

PHILLY STANDS UP PORTRAIT OF PRAXIS:

AN ANATOMY OF ACCOUNTABILITY

by Esteban Lance Kelly & Jenna Peters-Golden of *Philly Stands Up!*

The alchemy of our accountability work is a serendipitous mixture; part art, part science. To be sure, the skill and complexity involved in working on accountability processes is difficult to finesse. Nevertheless, we affirm that average people, regular folks in communities all across North America develop and exercise their own processes for making justice in sexual assault situations internal to their communities. In doing so, average people will meet more success, by any measure, than the State ever has in addressing the chaos of issues stirred up by incidents of sexualized violence.

What we now know, we learned through trial and quite a bit of error. Our missteps enabled, and in some cases exacerbated pain for which we are both responsible and repentant. Very few of us in the history of Philly Stands Up came to the group with formal prior experience working on sexual assault issues, let alone doing work with people who have caused harm. We are average people, figuring out how to do thorny work and our achievements stem from being committed to our values and purpose. We believe that people who have caused harm can change, and that we can play a crucial role in catalyzing that shift.

In recognition of contemporary peers and historical generations of people who have figured out and passed along lessons such as these, it is with a great sense of humility, that we share some logistical guts of what we've devised for our process and practices in working on sexual assault situations.

When we say that we work to hold people who have perpetrated sexual assault accountable¹ for the harm they have done, what this means is that we strive for them to:

1. Recognize the harm they have done, even if it wasn't intentional.
2. Acknowledge that harm's impact on individuals and the community
3. Make appropriate restitution to the individual and community.
4. Develop solid skills towards transforming attitudes and behavior to prevent further harm and make contributions toward liberation.

¹ Our working definition is based on Generation Five's articulation of accountability in their document, *Toward Transformative Justice*.

We conceptualize roughly five phases to an accountability process: the Beginning, Designing the Structure, Life Process, Tools We Use, and Closing a Process.

Phase 1. The Beginning:

People find us in many ways: we are known from leading educational workshops, contributing to zines and also through word of mouth, the internet, or through personal connections with individual members in PSU.

Sometimes a person who has caused harm gets in touch with us and says something like, "I really messed up and the person I hurt told me I need to work with you guys." Sometimes they say: "A few years ago I was abusive/ I sexually assaulted someone/ and I wasn't really ready to deal with it until now." In our workshops, people are often surprised to hear about those situations. The reality is that people who have caused harm are a complicated variety of people, and as they grow, many folks reflect on past behavior and see problems that they need to resolve.

Another approach is that someone might say, "I was sexually assaulted by *so-and-so*, and I want to hold them accountable." They would then task us with tracking down *so-and-so*, and attempting to instigate an accountability process. Beyond these cases, there are always the instances where someone who is neither the survivor nor the person who caused harm gets in touch with us on behalf of either party.

In any event, once we have touched base with the person who has caused harm, we vaguely sketch out the situation and discuss it as a group. We first find out if two collective members are able to take on this situation (we learned early on to always strive to work in pairs). If so, we discuss what we know about the situation and we honestly assess if we are equipped to handle it. There is always the possibility that there are pieces of this situation that we can't handle. Sometimes we are not qualified for one reason or another and by trying to work on it we could cause more harm than good. Sometimes PSU members decline engaging a situation because of elements that feel emotionally triggering.

After we have assessed the situation, we schedule a meet-up with the person who has caused harm. We typically meet in places that are public but run a low risk of encounters with people we

know; examples include parks, train stations, hotel lobbies, food courts or outdoor cafés.

