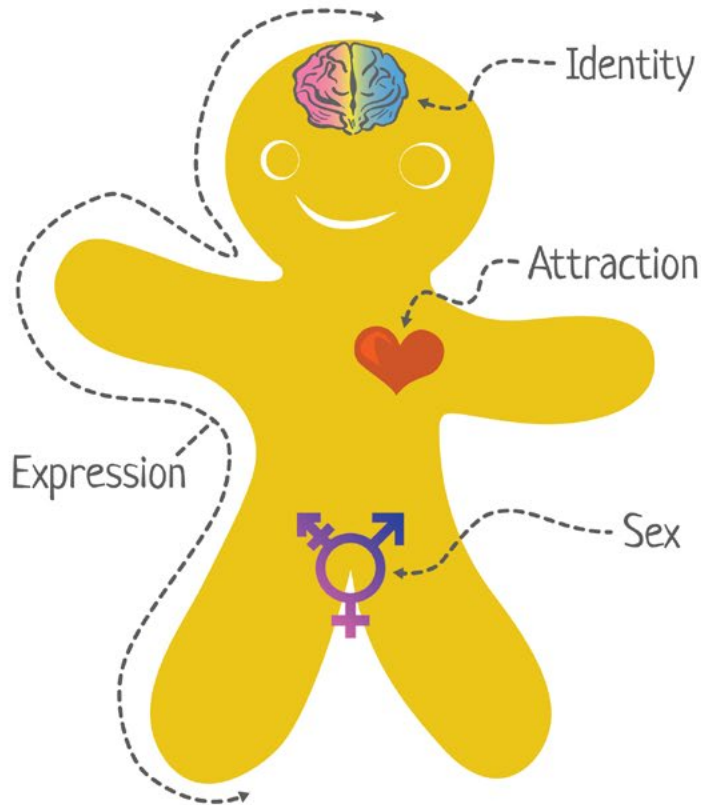
Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore

*The Gender Unicorn*, Landyn Pan and Anna Moore [Graphic], 2015, Trans Student Educational Resources, ([www.transstudent.org/gender](http://www.transstudent.org/gender)). CC BY 2.0.



The Genderbread person is another way to help show the differences between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex (sex you were when you were born), and physical & emotional attraction.

# The Genderbread Person v4 by its pronounced METROsexual.com



⊘ means a lack of what's on the right side

Gender Identity

- Woman-ness
- Man-ness

Gender Expression

- Femininity
- Masculinity

Anatomical Sex

- Female-ness
- Male-ness

Identity ≠ Expression ≠ Sex  
Gender ≠ Sexual Orientation

Sex Assigned At Birth  
 Female  Intersex  Male

Sexually Attracted to... and/or (a/o)

- Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

Romantically Attracted to...

- Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

Sam Killermann. (2017). *Genderbread Person v4.0* [Graphic]. The Gender Person. [www.genderbread.org](http://www.genderbread.org)

## ■ Pronouns

Pronouns are words like she, he, her, him, they, and them. We use pronouns for people we are talking to or someone we are talking about. People sometimes share the pronouns they would like others to use when talking to them or about them. For example, some people might ask you to use the pronouns they/them instead of she/her. Out of respect for each other's identity, we should ask what their pronouns are when we meet them or talk to them. It is okay to make a mistake and use the wrong pronoun. If this happens, say "I am sorry" and use the correct pronoun. Some people may want to use their name and not use a pronoun. This is okay, too.

## What is a Relationship?

A relationship is the way in which two or more people or groups interact and behave toward each other. There are many types of relationships.

- Family relationships (Mom, Dad, Siblings, Aunts, Uncles).
- Acquaintanceships (New people, Co-worker, Neighbor).
- Friendships (People you know well, common interests).
- Romantic relationships (boyfriend, girlfriend, partner, married, engaged).
- Caregiver relationships (professional or non-professional).
- Living Arrangements (roommates)



## ■ Family Relationship

A family relationship is a type of relationship you have with people who are related to you. Not all families are the same. Some families have:

- A mom and a dad.
- Two moms or two dads.
- Only a mom or only a dad.
- Grandparents.
- Siblings.
- Aunts, uncles, and cousins.
- Foster family.
- People in the same living arrangement.

Regardless of who is included in a family, everyone in a family should feel loved, respected, and trusted.

## ■ Acquaintances

An acquaintance is someone you do not know very well but may see daily or occasionally. This person may be someone you just met, either on your own or through family or friends.

Acquaintances might be:

- Your neighbor.
- A person on the bus, at school, at work.
- Someone at the doctor's office.
- A grocery store worker.
- Someone in the same living arrangement.
- People who are friends with your friends.



## ■ Friendships

A friendship is a type of relationship between people who are not related to each other but want to be involved in each other's lives. People involved in this kind of relationship are called friends. Each person involved in a friendship should put in equal effort to show love, support, trust, respect, and honesty.



