
Assessment guidelines

Stance

If a person who has been violence or abusive in relationship/s comes to see you for an interview, this is a significant step. A significant factor in how useful your engagement will be from here will depend on your stance. In particular, there's a tension when working with those who we think have behaved abusively, between colluding with them on the one hand and becoming accusatory on the other - often in an over-zealous attempt to avoid collusion. Somewhere between the collusive and the accusatory stance lies a more neutral position, which is generally more constructive. We sometimes say that if you could merge a social worker with a therapist, the approach would be somewhere near what is needed.

It's important that you make professional judgements about your client's abusive behaviour - it is an essential part of your job to assess the harm that has been caused and that might be caused in the future. It's human that you'll make personal judgements and have emotional reactions about some of the things you hear. However, it's also important that you form an alliance with your client towards change.

Change will come about when the internal conflict or dissonance within a person becomes unsustainable for them. To allow this to happen your job will be to help to build up the part of your client that wants a better life, the part with whom the violence and abuse don't fit well, the part that cares about their family, the part that would feel terrible if anyone else did that to them. If the person you are working with starts to feel judged and criticised, or picks up on your reactions to their behaviour, they are likely to become defensive. Then the conflict will end up being between you and the client; you'll do all the urging to change while he sits back and gets more and more entrenched and invested in staying put.

On the other hand, if you find yourself avoiding the difficult challenges, overemphasising your relationship and becoming essentially client-centred, your client will happily use the time with you to get support without working significantly on their violence and abuse at all.

We want to encourage you to practise taking a neutral stance with your client. We want to emphasise the idea of stance or manner because we're not suggesting you suspend any judgement or agenda internally - both intuitive judgement and the law of the land indicate that violence in intimate relationships is unacceptable. However, we recommend that you put your feelings and reactions aside in the session unless you're sure they're conducive to change in your client. Be curious and interested and share that interest with your client; try to use the 'Columbo approach' where you can invite them to question their own behaviour as far as possible, but be calm and non-conflictual.

With that in mind, we will go on to describe approaches that should allow your early meetings to yield the kind of information that will help you decide if you can work with this person, and think about what other interventions will make this family safer.

Stages in working with a domestic violence perpetrator

Essentially there are two distinct steps to working with perpetrators. It will help you a great deal to delineate these in your own mind as clearly as possible:

- finding out what has happened and assessing risk
- intervention: assessing suitability for intervention and then working for change alongside the person you are working with.

If you try to mix step 2 into step 1, you may well find that you fail on both fronts. For example, if you're just hearing about the build-up to an abusive incident and you start asking, 'What do you think that was like for your partner and children?', you may make your client defensive, which means they're likely to retreat from any openness they might have had in their account of the incident.

We advise you to go easy on yourself and on them; set out in your first session simply to get as clear an account as possible of what has been happening. Towards the end of one of these sessions you might be able to make a light- touch intervention (which we'll cover below) that may nonetheless be quite powerful. You might also neutrally summarise and reflect back some of the abuse and violence they've told you about here and there during the session. Trust that telling another person even a bit of what you have done and then hearing it reflected back, without any blame, judgement or justifications, is an intervention in and of itself.

Setting out

Professionals often ask people for their understanding of what the meeting is about. It's a useful way to ascertain whether there are misconceptions that need clarifying. It's also worth adding something to acknowledge the difficulty of the subjects you are going to cover:

How were you feeling about coming in today? I would guess this wasn't a meeting you were looking forward to. What made you think it mattered enough to come along despite that?

This might allow the client to give you some idea of their better side; to tell you that they care about their children, their partner or their family more generally.

They may immediately start to tell you about their experience of other professionals, their partner or 'the system'. The stories people tell you about other professionals they've been involved with frequently carry useful information about how you can best work with them and/or provide a glimpse of how they might be talking about you six months down the line.

Remember your neutral stance - you can 'reposition' your client's anger as you go by reflecting back the values that are implicit even in angry and blaming statements:

You feel like no one has heard your side...