Phase 2. Designing the Process:

Next we try to design a process based on what the situation warrants. Often, we have a document listing "demands." Demands are actions the survivor needs from the community or the person who caused harm in order to be safe and to heal. Below is a sample list of common demands:

- * "Pay for my STI testing/ abortion/ doctors appointment"
- * "Deal with your drug/ alcohol problem"
- * "If you see me out somewhere, it's your responsibility to leave the premises"
- * "Don't talk to me or contact me"
- * "Don't go to 'such and such group' meetings for now" (typically an organization in which both the survivor and person who has caused harm participate)
- * "Disclose to all the people you are sleeping with or dating, that you sexually assaulted someone and are in an accountability process"
- * "Write me a sincere letter of apology"

Demands are the central document in our accountability process. In situations where we have a list of demands, they fundamentally drive the design for our process. Our goals as facilitators of the process are to meet the demands laid out by the survivor- and in some cases the community at large- both in letter and in spirit. In designing a particular process, we bear several principles in mind:

Firstly, we try to involve the person we are working with into the design of the process. If they help make the plans, timelines, goals and help to brainstorm the things we can do together, then they feel more invested in everything. They are reluctant to bail on things because they do not see themselves as walking out on an externally imposed program.

Secondly, in order to engage them, we figure out methods that specifically work for the other person. If it is a visually-oriented person, we make drawings or word maps to describe what we are talking about in a meeting. If they hate to read, we might record a reading for them. If they have ability needs that make it hard for them to sit down for meetings, we might plan walks around the block while

we talk. In our engagement efforts, we have even arranged meetings consisting of street skating and board games. Be accommodating and creative!

Another important practice of ours is that we use the meetings as an opportunity to model the behavior we are trying to build in the person with whom we are working. Some examples of how we demonstrate preferred behavior include: articulating and maintaining discrete social/physical boundaries, striving for clear communication, practicing empathy, showing respect (which is perceptibly appreciated among people who have been ostracized in the aftermath of sexual assault), and exemplifying utter honesty. If the person we are working with misses a meeting or arrives late, we will discuss how they needed to communicate this better, and help them understand how the ways in which it was inconsiderate. Together, we lay down ground rules for how we want to communicate with one another, which gives us concrete agreements for holding folks accountable. We use their progress in adhering to agreements to create positive momentum; an endorsement for their capacity to grow and change- to be their better selves.

Phase 3. Life Structure:

When it is needed, we often put a lot of emphasis into fostering balance and creating structure in the person's life. If they are unstable then it becomes difficult for them to be present in the work we are doing together. In such situations, it becomes crucial for us to account for the fuller context of challenges in their lives. The more grounded one is, the better their chances are of following through on their accountability process.

Toward that end, we create space for them to have a personal "check-in" at the beginning of each meeting. This is a moment for them to share anything they wish about their daily lives, emotional state, or logistical hurdles. The check-in allows us to hear, for example, about their progress in finding a therapist or stable housing, or about job interviews or family visits. At times, we have actively passed along jobs prospects, accompanied people in looking for viable housing, and given people rides to therapy appointments. This humbling and more fundamentally 'human' work has helped us to see what it truly means to acknowledge that we are all in community together; that a politics of trust depends on everyday support and interdependence, and that nobody rests outside of that in a just society.

Phase 4. Tools we use:

Each process is unique. Most meetings consist primarily of talking. We talk about stories, the instances of assault that took place, relationship patterns and countless connected issues. We employ several general tools as guides in the meeting space:

- Story telling- We ask to hear stories, encourage discussion about dynamics or emerging themes, and use these didactically, sometimes revisiting their stories.
- Writing- Giving "homework" is a good way to maintain continuity between meetings. Sometimes people write down recollections of an instance of abuse, record what certain words mean to them, keep a log of times they felt frustration or anger (those are common emotions we work with), and maintain a journal about how the accountability process is going for them.
- Role Playing- Taking a cue from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, we sometimes try to act out interactions that have occurred or that could occur. Role Playing is great for building skills of perception and empathy, and is a safe way for people to try out new behaviors and understand past ones.
- Reading/ Listening/ Watching- Most situations that we come across call for educational development. There are countless helpful texts, films, lectures, podcasts etc that help to explain everything from patriarchy, to substance abuse, internalized oppression and dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. Here, our role is to tailor any resources for the person we are working with.

