

Tip Sheet for Health Professionals

Working with men who use violence or abuse in their relationships



Family violence is any abusive behaviour in a family or intimate relationship where one person attempts to gain and maintain control over another.

Family violence can take many forms including physical violence, sexual assault, emotional abuse, and social or financial control. It is important to remember abuse does not have to be physical or sexual to be considered family violence.

Violence is a criminal offence, and other forms of abuse and control can be similarly viewed as illegal activities. In your professional role and contact with the perpetrator, it is absolutely critical that you at no time accept any reasons for the existence and continuance of family violence and abuse.

How will you recognise family violence or abuse is taking place?

- They may tell you outright
- They may be referred to you formally (through a court process) for assessment and management of their violence and abuse or referred to you by a colleague for the management of family issues
- You may become aware directly or indirectly by their presentation, or through other family members seeking your assistance or presenting with persistent injuries
- The violence and abuse may come to light through your contact with them.

Issues that can point to family violence and abuse are:

- Fighting with their partner or family member regularly as a means of resolving issues
- Unwarranted jealousy or possessiveness
- Overt threats to harm their partner or family member
- Controlling all aspects of family life (e.g. finances, social contact, work arrangements)
- Stalking and overly monitoring behaviour
- Treating their partner in a derogative and dismissive manner.

These behaviours need an active enquiry on your part to determine whether there is violent and abusive behaviour in the relationship and the full nature and extent of the problem.

Reactions

It is common for perpetrators of family violence and abuse to fail to acknowledge or take responsibility for their actions when first confronted by their behaviour. Typical comments can be:

- **Denying** – 'I wasn't being abusive'
- **Minimising** – 'I only pushed them, they weren't hurt'
- **Justifying** – 'If they stopped annoying me, I wouldn't have had to do it'
- **Blaming** – 'It's not my fault, I'm under a lot of pressure at work at the moment'
- **Deflecting** – 'I didn't know what I was doing, I was drunk'
- **Avoiding** – 'I don't know why I hit themr'

Safety

Immediately consider the safety and potential risk to everyone – including other members of the family. This is essential where there are elements of physical violence, abuse or neglect.

Reporting requirements for domestic violence differ across states. You may be obligated to immediately take action by formally reporting your concerns to the relevant authority. You can clarify your immediate responsibilities through contact with your professional association or local police.

Where the issue of safety is not clear or unresolved, you must meet your professional obligations by acting to ensure that all parties are safe or will be made safe.

Where ensuring safety is not possible through your actions alone, you must follow any reporting requirements inherent in your professional registration obligations and/or articulated through your professional body. It can also be useful to consult with a colleague or professional supervisor outlining the situation and their recommendations for managing the issue of safety and ongoing professional contact with the person.

Important things you can do from the outset

Your approach and manner, particularly in spending the time to discuss and understand the situation, provides many opportunities to start addressing the behaviour.

Actively ensure that everyone is safe or can be made safe

This is usually done through reporting the violence or abuse to the relevant authorities.

Do not assume this is not your concern. By being made aware of the situation you now have a responsibility to ensure that relevant authorities are notified and other necessary reporting is undertaken.

Create awareness and understanding by exploring these areas:

- Do they see these behaviours as a problem?
- Why have they come to see you now?
- What do they need from you?
- What needs to happen for things to be different?
- What do they stand to lose or gain through addressing this behaviour in their intimate relationship?
- How is it affecting their other relationships?
- What have they done about it in the past?
- What has improved the situation or made things worse?

Consider alternatives to manage the situation

Do you have the skills and experience needed? It may be more appropriate to refer the person to a specialist practitioner or service and ensure that they attend.

Alternatively, you could form a coordinated management plan with other professionals to provide a network to assist the person and support the family to address these issues. Managing family abuse and violence through a group approach lessens the responsibility of one professional, provides support to those providing treatment and allows for regular consultation on progress and impediments.

Educate and empower

Talk about responsibilities and obligations by all parties in relationships, and the rights that individuals have that are the conventions of society or are protected by law. Make it clear that no matter what has happened to them in the past, they have choices as to how they behave and exercise their responsibilities in their relationships.

Assist in developing strategies

While ensuring safety, it may be that the solution does not involve immediate action but a more gradual and monitored approach to addressing the behaviour in the relationship.

Be realistic

Understand that the person may not have the insight, motivation or life-skills to be able to address the situation on their own. Your initial focus may be assessing these factors and whether you can work with them to constructively address the situation while ensuring the safety of others.

MensLine Australia is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with professional counsellors providing information and support for all relationship issues. Call us on **1300 78 99 78** or visit **mensline.org.au**.