

Considerations for workers when supporting anyone who has experienced or is experiencing domestic abuse

Never forget !! –

YOU might be the first person that they have told –
and *YOU* might be the one that makes a difference !

Each person is the expert on their life; respect their choices

You will see common themes and patterns, but each person's experience is unique. The direction they take must be defined by them (unless there are safeguarding issues). They can make decisions that worry you, like staying with or returning to an abusive partner. You may not agree with everything they say or do but this is their life.

Safety is the priority

A crucial first step in any intervention is to think about the likelihood of on-going or escalating harm. Inquests held to examine intimate partner homicides often conclude that the victim suspected the partner or ex-partner had the potential to kill them. Take fears seriously; their life may be in danger. Some studies suggest that their own sense of risk is distorted by chronic victimisation or to hope for the best. They may need an outside perspective to grasp the gravity of the situation or may readily recognise the danger and want your help.

Seek to understand each person individually

Before starting to deliver your service, check if yours is the service they want. Don't assume abuse is the only problem in their life. Let them know they are not alone. Their needs may encompass a variety of issues including health concerns, mental health issues, need for legal advice, housing, or any of a dozen other areas. Help them tell you what they need and be prepared to refer elsewhere if necessary. Remember some victims may have also been exposed to additional issues such as racism, language and/or cultural barriers.

Be aware of the power imbalance between the helper and the helped

Abuse is the misuse of power. Explain what you can do and also what you can't do to help. Clarify limits on your services, clarify your promise of confidentiality, emphasise that your assistance is optional and they can opt out. Proceed at their pace. They should be an active participant not a passive recipient.

Don't give advice; help identify and assess choices

Giving advice is essentially telling them what to do. Giving advice also accentuates the power imbalance between you (the expert) and them. They may have choices and options of which they are not yet aware. Or they may need help assessing the pros and cons of the available options. Help them have enough information to choose.

Be aware of messages hidden in well-meaning words

Having good intentions doesn't guarantee our words and actions are helpful. "Why didn't you leave?" The victim may interpret this in many different ways - they could feel judged; they could feel blamed for being a victim; the victim must leave home, not the person who makes the relationship intolerable. They can feel alone and misunderstood; the worker doesn't know how difficult leaving is, how many factors they had to take into consideration, how much they still question themselves. Well-meaning words can create distance, convey judgement, prevent rapport building and exaggerate the power differential between the two of you.

Listen more than talk

As helpers, we want to offer insight, solutions or helpful suggestions, so it can be difficult to stay quiet. Good listening also sends a powerful statement that they are worthy of your time and attention, you are interested in their situation, and someone understands without judgment. Your reactions during the conversation will determine how comfortable they will be telling someone else in the future or actually doing something about the abuse and/or changes needed.

Ensure privacy

Look around to check and ensure you have privacy. Always remember to check for any open windows.

Monitor body language and facial expressions

They may be checking your physical reactions for clues. Do you believe them? Are they shocking or disgusting you?

Talking or thinking about past traumas may trigger feelings of fear and helplessness as though re-living those events. Watch out for signs of distress or evidence they are overwhelmed by emotions. Talking through past painful events can be cathartic and liberating. But be prepared to encourage them also to talk about the present and the future (depending on support offered).

When appropriate, convey these concepts; “what happened was not your fault”, “I’m glad you felt comfortable telling someone what happened”, “you are not alone in having these experiences or in feeling this way”.

Clarify the next steps

Before they leave, outline what happens next or ascertain what they expect from you. If you will be telling others what they said, such as colleagues at your agency, let them know. Always ‘do’ what you say you are going to do. Always keep them informed.

Look after yourself after the discussion

Be prepared for the emotional reaction you may feel when hearing the disclosures. Their stories may leave you feeling sad, angry, or shocked. While these feelings are normal, it is not helpful to share your reactions with them. When needing to process your response to abuse disclosures find a supportive colleague or seek out the guidance of your supervisor.

DO NOT

- Remain silent for too long – use open questions
- Offer pity (e.g., “Oh, you poor thing”) or insincere concern
- Dwell on the negative – pick out the positives (they have left or they have asked for help, they can make changes)
- Interrupt
- Talk about yourself or your own experiences of abuse
- Try to solve all their problems
- Pressurise them into agreeing actions
- Offer to pass messages on to a perpetrator
- Withdraw support if they want to stay with the perpetrator – find agencies who can
- Give the impression that you know everything there is to know on the subject.

NEVER

Never promise things will be better when they leave.

The leave/stay decision is usually the hardest one. Before things get better, they may face many difficult days and lots of changes and uncertainty. A victim might experience a reduction in standard of living, need to move residences (disrupting the children's lives), suffer loneliness and self-doubt, be ostracised by former friends, or suffer harsh criticism from the perpetrator or their family. Perhaps it will be "worth it" in the end, but this is the hardest time – now.

Never tell them the perpetrator may change.

Victims may hold out hope that counselling or programmes will make them change - if only they would "talk to someone" or "get help." Help the victim understand that they can't change the perpetrator. There is no absolute guarantee they will be safe from abuse. A perpetrator's attendance on a programme can be a positive step for the family and is something to be encouraged, but help victims to have realistic expectations about the outcome.

Never say how the children will feel about the separation

It's true that the children are better off if not living with abuse. But their support for a separation is not guaranteed. Children can love the abusing parent. Children can blame the victim or the abuser. The emotional and behavioural problems of children can flare up or be exacerbated in the weeks and months after separation. Some children desperately want a separation and some live in fear of it. Two children in the same family may have completely different views. You can never predict how children will react or how the contact arrangements will be sorted. Every case is different.

Never force them to involve the justice system and never predict the outcome

There are pros and cons to involving the police and/or the courts, which you can explain to them. Be realistic about the benefits and honest about all possible consequences.

One final thought - be kind

One outcome above all the rest is clear to us – victims/survivors 'can' grow and thrive once free from abuse and fear. The compassionate support of the helpers along the way helps them in their journey. Listen with respect and without judgment, give them choices and provide hope that better days lie ahead.