There are different kinds of friendships. Some friends share a little about the things going on in their life, but not all things. Some friends may talk daily or even several times a day, in person, on the phone, or the computer. Some friends may feel comfortable sharing everything and call themselves “best friends.”

## ■ Romantic Relationships

A romantic relationship is a type of relationship that is personally defined between people looking to create healthy, trusting, and intimate bonds with one another. A romantic relationship means each person involved needs to agree (consent) to being in a romantic relationship. A romantic relationship can include, emotional, physical, and/or sexual closeness, but does not mean that there is always sexual activity involved.

## ■ Romantic Attraction

A romantic attraction is flexible and depends on what a person wants in a consensual romantic interaction with another person or persons. You can feel romantic attraction to anybody, any gender, or an attraction to a person who is gender-fluid. When someone identifies as gender-fluid, their gender identity and how they show their gender to others may change. A person can feel no romantic attraction to any genders.

You have the right to decide who you want to be in a romantic relationship with and who is right for you. This can change at any time and is a personal choice. Everyone has the right to choose their own partners.

## ■ Caregiver Relationship

A caregiver relationship is a type of personal or professional relationship, which is defined by the person who is receiving the support.

This relationship requires:

- Confidentially and right to privacy.
- Creating boundaries.
- Respect for boundaries.
- Trust.
- Person-defined communication.

## Privacy and Confidentiality

People with I/DD have the same basic legal, social, and human rights as everyone else. You might need accommodations, protection, and support but your rights should never be limited or restricted.

## ■ Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a promise made about using or releasing private information about you without your approval. Confidentiality is respecting the choices you make about who knows what, how much, and when.

Some professionals must promise to respect your privacy choices so you can get help, take risks, and avoid losing control of your life and the decisions you are making.

## ■ Right to Privacy

You have the right to privacy. This means you have the right to be alone and the right to control how and what information is shared with others. Privacy is an individual choice. Privacy is not about keeping secrets. It is making choices about who knows what information about you, how much information, and when you want to share that information.

## Creating Strong Boundaries with Caregivers

You may not always have a choice in caregivers, but it is important to be able to share your thoughts and feelings about how your caregiver can best support you. You can do this by sharing what you want by making statements like, “I want,” “I need,” or “I expect.”

Strong boundaries should include trust and respect for each other. Both trust and respect are just as important in a caregiver relationship as they are in your personal relationships. Thinking about strong boundaries can help you decide what you are comfortable with and how you would like to be treated by your caregivers. Setting these boundaries and having caregivers respect your boundaries can help empower you and build self-determination.

## Person-Centered Communication

Person-centered communication is communicating with people in a way that sees them as a whole person. This way to communicate helps us recognize the person, their feelings, likes, and needs, which can help build a shared understanding of any problems, goals, and barriers. This is important because it can help the person make informed decisions about their lives.

One way to make sure you center the person you are communicating with is by using plain language. Plain language breaks down complex words, ideas, and sentences. You need to know your audience and use terms and phrases that are understandable. Plain language is a respectful way to communicate.

Another way to include person-centered communication is to make sure that if someone speaks a language other than English, or is Deaf or Hard of hearing, it is important to have an interpreter to help with communication. Make sure they have the skill level and ability to communicate accurately and at the proper level.



## Living Arrangements and Relationships

You may have acquaintances, friends, caregivers, and romantic relationships in the places where you live. Everyone should be respectful to each other and with each other's personal belongings in a shared space. Personal boundaries can and should be set within all relationships and living arrangements.

### ■ Examples of Living Arrangements:

- Living alone in an apartment or house.
- Living with roommates in an apartment or house.
- Group homes.

The relationship you have with staff is important because they may provide daily care and can be an important resource.

Sometimes you may experience new staff or staff changes. It may take time to build trust between you and staff, but trust is important to have in this relationship, because if you have a concern you want to share, it should be shared with someone you trust.

If you feel you are being treated unfairly or are being harmed by staff or another person in a shared living space, it is important to know what to do and who to talk to about it. Talk to someone you trust about your feelings and what is happening.

All relationships, new and old ones, take effort by everyone in the relationship. No matter what type of relationship, remember that you should feel loved and respected.



## Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships

A healthy relationship should include love and respect between people and an unhealthy relationship is when love and respect is unbalanced. Unhealthy relationships can happen among families, acquaintances, friends, romantic relationships, caregivers, and roommates.

### In a **healthy** relationship:

- Your boundaries are respected.
- Your things, pets and service animals are treated with care and respect.
- Your friends and family are treated with respect.
- Abuse is never okay.



### In an **unhealthy** relationship, the other person may:



- Threaten to hurt you or not help you.
- Threatened to leave.
- Threaten to kill you, your family, or your pets.
- Make you break the law.
- Force you to do something you do not want to do.



### In a **healthy** relationship:

- Decisions are made together.
- You feel safe to share your feelings with each other.
- It is ok if you spend time with your friends and family.
- You are listened to and talked to with respect.
- You do not blame each other.



