



CONVERSATION GUIDE:

STARTING THE DISCUSSION ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

WHY TALK ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Since over half of women living with HIV have experienced domestic violence (DV),¹ it is important for HIV/AIDS providers to recognize and respond to the needs of survivors of domestic violence. Many service providers avoid or are hesitant to ask individuals if they are experiencing violence in their current or former relationship and it is common for providers to feel unsure about how to begin. However, it is important for providers to address any uneasy feelings they have about asking these questions and provide support to all individuals accessing services. Service providers can provide pivotal resources by starting a discussion about domestic violence, giving every person the opportunity to talk about violence in a supportive setting.

WHO & HOW TO TALK ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Every service provider can make DV informational materials readily available and visible in their offices. By displaying information about domestic violence, every individual accessing services has the opportunity to read through information about the issue independently. Having information that's visible also tells individuals accessing services that domestic violence is an issue that is open for discussion at this organization.

Service providers can consider asking questions about domestic violence with *all* service participants and should be intentional about the way that the questions are presented. Rather than rattling off a list of questions, service providers should make the process conversational and view it as an opportunity to get to know the service participant as an individual and identify how to best meet their needs.

Everyone should be informed as to why they are being asked these questions, what will happen to the information, and that they have the right to refuse to disclose any information. Do not limit these questions only to women - remember that domestic violence occurs in all types of relationships.

Domestic violence may carry with it shame, guilt, and embarrassment. A survivor may not trust you enough to answer the questions directly and may minimize or deny what is



happening. It is important to let each service participant know that if they ever experience domestic violence that you are open to discussing it. If you have the opportunity to meet with an individual more than once, there may be an opportunity to ask some questions again. If so, it is important to explain to the service participant that you often revisit questions about violence since individuals experiencing abuse or violence may not always feel comfortable talking about what is happening and that a person's relationship status may change.

Remember that some cultures are less comfortable than others discussing topics such as violence, sex, sexual behavior, etc. In these situations, advocates and counselors should remain culturally sensitive and find less direct questions to open these topics up for discussion with every service participant.

EXAMPLE DISCUSSION STARTER:

"One of the things we know is that many people are involved in relationships that are abusive or controlling or even violent. There is a connection between a violent relationship and the risk of HIV infection. The fear of violence can hinder risk reduction attempts, so we ask everyone some questions about their relationships."

GENERAL GUIDELINES:

- Make the conversations about domestic violence a routine part of history or intake process for **all** service participants.
- When asking the questions about violence, normalize the process and let the individual know that these questions are asked to everyone as a way to provide any and all needed supports.
- Be straightforward and ask direct questions. Avoid asking "Why..."
- Begin with general relationship questions that may elicit red flags of domestic violence (see HITS tool below)
- If you sense that there is domestic violence, move to more specific questions based on responses (see 'Additional Questions' below).
- Ensure that questions are being asked in a private, confidential setting. Partners should not be present and state that this is a standard practice for the provider if there is any pushback.
- Clarify your role with the service participant, how it fits in with the process of discussing domestic violence, and what you can do to support an individual who is experiencing violence.



Positively Safe:

THE INTERSECTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & HIV/AIDS

- Have a written and verbal explanation of confidentiality about domestic violence disclosure and make it accessible to the service participant.
- Be respectful and nonjudgmental. This will create an environment of safety and trust.
- Avoid using terms such as domestic violence, victim, abuser, batterer – the individual might have preconceived notions about what this means and reject that they might be in an abusive relationship without further reviewing the behaviors of their partner or former partner.
- Be aware of your own personal assumptions, biases, and prejudices about the individual and identify how that might impact the way you screen individuals from various cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds.
- Honor the autonomy of the individual, their expertise in their own life, and their agency to make the best decisions for them at that time.
- Validate the individual's feelings and experience (e.g. "*No one deserves to be abused,*" "*I believe you*").
- Use gender-neutral language when referencing an abusive partner and when asking about or discussing domestic violence.
- Discuss their safety and validate this need (e.g. "*I am afraid for your safety and the safety of your children,*" "*What do you need to increase your safety at this point in time?*").
 - Consider starting a discussion about **Safety Planning**, referencing the resource found in the *Positively Safe Toolkit*.
- Recognize that there is a cumulative effect of experiencing violence over a long period of time and that many tactics can be used in an abusive relationship.
 - You can reference the **Power and Control Wheel** and/or the **HIV/AIDS Power and Control Wheel** as tool to discuss various tactics of abuse, found in the *Positively Safe Toolkit*.
- Ask if a referral for services would be helpful at this time. Offer to provide them information for future reference.
- Discuss options for services and supports that they may consider now or in the future.
- Consider that they may have an ex-partner with whom they are still in contact, so try to use 'partner' and 'ex-partner' in the questions to bring both possibilities into the conversation.



WHEN TO TALK ABOUT DV?

- At intake/pre-test counseling
- During a risk assessment
- While discussing the individual's sexual and drug use history
- Whenever partners are discussed
- During a discussion of how they may react to a HIV+ test result
- During safer sex discussions
- During a discussion on disclosure
- At post-test counseling

HITS: UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

HITS is a tool to help HIV/AIDS providers understand what domestic violence is and how to support individuals who may reveal some 'red flags,' indicating DV. Some indicators of an abusive relationship are:

H – Hit, Humiliated, Harassed
I – Isolated, Intimidated, Injured (physically/emotionally)
T – Terrorized, Taken (money/belongings/children from them)
S – Sexually assaulted, Stalked

USING HITS AS A CONVERSATION GUIDE

Begin with general relationship questions that might elicit signs of violence. Here are some examples:

- Does your partner support and respect your decisions?
- Has your partner ever tried to prevent you from seeing family or friends?
- How do you and your partner handle problems and conflict?
- What happens when you and your partner disagree?
- How do serious disagreements affect your relationship?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR A CONVERSATION:

- Do you feel controlled and/or isolated by your partner?
- Has your partner ever threatened you or your children?
- Has your partner ever humiliated or ridiculed you? In what ways?
- Has your partner ever destroyed your property? In what context?
- Does your partner have access to weapons? Do you feel threatened by this?
- Are your children afraid of your partner? Why?
- Has your partner ever forced you into sexual situations against your will?



If you are meeting with an individual who came with their partner and feel there is controlling behavior or safety concerns, you will have to decide what to do in each situation, understanding that your actions may jeopardize the victim's safety when the couple leaves.

HOW TO RESPOND TO A DISCLOSURE

If domestic violence is disclosed, remember that the information obtained about the relationship might need to be discussed again during test results, if testing is done, and as part of risk reduction.

If domestic violence is disclosed and it seems appropriate to offer a referral, the provider could say:

“Given everything we have talked about, I have concerns about your safety—in the relationship. There is a program in the community called _____ and we have a great partnership with them. I know they could help you. Would you be interested in talking with them?”

- If they answer yes: “Then let me tell you about their services and give you this brochure. If you want, you can call them from here or I could call and put you on the phone. Whatever you want—you might want to think about this more. This is up to you. OK?”
- If they answer no: Be sure to reassure the individual that there are resources and support available to them if they ever need them.

ⁱ Machtinger, 2012; Black, 2011