Phase 5. Closing a Process:

Improving upon ourselves is lifelong work for everyone and certainly for folks who have a history of perpetrating violence. Most of our accountability processes last between nine months and two years, and could usually continue ad infinitum. This begs the question, "when is it time to wrap up a situation?" Much like therapy, there is no objective answer to this, but here are some indicators for when it might be appropriate to wind things down.

One obvious moment to close out a process is when both the letter and the spirit of the demands have been met. If a demand is "write me a letter of apology," it won't do for the person who

has caused harm to draft a letter within the first few months of their process. Composing an apology may be the technical letter of the demand, but writing it to convey sincere contriteness is the true spirit of the demand. This penitence can only be declared once hard work and requisite time have gone into understanding one's role in the harm of the assault, and once they have gained a sense of empathy for how it affected the survivor(s) and the community.

If a demand calls for sobriety or a reduction in the use of illicit substances, then fulfilling the true spirit of the demand would require both cutting back substance use and moving toward a true understanding of how the survivor (or community) came to this demand. What we would look for is recognition by the person who caused harm that in their case, drinking or using creates conditions for their judgment to be impaired and how this traces to their abusive behavior. Making that connection and changing their relationship to that substance would therefore be true fulfillment of the demand.

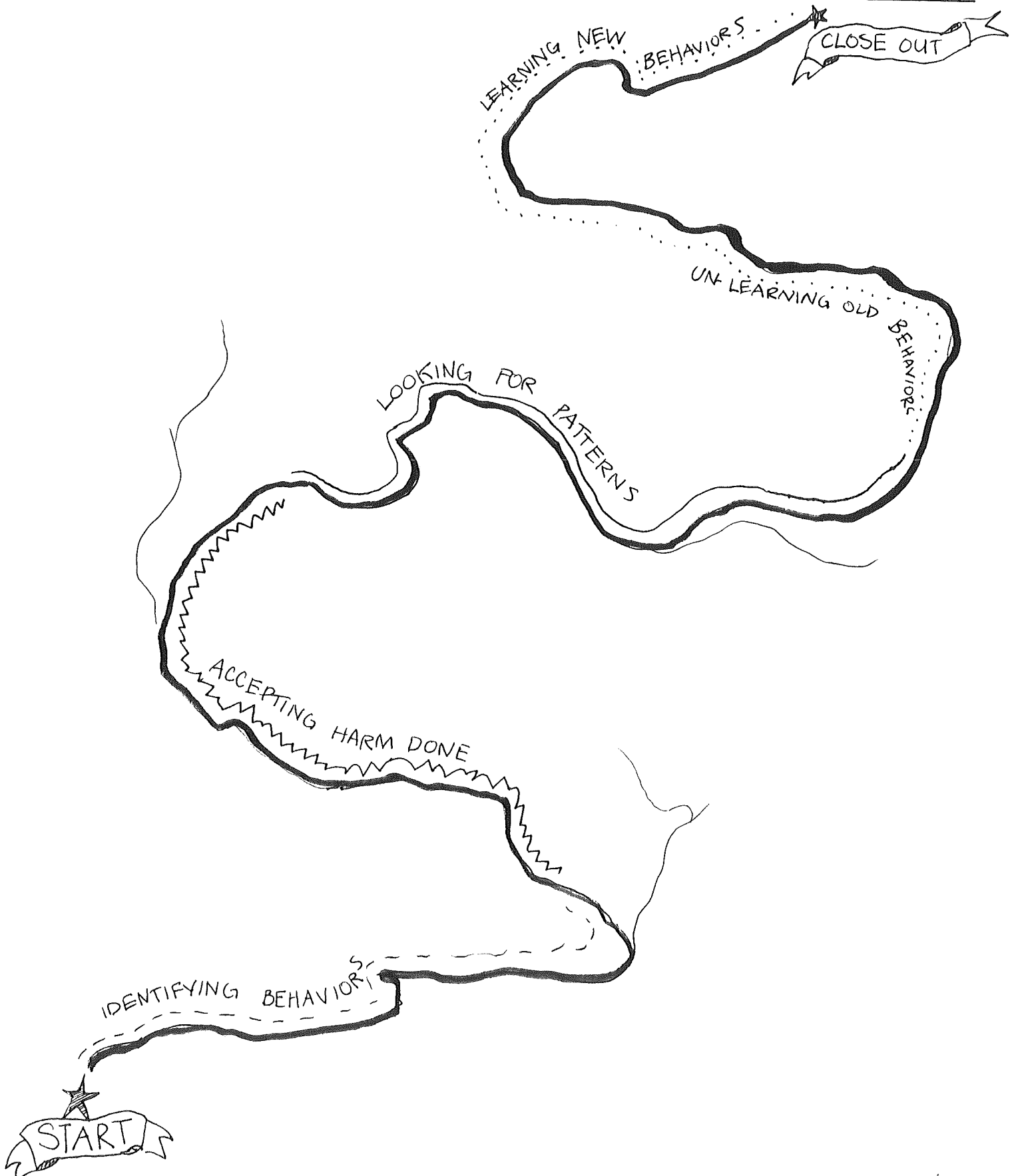
Another indicator for transitioning out of a formal process is that the person who has caused harm has identified ways to change the behavior that has led to sexual assault and has demonstrated their capacity to navigate through "gray zones". Here, it is important to see how they have practiced this shift in their everyday life and to feel confident as a guide in the process that this change is profound and lasting.