### In an **unhealthy** relationship, the other person may:



- Put you down and call you names.
- Make you feel ashamed or guilty.
- Ignore you or your needs.
- Make you feel unworthy.
- Make you feel bad about yourself.

### In a **healthy** relationship:

- Your privacy and boundaries are respected.
- Your feelings and opinions are respected.
- Your friends and family are treated with respect.
- They support the activities you like to do.
- You are listened to without judgment.
- They are respectful when talking with you.



**In an unhealthy relationship,** the other person may:



- Say the abuse is no big deal or did not happen.
- Blame you for upsetting them, so they hurt you.
- Tell you that your disability is the reason you got hurt.
- Make up stories and lies to make you doubt your experiences and memories.

**In a healthy relationship:**

- You are encouraged.
- You are believed and supported.
- Decisions are made with support and encouragement.
- You are offered help to find information you need to make decisions.



**In an unhealthy relationship,** the other person may:



- Tell you what to do and take away all your choices.
- Make you stay home.
- Take away your phone, access to a computer, and TV.
- Keep you from doing the things you love.
- Keep you from your family and friends.

### In a **healthy** relationship:

- You make decisions together.
- You have an agreement about the money in your relationship.
- You give gifts because you want to not because you expect something in return.
- Money does not control the relationship.



### In an **unhealthy** relationship, the other person may:



- Stop you from getting or keeping a job.
- Take some or all your money and only give you small amounts of money.
- Not tell you how much money is left or what money they spent.
- Not contribute any money to the relationship because they do not have a job.

### In a **healthy** relationship:

- The responsibility for children is shared.
- You talk to each other with respect to come up with solutions.
- Each of you is a positive, non-violent role model to the children.



**In an unhealthy relationship, the other person may:**



- Say you are a bad parent in front of the children.
- Tell the children lies about you.
- Tell you they will leave and take the children with them.
- Tell the children to give you a messages.

**In a healthy relationship:**

- Everyone is responsible for their words and actions.
- You admit when a mistake is made and apologize.
- Any type of abuse is never ok.
- You use “I feel \_\_\_\_\_” statements when sharing your thoughts.
- Treat the other person as you would want to be treated.



**In an unhealthy relationship, the other person may:**



- Treat you like a child or servant.
- Make all the decisions.
- Take control your medication.
- Keep you from using your accessibility equipment.
- Not give you any privacy.

## In a **healthy** relationship:

- You respect each other's decisions and boundaries about sex.
- Everyone asks for consent (permission) before touching each other or having sex.
- You can say “no” or “stop” and turn your body away at any time.
- Even if you are in a relationship together, you can say “no” or “stop.”
- Use facial expressions and tone of your voice to share what you do and do not want to do.
- You can show affection without having sex.



## In an **unhealthy** relationship, the other person may:



- Force you to have sex.
- Not respect your decisions and boundaries.
- Not ask you for consent (permission) to touch you or have sex with you.
- Do not stop when you say or gesture “no” or “stop.”
- Force you to do things you do not want to do.
- Hold you down or use force against you

Used with permission, Illustrations from Vera Institute of Justice, Center on Victimization and Safety (2020) [Victimization Tactics](#). Supporting Crime Victims with Disabilities Online Training Toolkit. Back to the Basics: An Introduction to Disability and Victimization.

## Video and Website Resources

“What is Consent?” CampusClarity video (page 4)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJOKRYbgDh8&t=1s>

“The Gender Unicorn” Trans Student Educational Resources, 2015. (page 6)

[www.transstudent.org/gender](http://www.transstudent.org/gender)

“The Genderbread Person” (page 7) <https://www.genderbread.org>

“What the Words Mean – A Basic List of LGBTQ Words”

<https://e8v3d4a2.stackpathcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/What-the-Words-Mean-A-Basic-List-of-LGBTQ-Words-1.pdf>

## Helpful Resources

1. **Self-Advocate Coalition of Kansas (SACK)**

2518 Ridge Ct.

Lawrence, KS 66046

1-785-749-5588

<https://sackonline.org>



2. **Kansas Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence (KCSDV)**

634 SW Harrison

Topeka, KS 66603

1-785-232-9784

<https://www.kcsdv.org>



3. **Disability Rights Center**

214 SW 6th Ave STE 100

Topeka, KS 66603

1-785-273-9661

<https://www.drckansas.org>



**4. The Compassionate Ear Warmline 1-913-281-2251**

**Answered 4pm-10pm daily, including holidays.**

The Compassionate Ear Warmline is a peer-operated listening service for persons in need of support. People who have experienced life problems answer the phone.

The Warmline offers:

- Supportive listening
- Coping plans
- Information
- Someone to talk to if you feel alone

**5. Kansas Crisis Hotline 1-888-363-2287**

**Answered 24 hours, every day of the year, including holidays.**

The Kansas Crisis Hotline is answered by trained staff ready to help people in need of support after experiencing domestic and/or sexual violence.

The Crisis Hotline offers:

- Supportive listening for people who have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence
- Information
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Connection with services
- Someone to talk to about the violence