- ... so being listened to is really important to you
- ... so fairness really matters to you
- ... so justice is something you feel really strongly about — tell me what you mean by justice.

Getting consent to ask direct questions

A next step is to get consent to ask the many and intrusive questions that will form the body of your interview. It takes a minute or two to set this up well and it is worth doing.

I need to ask you some very direct questions about these issues — is that OK? But let me know if I ask you something you don't want to answer — would you speak out?

or

It's a strange situation because we've have only just met and I might need to ask some difficult questions. If you start to feel uncomfortable, can you let me know you want to take a break for a few minutes?

You can't make anyone talk to you about things they don't want to talk about, so you may as well build in safe 'get- outs' for them. In a similar vein, it may help to say early on:

A lot of people find they remember more details as they go along — sometimes weeks later.

This leaves a 'back door' for the client to disclose more as time goes on - whether that's due to increasing pressures from the 'system' or to your interventions with them.

Finding out about the violence and abuse

Do chat a little about the early stages of the relationship, but don't spend so long that an anxious sense of 'beating about the bush' develops. This person knows what you are here to discuss and so it can be almost reassuring if you move quite soon towards talking about the abuse. Some key pointers that will help guide you are as follows.

DON'T GET STUCK WITH GENERAL QUESTIONS

If you ask general questions, you'll get vague, evasive and often 'idealising' answers. Questions like 'How is your relationship?' become richer and more useful if you add, 'What are the best and worst aspects of it?' And even those kinds of questions will yield more vivid information if you ask, 'Can you give me a specific example of that (the best and worst aspects) or tell me a story about something that would illustrate that aspect of the relationship?' Domestic violence assessment needs to be rooted in the detail of actual behaviour.

AVOID YES/NO QUESTIONS

Questions such as 'Don't you think that would have upset her?' or 'So did you hit her just the once?' often imply a right and a wrong answer that will make your client feel trapped or offer them an easy get-out.

AVOID 'WHY?'

The only time to ask why in the finding out phase is if you are genuinely exploring something - in which case phrases like 'Can you explain ...?' or 'Can you help me to understand ...' might be preferable. 'Why?' can sound judgemental, and this will only push your client onto the defensive and wake up the part of them that wants to justify and minimise what they did. Remember your neutral stance.

TALK TO WHERE THEY ARE AT

Speak in language that fits this person's current experience. They are unlikely to relate to being called a domestic violence perpetrator just now (if ever), so asking when they first used domestic violence won't help. Asking about the very first time they got physical with a partner when arguing might be easier for them to relate to.

GET BEYOND THE CASE RECORDS

If the person you are working with has been referred to you from another agency, try to free yourself from acting and talking as if the events in the 'chronology' or the 'index offence' are the only times they've been abusive. Statistically speaking, that's highly unlikely to be the case and really you are interested in the pattern of controlling and abusive behaviours across the whole relationship.

USE A SCHEDULE, BUT PURELY AS AN AIDE MEMOIRE

Below is an 'interview schedule' of some of the kinds of questions that might help you - consider them a reminder rather than a script and don't feel you have to use them all. If you really just sit and ask a long string of questions you will find that you have more of an interrogation on your hands than an interview.

Asking about violence in the relationship

When and how did you two first meet?

I assume that the relationship worked well at first — what do you think worked best about you two?

- What were the first signs of problems emerging?
- What issues did you argue over at first? And later?
- When did you first lay a hand on your partner in anger?
- Tell me about some other times when you've gone too far. Or when you haven't used the right methods to stand up for yourself.

- What are you like these days when you are angry? At your best and at your worst? Can you give me recent examples of each?

How do you get physical with your partner when arguing? Let's consider a particular time — if you could see a film of yourself during that argument, how would you look? If the curtains were open and I walked past your place when the argument was at its worst, what would I see? Did you pace around, shout, bang things, break things, stand close to her when shouting, etc. ?

