

INTERVIEWING AND SCREENING

Since domestic violence is something that can affect anyone, it is important to screen all clients for a history of domestic violence, regardless of the setting. Asking questions about abuse as a standard part of an intake process can make it less threatening for some survivors to respond than if they feel they are being singled out. It is much better to ask the question and be told there is no history, than to miss an opportunity to provide some support and information to a person who is at risk. The techniques and skills identified in this section can be adapted for any social work setting.

Interviewing Basics

(1) Interview the person by herself or himself

You should always assume that anyone with the person you are helping could be the batterer. Domestic violence can occur in any relationship— heterosexual, homosexual, parent-child, child-parent or sibling. It is important to take some time early in the interview to meet with the individual by her or himself. You can tell her or him that it is standard procedure and ask anybody accompanying the patient to have a seat in the waiting area for a few minutes. Alternatively, depending on the organizational setting you are in, there may be a natural moment during which you are alone with the individual. Once you are alone with her or him, you can ask about the nature of the relationship more specifically.

(2) It is always okay to ask the question

It is much better to ask someone needlessly about violence in her or his life, than not to ask someone who could use help. Most people will not be offended by your showing concern for their well-being. This is true even for survivors who might not be ready to talk with you about their situation.

Sensitive Questioning

(1) Avoid loaded words

Some people who are dealing with domestic violence do not define their situations as being “abused” or “domestic violence.” It is better to ask about behaviors, rather than use a label. For example, you can ask:

- What happens when you and your partner have a disagreement?
- Have you ever been afraid of your partner?
- Is there anyone in your life who is harming you?

You can also start with more general questions, such as:

- How would you rate your stress level?
- Have you noticed any changes in your eating/sleeping habits or how you spend your free time?

If the person describes a situation that you feel might be abusive, you can ask more specific questions about what happens in the relationship.

- How often does your partner scare you?
- What was the scariest time you have had with your partner?
- Have you ever felt afraid you would be seriously injured or killed?
- Has your partner ever hit you or hurt you physically?
- Does your partner have access to, or threatened you with, weapons?

(2) Avoid questions that begin with “why”

Questions that begin with “why” can often sound accusatory to the individual being asked. A lot of battering behavior is geared towards making the victim feel responsible for the violence in their lives, so most survivors will have a heightened sensitivity to anything that might confirm feelings of self-blame. The batterer is the one who is responsible for the violence.

(3) Ask questions that elicit broad responses

Try to get as full a picture of the relationship and the survivor’s supports as possible. This will help you with safety planning and with determining how you can best help the individual with being safe.

If you believe that the person is at risk of harm

(1) Safety planning

Try to do some safety planning with them.

(2) Regard survivors as experts on their own lives

He or she knows the batterer well and can therefore usually judge his or her own risk pretty accurately. If the person tells you that something you are recommending will escalate her or his risk, this is probably true. If the person tells you that some other option has worked well for them in the past, then support them in taking that step again now.

Denial is a critical and useful strategy for survivors. It is difficult to meet the normal demands of life if you are constantly thinking that someone you live with is going to harm or kill you. Often, using denial permits one to do what needs to be done in life. Sometimes, on the other hand, denial will prevent the survivor from recognizing their immediate risk. When you think this is the case, it is important to voice your concerns for the person’s safety and your understanding of the situation. For example, “I need to tell you that I am worried about your safety. You told me that.... This makes me concerned that....”