Often we would be hesitant to wind down an accountability process unless we are confident that whomever we are working with has developed responsible and sustainable systems of support in their life. We look for clues that they have not one or two, but plenty of upstanding friends, with whom they can talk to about matters of consequence. This can include housemates or family members who they can trust for support when challenges come up, particularly with issues related to this work. We also work to ensure that they are familiar with the resources available to them around the city that can serve their needs.

Usually "ending" a process looks more like phasing it out. Over time we go from meeting each week, to twice a month, to once a month, until finally we are only meeting to check-in periodically. After an accountability process, the people with whom we have worked know that we are here for them whenever they need us.

ROAD MAP

OF AN
ACCOUNTABILITY
PROCESS



Road Map of an Accountability Process

An Accountability Road Map sketches out a process to give it structure while clarifying intentions, goals, and allowing you to get a sense of the trajectory and the big picture. Because accountability processes are never linear or clear cut, we use a road map instead of an agenda; Road Maps have ample room for construction, road blocks and detours. They help you maintain a sense of your over all goals, while remaining flexible and open to re-routing paths and re-imagining the journey once you've started.

The Five Major Phases of Accountability Processes

There are endless ways to map out phases of an accountability process, but here are the five most common phases we have charted in our work and experience:

Identifying Behaviors

The first step in a process is that a person must have an awareness and understanding of the actions and behaviors for which they are being called out. This is foundational and can sometimes take longer to accomplish than you might imagine.

Accepting Harm Done

Building on the understanding of what specific behaviors led them to this accountability process, the next step is to acknowledge in what ways these behaviors were harmful -- even if harm wasn't their intention. This is the seed of one of most frequent goals in a process: building empathy.

Looking for Patterns

Making comprehensive change to prevent future assault requires broadening the focus beyond the isolated incident(s) that precipitated this process. This means identifying and naming the person's history of abusive/harmful actions and contextualizing these behaviors in their underlying assumptions and socialization.

Unlearning Old Behaviors

The process of breaking habits starts with identifying harmful dynamics and then deepens beyond naming to analysis and understanding. Gaining an awareness and determining the kinds of situations that trigger or enable abusive or harmful behaviors and then having clear strategies to avoid and diffuse the potential path for harm.

Learning New Behaviors

Building new positive/healing patterns of behavior goes hand in hand with breaking down the old harmful patterns. One of the tools in this stage is role play, where a person can rehearse their consent practices, graceful acceptance of criticism, disclosure strategies, etc. Also important is becoming familiar with their resources to support positive and new behavior [affordable therapy, sites to find jobs, a clearly defined network of supportive friends, membership to the gym, etc]. This phase is very much about understanding the ways to build new behaviors so this skill becomes sustainable and fueled by self reliance.

