

Screening Questions for Possible Victims of Domestic Violence

While inquiring about abuse may seem difficult at first, recognizing that it is important, legitimate and potentially lifesaving to ask for help clinicians overcome their initial hesitations and become comfortable addressing domestic violence with their patients. Clinicians can help decrease a woman's potential discomfort by framing questions in ways that let her know that she is not alone, that the provider takes this issue seriously, is comfortable hearing about abuse, and that help is available. With practice, each clinician will develop his or her own style of asking questions about abuse.

- 1. Framing Questions.** Sometimes it feels awkward to suddenly introduce the subject of abuse, particularly if there are no obvious indications a woman is being abused. The following are examples of ways provider can introduce the issue:
 - “We now know domestic violence is a very common problem. About 25% of women in this country are abused by their partners. Has that ever happened to you?”
 - “Because violence is common in women's lives, I now ask every woman in my practice about domestic violence.”
 - “I don't know if this is a problem for you, but many of the women I see as patients are dealing with abusive relationships. Some are too afraid or uncomfortable to bring it up themselves, so I've started asking about it routinely.”
 - “Some women think they deserve abuse because they have not lived up to their partners' expectations, but no matter what someone has or hasn't done, no one deserves to be beaten. Have you ever been hit or threatened because of something you did or didn't do?”
 - “Because so many women I see in my practice are involved with someone who hits them; threatens them; continually puts them down; or tries to control them; I now ask all my patients about abuse.”
 - “Lots of the lesbians and gay men we see here are hurt by their partners. Does your partner ever try to hurt you?”
- 2. Direct Questions.** However one initially raises the issue of domestic violence, it is important to include direct and specific questions:
 - Did someone hit you? Who was it? Was it you partner/husband?
 - Has your partner or ex-partner ever hit you or physically hurt you? Has he ever threatened to hurt you or someone close to you?
 - I'm concerned that your symptoms may have been caused by someone hurting you. Has someone been hurting you?
 - Does your partner ever try to control you by threatening to hurt you or your family?
 - Has your partner ever forced you to have sex when you didn't want to? Has he ever refused to practice safe sex?
 - Has he/she tried to restrict your freedom or keep you from doing things that were important to you (like going to school, working, seeing your friends or family)?
 - Does your partner frequently belittle you, insult you and blame you?



- Do you feel controlled or isolated by your partner?
- Do you ever feel afraid of you partner? Do you feel you are in danger? Is it safe for you to go home?
- Is your partner jealous? Does he frequently accuse of you of infidelity?

3. Indirect Questions. In some clinical settings, it may be appropriate to start the inquiry with an indirect question before proceeding to more direct questions. The following are examples of the approach.

- Have you been under stress lately? Are you having any problems with your partner? Do you ever argue or fight? Do the fights ever become physical? Are you ever afraid? Have you ever gotten hurt?
- You seem to be concerned about you partner. Can you tell me more about that? Does he ever act in ways that frighten you?
- You mentioned that your partner loses his temper with the children. Can you tell me more about that? Has he ever hit or threatened to physically harm you or the children?
- How are things going in your relationship/marriage? All couples argue sometimes. Are you having fights? Do you fight physically?
- You mentioned that your partner uses alcohol. How does he act when he is intoxicated? Does his behavior ever frighten you? Does he ever become violent?
- Like all couples, gay couples have various ways of resolving their conflicts. How do you and your partner deal with conflicts? What happens when you disagree? What happens when you partner doesn't get his way?

If A Woman Does Not Acknowledge Abuse: If a patient says that abuse is not occurring, but the clinician is still concerned about abuse, there remain a variety of issues that may be discussed. Let her know your concerns. Sometimes a patient may listen silently, without overtly acknowledging what is being said. In this case it is still helpful to offer some information about abuse. Make sure to provide the woman with a referral sheet of phone numbers. Encourage her to return if she has any problems in the future and/or to contact any of the resources that have been provided.

Source: *Family Violence Prevention Fund*

