



Engaging with clients who choose to abuse their intimate partner or families.

The following information is provided to support clinicians who may find themselves working with client who they identify or suspect are being abusive towards their family and/or partner. Central to any engagement with a suspected perpetrator is the safety of the health professional, other staff, and of those experiencing the abuse (and their children). It is important **not** to engage with this person on his use of violence in a way that increases the risk to that person's ex/partner or children.

Key points:

It is not the role of health professional/s to determine who is the primary aggressor (or potential perpetrator) of abuse.

Both men and women can use abusive behaviour and violence in their relationships, most family and intimate partner violence is perpetrated by men.

Abusive behaviour does not have to be physical violence. It is any behaviour that a person uses to gain power and control over their partner / family or causes that person to live in fear.

People who choose to be abusive are not 'out of control' because of poor anger management, stress, alcohol or drugs, rather they've learned to use abuse to get what they want (or gain power and control over another).

How can you recognise a person who may be choosing to abuse their partner and/or family?

- He may tell you outright.
- He may talk about their abuse in language such as:
 - fighting with their partner / family member;
 - being jealous or possessive of their partner;
 - Talking of their right to control aspects of the family such as finances, social contact, work; and
 - Talking about their partner in a derogative and dismissive manner.
- He may be very insistent on staying with his partner throughout the appointment.
- He may **minimise** the violence / his behaviour e.g. 'It just got a bit out of hand'; "I only pushed her"; "the kids didn't see anything"

- He may **blame** the victim for his behaviour e.g. “she pushed my buttons”; “she’s blown this out of proportion”
- He may **excuse** or **justify** his behaviour e.g. “I didn’t know what I was doing, I was drunk / high / stoned”, “I was feeling so frustrated I’m not normally like that”, “I just snapped”; “she pushed me too”; “If she stopped annoying me, I wouldn’t have had to do it”

He may display some or none of these behaviours at the time of interview.

What can you do?

- Immediately consider the safety and potential risk to everyone including yourself, other staff members, their family members including children.
- When possible, ask about his role as a parent/new parent (as you would with the child’s mother). By asking him the same type of questions that you would ask the mother about parenting expectations will provide insight into what he does or does not do in the home and will then give an indication of his attitudes around privilege and entitlement. This is also an easier way to engage him in initial conversation in this topic and as a gateway to exploring further. For example.:
 - How does it feel to be a new Dad?
 - Are you able to tell me about your role in the family?
- If possible, encourage him to talk about what’s going on in their relationship e.g.

“What do you do when you get angry with your partner?”

“When you argue with your partner, do you become aggressive? What does that look like?”

“Many couples disagree about things and fight. Disagreements are part of a normal, healthy relationship. However it is a problem if one partner feels scared or threatened”

“Perhaps you haven’t hurt your partner / family member, but you’re worried you will?”

“Do you think your partner (and/or children) is afraid of you?”
- Talk to him about the impact his behaviour may be having on his children (some perpetrators are more motivated to reflect on their behaviour if they understand the impact this is having on their children, rather than focusing on the impact it is having on their (ex) partner) e.g. what would it have been like for the kids to hear that?
- Respond to a person’s attempts to minimise, excuse or justify their violence by encouraging them to re-evaluate their behaviour and self-exploration e.g.
 - “what was that like for her?”
 - “what does that look like? (when you ‘snap’)”
 - “can you tell me about what was happening for you?”
 - “how did she experience it? What was she feeling”



Make it clear that no matter what has happened in the past, they have choices as to how they behave in their relationships.

Let them know that there is help available (see section below).

What not to do?

- Don't engage in an accusational manner (oppositional, judging, challenging, telling him his behaviour is bad or arguing with him). This can make him disengage, resist or anger him, increasing the risk of him choosing to use violence toward his family.
- Don't collude with their minimisations or excuses. Don't accept any reasons for the existence and continuance of the violence and abuse.
- Don't bring attention to anything his ex/partner has said, as this could put them further at risk.
- Don't shame the person. Be open and curious with your questioning.
- Don't suggest couples counselling, anger management programs or family mediation services.

Staff Safety

Ensure you're aware of and implement your health sites aggression management procedures such as Code Black.

Support Services available

Men's Domestic Violence Helpline: 1800 000 599

A 24/7 confidential helpline where men can talk confidentially to a trained professional. Men who are victims of FDV can also use this line to get support.

MensLine Australia: 1300 78 99 78

A 24/7 confidential telephone and online support, information and referral service for men, specialising in family and relationship concerns.

Breathing Space: 9439 5707 (located metro Perth)

A 3-month therapeutic residential program for men who have been abusive to their intimate partners or family members.

Men's Behaviour Change Programs:

Therapeutic behaviour change programs delivered by numerous organisations.

Go to: <http://sfv.org.au/programs-delivered-by-the-network/> for full list of providers.



Resource: [How do I know if I'm abusive?](#) A self-help guide for men who want to change, Department of Communities.

For further information on this topic see the ANROWS Practice Guide: [Working with Fathers who use violence - Practice Guide](#)

References:

Tips for engaging men on their use of family violence, The Lookout, www.thelookout.org.au

No to Violence: working together to end men's family violence, Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, www.ntv.org.au accessed

Tip Sheet: working with men perpetrating violence or abuse in their families or intimate relationships, MensLine Australia, www.mensline.org.au accessed

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request.

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