Blueprint for Doing the Work

Three of the most consistent and challenging barriers people going through accountability processes run up against are:

1. inability to recognize and name the emotions they commonly feel
2. lack of empathy for others (specifically the survivor[s])
3. getting lost in the sea of dynamics, feelings, and memories they are being asked to consider, talk about and revisit.

The Blueprint is a tool we came up with to help move past all three of these sticking points. It is a structure that can sometimes be conceptual and confusing to get the hang of, but it has endless possibilities for how you can use it and the potential to help ground them in what is often a confusing and overwhelming process.

Floors

In the Blueprint, each floor is assigned to represent one person or group of people. The first floor is often the Person Who Has Perpetrated Harm's floor. The 2nd floor is the Survivor's floor. There is no limit to how many floors you can add.

Rooms

Each floor is made up of rooms. One room holds one emotional state like, "anger", "feeling misunderstood", "embarrassed", "joyful", "irritated", "anxious", "rational" and on and on and on. You can fill in the rooms of your blueprint as you get to know each other. Together you can all build the rooms based on what themes or commonly experienced emotions the person you are working with feels. It is helpful and feels productive to say, "I've noticed that when you are telling stories about times you've lost your temper or gotten upset, you often feel frustrated at the beginning and end of the interaction. Would you say that *Frustration* is a room we should build on the first floor?" The process of building rooms together is a great way to have all of you meaningfully participate in the hard work of the process. **Building rooms is also a key way to identify patterns of behavior.** Where you place specific rooms can also help see the connection between two or three emotions, i.e. if "feeling misunderstood" often results in "anger" or "being mean" it is helpful to build those rooms next to each other, so you can all see how they interact with one another.