- How long do arguments last? How do they end?
- How often do arguments like this happen?
- What do you feel is the worst thing you've done to your partner? What would your partner say is the worst thing?
- What is the most recent thing you've done?

Have you ever got her to do sexual things that retrospectively you think she was uncomfortable about? How did you get her to do that?

Tell me about your earlier relationships and in what ways they were similar to and different from this.

Have the police been called in the past? How many times?

Any social services involvement?

If the client is a parent –

Tell me a bit about each of your children.

- What makes you proud of them?
- What are the best times for you as a parent?
- What are the hardest times for you?
- How has the violence in your relationship affected your relationship with your children?
- What do you think they are aware of?
- What have you noticed about how the children are affected by the violence and abuse between the adults?
- Do you talk with your children about the violence and conflict in the family? What do you say? What would you want to say, if you could?
- Is there anyone else the children talk to about this? Who else is important to them?
- Did they see the violence? (If he says they were not in same room, ask where they were in the house.)
- How do you think seeing the violence affected the kids? If they weren't in the room, how would they have felt listening to what went on? Or seeing the after-effects? (Ask if there were injuries to their mother or damaged property. Would the children have seen this?)

- What do you think the effect of growing up seeing Dad hit/insult/shout at Mum is on the children?

Childhood

- What were things like between your parents or carers?
- Did you see or hear violence between them when you were a child?
- What was it like if they argued and fought?
- Did you ever get hurt yourself?
- Some people talk about being neglected or treated roughly as a child. Did anything like this happen to you?
- Who do you think was to blame for the violence?
- Did they ever get help ?
- Returning to your own relationship and taking action
- So you've been together X years and you've gone from [first bullying behaviour] to [worst bullying behaviour]. If the violence and abuse continued to escalate in the same manner, where would your relationship be another X years down the line?
- How do you want to be as a partner and father? Is it different from how you've been? In what way?
- How do you feel about coming in for more sessions?
- Have you tried doing a course before [on any subject]? If you didn't finish it or go regularly why was that?
- Have you ever said you'll change or won't do it again? Did you keep your word? What got in the way?

USE INVENTORIES

After a verbal interview we really recommend using inventories exploring the range and frequency of abusive behaviours. If your client is able to read and write then leave them with the inventories for ten minutes, then come back and glance over them, asking about anything that leaps out at you. We find that some people are much more willing to disclose difficult information in a questionnaire than face to face.

Not only is it impossible that you remember to ask about every form of abuse, but letting someone alone with a list and their thoughts allows them time to reflect away from the scrutiny of the worker. This seems in some cases to effect less image management and thus increase disclosure. The inventories are also useful for assessing 'two-way' violence in relationships.

Working with denial and minimisation at the assessment stage

The most common problem that workers face when attempting to address the issue of domestic violence is clients' unwillingness to speak openly about what has been happening. If we want to create the best conditions possible for disclosure, it is important to put ourselves into the clients' shoes and understand the factors which make people want to cover up or deny when a professional makes enquiries about their family.

FEAR OF CONSEQUENCES

The most obvious factor which contributes to denial is the client's fears about what the consequences will be if they do give a full account of what has been going on. Parents often say they covered up the abuse because they were afraid that their children would be taken away. They may fear that their family and community will find out what has happened and that they or their family will be ostracised or shamed. Perpetrators may additionally fear criminal prosecution, or losing their job. These are very powerful fears, and anyone who has them is likely to be very cautious about what they tell a professional.

While you cannot guarantee that these fears will not be realised, some may be highly exaggerated and unrealistic.

It is useful to guess at and explore worst fears - reassuring and minimising your client's worries where you can.

SHAME

Remember that when we start a conversation with someone about domestic abuse, we are asking a complete stranger to talk with us about some of the worst things they have ever done. In this kind of situation, some degree of justification, minimisation and externalisation of blame are normal. Most people will use these tactics when asked about something they feel badly about - they are a sign of inner conflict about the abuse, or at the very least of an awareness of social conventions. In light of this, the absence of any attempt to justify or minimise the abuse would probably be a worrying sign (indeed some research shows that those perpetrators who fail to deny their actions at the time of arrest are actually more likely to offend again).

