

Distinguishing Victim/Survivor from Abuser

Determining who the abuser is and who is being abused can be a challenge, especially in same sex relationships. Abusers can isolate their partners by seeking out potential services and securing them as a resource for themselves so the service won't be available for their partner. In addition, a batterer can present as a victim because s/he feels victimized though s/he is in fact controlling his/her partner, and a victim can feel like an abuser because s/he has used physical violence to defend herself. Most abuse victims do not draw distinctions between fighting back and acting in self-defense.

Indicators of a Victim/Survivor:

The survivor will...

- Recall the chronology of events in detail
- Blame self
- Feel ashamed about being victimized
- Fear the partner
- Feel remorse for fighting back
- Protect the partner
- Describe how life has narrowed during the relationship
- Have stories of unsuccessful attempts to leave or repair the relationship
- Feel confused

Indicators of an Abuser:

An abuser will...

- Remain vague about events & omit details
- Blame partner & minimize personal role
- Feel victimized
- Exaggerate own injuries & minimize partner's
- Claim the violence was "a two-way street" or "just a fight"
- Assertively claim to be a victim
- Mention receiving abuse in prior relationships & claim not to understand why these relationships ended
- Act persuasive and logical

How to Screen for Perpetrators

Abusers try to get those working with them to back off, either by being constantly angry and challenging or extremely agreeable. Their goal is to wear you down or enlist you as an ally to get the system to do as little monitoring as possible.

Assessments

To assess whether someone is a perpetrator, go over abusive incidents and examine the context, the intent of actions and the effect of those actions. Consider the following questions:

- Context
 - What is/was happening in the relationship before & after the behavior occurred?
 - What meaning or history does the behavior have given the context?
- Intent
 - What are the reasons for the behavior?
 - What is the goal of the behavior? Control?
- Effect
 - Whose life is smaller as a result of the behavior? Who is being controlled, etc.?

In general, try to "slow down" the story. Ask about what happened in the abusive incident, starting with even an hour before the event — what the client was feeling, doing and thinking, and then what happened, and who said what. Obtain details and keep the discussion chronological.

Note: This method should be used carefully, and only in those cases where there is real ambiguity. To apply this method to all clients could promote victim-blaming because to ask a victim questions about what s/he was doing

prior to an abusive incident could imply mutual responsibility.

Questions to Ask

When screening to distinguish between an abuser and a victim/survivor, service providers must assess the power dynamics of the relationship. Some useful questions include:

- Is this a pattern of behavior? Does the accuser claim that the partner has committed one or more of these acts more than once?
- Who seems to be more in control of the other person? Who seems to make most of the decisions? Who gets their way most of the time?
- Has one partner changed their job, friends, socialization patterns, ideas and activities in response to the other person's requirements?
- Who is afraid of whom? Without prompting, has the client indicated she is afraid of their partner? Are they afraid to stay in their home with their partner? Are they afraid to fight or disagree with their partner?
- What have the consequences been if they have a disagreement or the authority of the accused is challenged?
- How does the client describe the impact that the abuse has had on them? How do they feel about themselves, their ability/need to please their partner?
- Does either partner admit to abuse/violence against their partner and how does she explain it? Is there blame or responsibility taken?
- Who initiated the violent incident? (It is important to remember here that although someone may strike the first 'blow', they may have done so because a past pattern of abuse alerted them to imminent violence.)
- Distinguish between abusive and assertive behavior. Some people label any behavior that they dislike, or that they find painful, 'abuse'. It is important to find out exactly what happened before labeling the behavior.

In addition, if a service is concerned about a client's own violent behavior against a partner, some further questions can be posed, including:

- What was the intent behind their violent behavior? Was it to: control the partner or cause their partner to change their behavior?; hurt or injure their partner?; to retaliate against their partner who was abusive in the past?; to protect themselves?
- Have they ever inflicted an injury on their partner (either emotional or physical)? How severe were those injuries? What was the effect of this violent behavior on their partner?
- Was the person's use of physical or verbal aggression a pattern of behavior or an isolated incident?
- What was the sequence of events leading to the violence? What do they see as being the cause of the violence?
- Have they ever had a previous violent relationship and how do they describe that relationship?
- How do they feel about the violent incident? Who do they see as being to blame or responsible?

Adapted from

- <http://www.springtideresources.net/resources/show.cfm?id=144>
- New Jersey Coalition of Battered Women