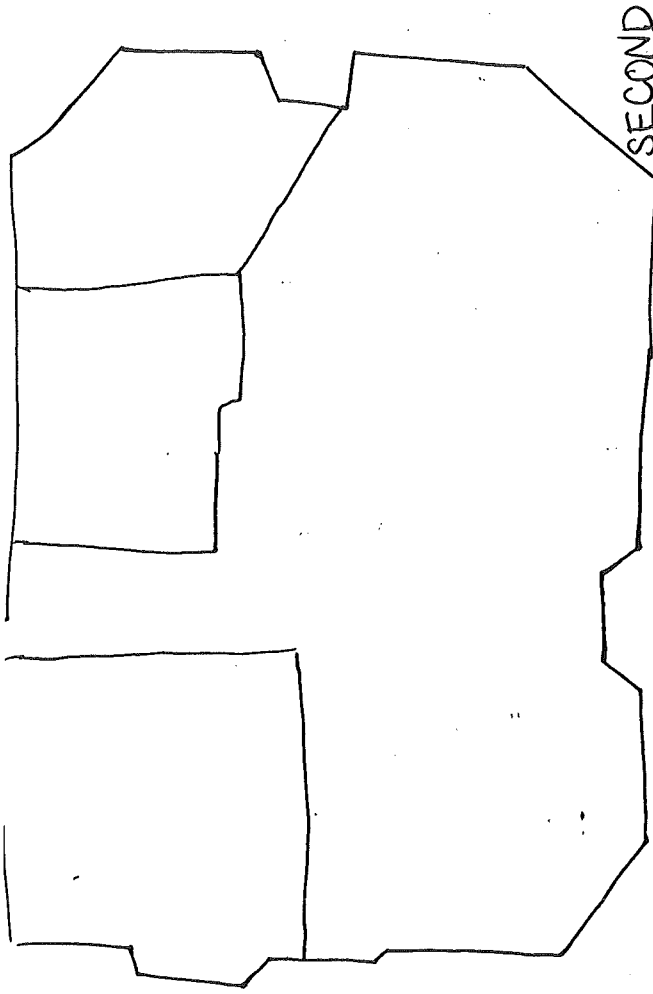
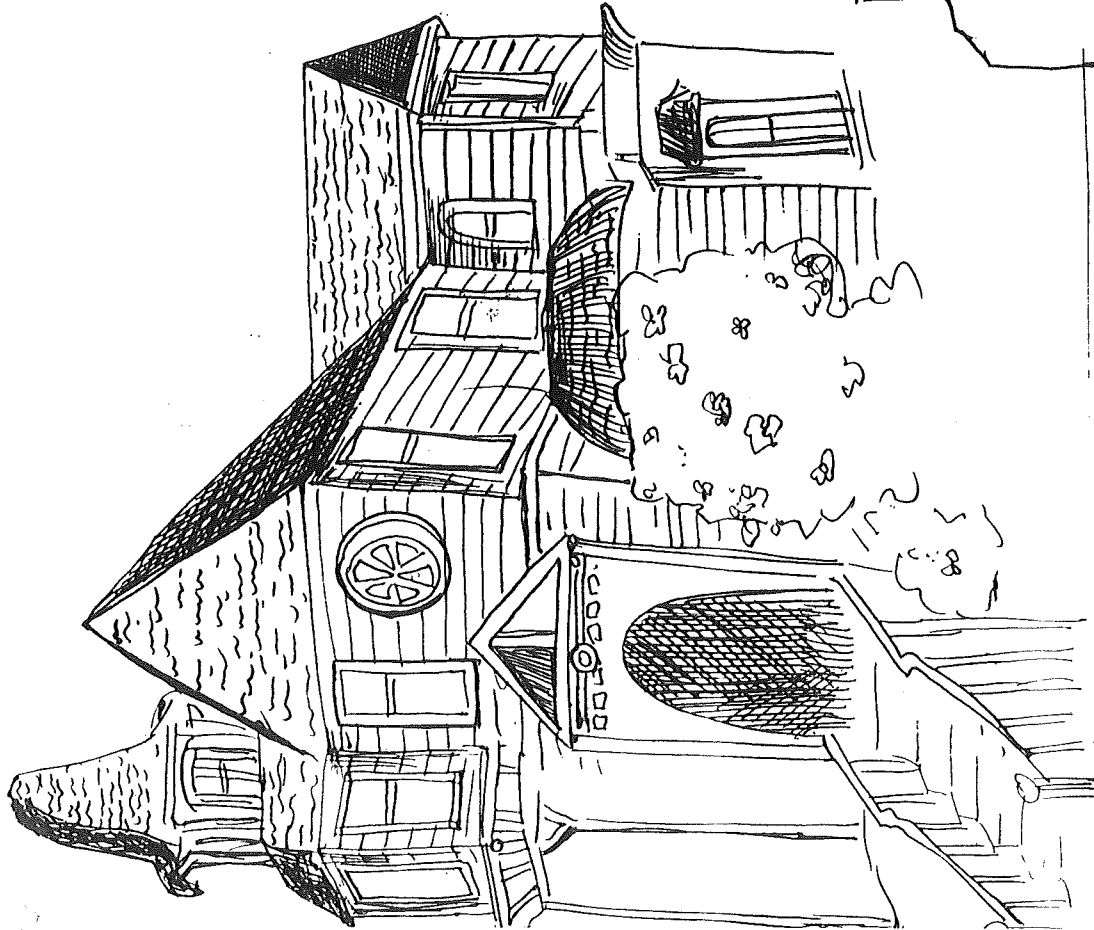
How to Use Your Blueprint

While the act of building it is ongoing [you can always add more rooms, closets, relabel rooms], once you have some things labeled and constructed, there are lots of ways to use the blueprint. Often, we have it sitting on the table while the person we are working with is telling us a story from their week or discussing an instance of assault that we are working through in our process. If they get confused, are getting off track or losing focus, we can say "Where were you on the first floor when he said that to you?" They can take a minute to regroup and work to notice what emotional state they were in.