Shame will make it less likely that a person will want to disclose what they have done and more likely that they will interpret you as being judgemental of them. People who feel bad about themselves are often hyper-alert to signs of criticism, so you'll need to manage how you show your own emotional reactions to hearing about abuse.

If you hear your client minimise their abuse or tell nasty stories about why the victim deserved it, therefore, take a breath and remember:

- You are gaining information about your client's world view, their thinking patterns, their insight into their abuse and their levels of hostility towards their partner.

- Dealing with denial, minimisation of the abuse, partner-blame and other justifications are the bread and butter of this work. Regard increased disclosure as a goal of the work, rather than a prerequisite.

MINIMISATION

Minimisation is when we make the abuse or its impact seem less serious, less pervasive or less recent. Professionals often hear that the violence only happened 'once or twice', 'We have arguments, like any couple', or that all that's happened are the few incidents that have made it onto public record.

While 'Tell me what happened' might be a useful opener, you'll quickly find that such open questions can lead you way off your agenda. We don't want to script you or suggest you say things that don't sound like 'your own voice', but we do advise that you choose the wording of questions carefully, depending on the kinds of response you're after. Your questions need to be open enough to get your client talking, but they need to be directive enough to maintain a focus on his or her behaviour - not about what their partner or anyone else did. Get used to asking, 'What did you do next?', and to repeating this in different ways until you've got the picture. This means using a style of interviewing you might associate more with the police when they are trying to piece together a detailed account of an incident.

To get a brief, simple idea of risk and to glean some information for future interventions, you will want to find out as far as possible about the first, the worst and the most recent incidents of violence. If you have more time you can track the spaces between in more detail afterwards.

You will want to form a clear picture of each incident, starting from when the argument began and running through the perpetrator's actions step by step up until the violence came to a stop. Get into details: Where were they - he and she and the children - when the argument began? At what point did they move from A to B? What was the abuser saying? On a scale of 1 to 10, how loudly? How and where did they first touch their partner? How hard? What did they do next? And so on.

You might find the process gets awkward or that your client gets defensive. If they do, then acknowledge and discuss the barriers to disclosure by saying something like:

I can see this is difficult to talk about — I am a relative stranger and this is clearly stuff that doesn't fit with how you want to be as a father and husband/partner. I guess you may want to reassure me that you're OK. Sometimes people assume that if they deny any problems I'll be reassured. Actually I am most reassured by a degree of disclosure and a willingness to work with me to change. When I feel I've reason to worry but am faced with blanket denial, I worry more.

Perhaps the most important approach, though, is to be neutrally persistent in order to get the detail and context of what happened. When you feel you have gone off track, gently guide your client back to the details of what happened:

Earlier on I asked how your partner got those injuries and I'm afraid I still don't have a clear picture of how. I know it's difficult to talk about but I'm going to take you back.

It can be helpful to switch into a present tense account to help the parent get back into the thoughts and feelings at the time:

So, you're both in the kitchen and you've just said.....and she's just said..... and then what do you do next?

When exploring the frequency and severity of abusive behaviour, try using scales - for instance:

On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being punching her as hard as you can) how hard did you punch her?

Ask for details of the words that the abuser used - ask for exactly what was said and how:

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is as loudly as you can possibly shout, how loudly were you shouting and what did you shout?

And a final tip, pitch your questions about the violence at higher levels than you would guess has been used - this makes it easier for your client to disclose the real level of violence:

Worker: So how many times did you hit her? Are we talking like an onslaught? 30 or 40 times?

Client: Good God no! It was only a couple of times.

Worker: Like four or five times?

Client: No, like three times.

Whereas if you simply ask, 'Did you hit her the once?', the answer is very likely just to be a yes.

PARTNER BLAME

It is almost inevitable that the person you are interviewing will try to pass blame for their actions over to their partner by telling you what she did to deserve it.

