Planning Your Visit with University Students

CHECKLIST

In Advance

☐ Contact the museum to schedule your group’s visit (museumed@msu.edu or 517-432-1472).
☐ Visit the exhibit in advance, or assure that you have reviewed the website thoroughly.
☐ Review the Adult Discussion Guide for the exhibit and consider how you will use it with your student group.
☐ Orient students to the exhibit: Share the website or have them view one of the videos.
☐ Disclose and discuss your role as a mandated reporter (for MSU employees).
☐ Explore self-care with students.
☐ Consider whether you might need assistance supporting, monitoring, and processing the experience with your group of students.

Important Considerations

The exhibit makes a powerful statement about the experience of sexual abuse survivors and the culture and climate that contributed to allowing this abuse happen. Students should know the exhibit may evoke strong reactions. However, please do not let this overshadow the benefit of learning more about these issues and the strength and resilience of survivors.

Assure that students understand they have choice and that any time they can step away from the exhibit. Have them explore positive coping strategies that they will use if the content is stressful. Some positive coping strategies include breathing exercises, taking a short break, talking with a trusted peer, refocusing on a positive, and journaling.

If you are an MSU employee or other mandated reporter, you have obligations to report “suspected abuse/neglect, even if this maltreatment happened during childhood, allegations of sexual assault, relationship violence, stalking, or sexual harassment.” (For other institutions, please consult your school’s administration about your responsibilities.) Students should be reminded that if they share details of anything that has happened to them you will have to make a report. This does not mean that they cannot share and process their reaction to the content with you or the class. Be prepared to support students if they decide to make a report of something that happened to them in the past, because of visiting the exhibit.

During the Visit

☐ Develop a plan for how you will tour the exhibit.
☐ Meet students at the museum and enter the exhibit together. If you have a member of the Museum staff leading you through the exhibit, start with this. Then allow students some time to experience the exhibit themselves, then come back together as a group and allow for debriefing/Q&A before you leave.
☐ Observe reactions and offer support as needed throughout.
☐ Plan in advance where you will discuss and debrief the experience. There should be an opportunity to process and discuss reactions before your group disbands for the day.

Important Considerations
Have a clear plan and agenda, and be sure you review it with students in advance. If you change the plan, offer clear explanations. Safety and trust are achieved through predictability and clarity. These are necessary for students to engage fully in the exhibit.

Throughout your time in the exhibit, observe reactions and needs for support. Things to make note of are strong emotional reactions, withdrawal and avoidance. Support can be as simple as a brief reflective statement about your observations, such as “I see this is difficult for you.” It may also be useful to give a student permission to excuse themselves. Much of your observation may be simply making notes of ideas, observations and reactions that might be of interest during your group’s discussion.

If you find yourself having an emotional reaction to the content, you may just want to note and acknowledge your reaction. Avoiding your own reactions might be interpreted by students as a suggestion that there are right/wrong reactions or that it is not okay for them to express themselves.

After the Visit

- Utilize the Discussion Guide. Have a plan about which questions you will start with, but be prepared to adjust to what comes up for the group.
- Invite students to share personal reactions.
- Conclude group discussion with a call to action. Have the students identify something that they can do to make a difference.
- Follow up with any students who might need assistance.
- Take care of yourself, process your experience with a colleague, and plan for follow up with your group or individual students.

Important Considerations
Do not delay providing opportunities for students to process their personal reactions. Create this opportunity before the group is dismissed. Find a comfortable and safe space for discussion and processing. (It may be possible to use the back part of the gallery. Please talk to the Museum Education Team.) Establish ground rules that include active and engaged listening, address trust and confidentiality. It can be useful for you to establish the ground rules yourself, but you might also consider having students establish these group norms.

Start your discussion with questions from the discussion guide. Allow for the expression of personal reactions that include emotions, but do not force this. As the discussion progresses and if it does not come up naturally, you may inquire with the group about their personal reactions. Expect anger, sadness and other highly charged reactions. Being able to verbalize emotional and personal emotions can be an important part of processing their experience.

Notice if you are uncomfortable and take care not to react to your own discomfort by shutting down anyone else’s expression. Assure that as you listen and respond it does not become apparent that it is expected that individuals will share feelings or self-disclose.
Maintain boundaries. Do not press students to share with you what happened to them or what they are experiencing. If someone shares a personal experience, acknowledge what they have shared and respond empathically. Do not ask them to elaborate. Identify where they can go for help and acknowledge that as their instructor it would not be your role to explore and process this in depth.

End the discussion with a call to action. Have group members identify something that they can do to make a difference about the issues that come up. These don’t have to be big commitments, but rather what will they do with their new understanding to contribute to promote understanding, prevention and response. Your objective is to have them use their new understanding and their strong feelings in a way that empowers them to take action. This is especially important if group members expressed strong feelings related to be overwhelmed, and dis-empowered.

After your group has been dismissed, note any students whom you may need to follow up and contact. Reach out to them with your observations that they might need additional support. It is OK to give them space and not overwhelm them, but let them know that you care and will be checking in.

Finally, it may be useful to you to debrief your experience with a colleague. Talking about your reactions and observations to the students’ experience may help you gain clarity about what else they need as a group or individuals.

This resource was written by Cheryl Williams-Hecksel, LMSW, Senior Clinical Instructor and Evidence Based Trauma Certificate Coordinator in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University.