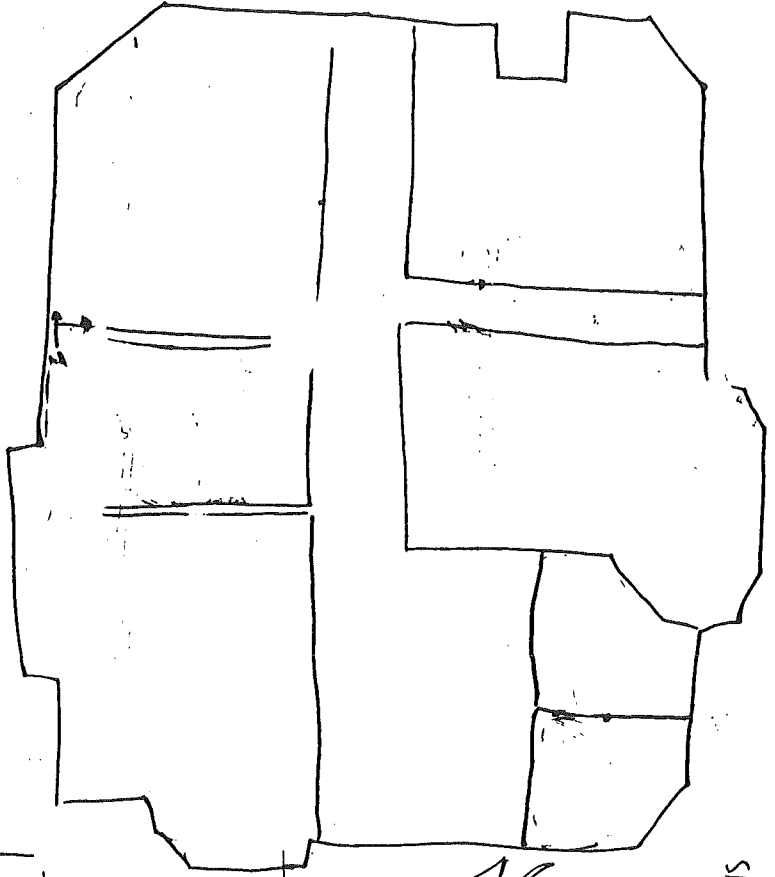
You can use the model of a "house" as realistically or creatively as you want. Often, we use

the “hallways” as actions and opportunities for making decisions; “When that conflict was happening, you were walking down this hallway and you turned in to the “manipulative” room. What would happen if you had turned in to a different room?” or “What would it take for you to have gotten up out of “anxiety” room and walked down the hallway to the “spiritual centered” room? What route would you have taken?” The hallways are key. They remind the person you are working with that there are decisions and actions before, during and after conflict or conditions that lead to harm. Pointing out how they have choice in which rooms they walk in to is a way to point out responsibility -- it is also a way to talk about the real challenges of and default ways they get to a specific emotional state.

The distinction of floors can be confusing. The struggle of “learning empathy” often looks like the person who has caused harm having a difficult time seeing anything from a point of view that is different than theirs. This can come off as egotistical and narrow. If the person you are working with is spinning around and around in their version and experience of the story and you want them to move or see it from a different vantage point, it’s hard (and probably not helpful) to say, “you are being completely self-involved. Look at it from the survivor’s point of view!” It is possible, though (and maybe more helpful) to say, “you are stuck on the first floor. I want you to try and get to the stairs and walk up to the second floor for a little while.” The second floor usually won’t have any rooms labeled because you (probably) don’t know the emotional states of the survivor. Being “on the second floor” is symbolically important because it signifies a separation from the person who has caused harm’s story and rooms. When they are on the second floor it is an exercise in imagining and trying to understand how someone could have interpreted or experienced their actions differently than they might think.



SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

FLOORPLAN for drawing the WORK*

ROOMS = STATES OF BEING

HALLS = CHOICES OF ACTIONS