It's really tempting, when you hear a hostile allegation about the victim of the abuse, to want to jump to their defence. ('How much does she actually drink?', 'Maybe she wasn't kissing this other guy in that way?', etc.) Beware. Hold fast to the idea that violence is wrong even if one has an alcoholic, unfaithful, provocative or otherwise unpleasant partner. Given this, whether the allegations about his or her partner are true or not is irrelevant to your assessment of the risk the abuser poses. Don't even imply that it is relevant by spending effort arguing over such allegations. Work simply on this basis:

I don't know your partner or her side of things — but let's assume that she will continue to be exactly as she always has, and let's focus on how you've responded — and later we'll think about how you could respond differently in future.

There are also some speedy ways to avoid colluding without getting too drawn into the issue of who is to blame. The most obvious is reframing. For example:

Client: She was screaming hysterically at me.

Worker: So, she was really angry with you. What did you do next?

Where partner blame is pervasive, you might want to explicitly seek your client's consent to interrupt and shut it down.

Your partner isn't here. Nothing that you and I can do in this room is going to change her. The only person you can change is you. So let's think together about what you did and how you might have handled the situation differently. To keep you focused on that I am going to interrupt and bring you back to talking about yourself when you seem to be focusing a lot on your partner — is that OK?

Assessing risk

As the most powerful predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour, we need to gather as much information as possible about the pattern of abuse in current and previous relationships (if there has been domestic violence in another relationship, this is a strong indicator the violence is likely to reoccur). Look in detail at:

- frequency and severity of physical assault
- the frequency, intensity and duration of emotional/psychological abuse, jealous and isolating behaviour, 'coercive control'
- sexual abuse within the relationship
- harassment during periods of separation.

Both parents may have quite restrictive definitions of 'violence', so it can be very helpful to use checklists or a list of questions about specific abusive behaviours.

Other factors in the person's history

There is a range of other historical factors which research has shown to be predictive of more serious domestic violence and which therefore warrant investigation and consideration:

- developmental history - in particular a history of maltreatment in childhood, exposure to violence in childhood and significant conduct/adjustment problems as a child
- substance use problems
- mental health problems
- general aggression
- a history of the child maltreating children
- criminal history (non-violent)
- perpetrator's failure to protect the child by exposing them to domestic violence
- a history of abuse by extended family members
- unwillingness to accept the decisions of the victim and the courts
- a history of employment problems.

Dynamic or changeable factors

In your interviews you will also be able to make an assessment of the attitudes, beliefs and thinking patterns that underlie the person's behaviour. The sections in the manual on analysing incidents of abuse will help you to do this.

Does denial increase risk?

As we said previously, in the early stages of any kind of intervention, it is most likely that the suspected perpetrator will deny the seriousness of the concerns, blame their partner or other circumstances for whatever of their behaviour has become 'exposed' and often feel anger and outrage at you and at the system for exaggerating the risk they pose. Levels of disclosure will depend significantly on how the parent calculates the costs and benefits of coming clean at any given time.

Our advice is to make an assessment of risk based primarily on the information from other sources - especially about historical factors - whilst remaining aware that reduction in denial and an increase in motivation to change are targets of intervention more than they are significant risk prediction factors. As such, they are unlikely to be present at the outset.

Making clear statements about risk

Statements about risk need to be clear, closely specified and based on what you know (ideally from multiple sources) about the person's previous behaviour. A risk statement should include an estimation of:

1. the likelihood ...

e.g. unlikely to occur, may occur, is likely to occur, is very likely to occur

2. of what kind of harm ...

e.g. emotional abuse, physical violence

3. to whom ...

the adult partner? the children?

4. at what level of frequency and severity ...

this estimate will be largely based on the kind of abuse the perpetrator has used in the past, but will also take into account potential escalation.

5. within what timescale ...

imminent risk? ongoing risk if nothing changes?

6. and in what context?

© Chris Newman and Kate Iwi 2017

when the couple are living together/apart? at time of threat to the relationship? at contact handover? if he finds out where she lives?