

Tips and Tools for Self-Advocacy

This tool has been developed for women who believe that they may have been treated inappropriately or unfairly by either a professional or a representative of a community institution that they have sought assistance from. Each woman must assess what action is best for her, based on safety, current priorities and resources available - such as time, energy, support, money. The following ideas are by no means a blueprint, but a list of suggestions to help plan and make decisions about actions. Making an informed decision to not take action can also be a positive and empowering choice.

Preparation Suggestions

What are the issues?

Take time to think about what the issues are. Clarify your expectations for the situation. Determine how much time, energy, money you want to put into taking action.

What can you find out ahead of time?

Gather information about the services, policies and procedures of an organization if applicable. Ask about complaint or grievance procedures. Find out if your expectations are within their mandate. This will help you set goals for the interaction. Where possible, start from within an organization and use the procedures that it has in place.

Who do you wish to contact?

Identify who it is you wish to speak or write to. If you wish to maintain a relationship with someone that you have a working relationship with, (eg: patient-doctor, client-lawyer) it may be helpful to talk to them directly first. In this kind of a situation where you feel your safety is not in jeopardy, it is respectful to give feedback in person and in private.

In some situations you may not feel safe or comfortable doing so and will wish to speak to a supervisor. If you are making a request for a change, it may be the supervisor or manager who has the authority to take action. In the case of professionals, there are often governing bodies, such as the Law Society of Upper Canada or the Ontario Medical Association that are responsible for ensuring the ethical practices of their members.

What do you wish to ask?

Prepare a list of questions ahead of time. Are you asking for information? Do you have a solution to the problem that you would like to propose?

What kind of support can you seek out?

Role play or discuss your questions and concerns with someone else who can support you and give feedback. Talk to others who may have had similar experiences they can share with you. If

you are writing a letter, ask someone to review it for you. Venting your anger to someone may make it easier for you to engage with the person/institution you wish to address. In some cases you may wish to ask a support person to accompany you or to be available to debrief.

Are you prepared for different responses to your inquiry?

You may wish to consider and plan for different responses. People may react negatively to concerns or criticism from other people. Some professionals do not like their expertise challenged and may be defensive and intimidating. Plan your approach so that you focus on the issues, not a personal attack. Others will respond positively, wishing to rectify any misunderstanding or inappropriate action on their part.

Think ahead as to what the best possible outcome would be, as you may be asked what can be done to rectify the situation. Perhaps your main goal was to ensure that it did not happen to you or someone else again. Depending on the situation, you may feel an apology is sufficient.

Taking Action

1. Identify yourself and why you are calling. State what you would like - such as a ten to twenty minute phone call, or a time to come in and talk to them. Ask them if this is a good time, and if not, request a time to call back or go in and see them. If you are not sure, ask them if they are the person you should be talking to about your concern, or if there is someone else they can direct you to. Be prepared to leave a message or use voice mail. Think about a brief message that will likely elicit a positive response.
2. State what you see to be the problem. Be clear, specific, and brief. Keep to your point even if they try to change the subject. Ask to be heard out, if the person interrupts or is too quick to apologize or dismiss your concern.
3. If the person refuses to listen, blames, criticizes or uses inappropriate language, you have the right to ask them to stop. If they do not, end the interaction. If this occurs, you can then reassess your strategy and determine if there is another avenue to pursue, eg. a supervisor, a professional association.
4. If the individual or institution uses language terminology or jargon that you do not understand, ask for an explanation.
5. Listen carefully to their response. Paraphrase or repeat back to ensure you heard the information accurately.
6. Take notes so you can refer to them later.

7. If appropriate, ask for written materials to be provided to you.
8. You may wish to state what could be done to rectify the situation. If the individual does not have the authority to do so, ask who you could talk to. If you are wanting a change in a policy, you may need to submit a letter to a Director, Board of Directors or elected government official.
9. You may wish to ask if you can call back again if you have further questions.
10. If they commit to an investigation or another action, ask for a time frame.
11. A follow-up letter may be helpful. You may wish to have on record your concerns and the actions that have been agreed upon. It is also very important to give praise where it is due - if you were dealt with in a respectful and helpful manner, a letter of thanks can go a long way to building bridges and providing closure.
12. Think of this as a learning experience. What did you do well? What would you do differently another time?

Congratulate yourself on your courage and the skills you have used in taking action.