

Working with men experiencing abuse in their relationship

People in varied professional roles, but most often in the health or counselling professions, are those most likely to be sought out by men experiencing violence or abuse in their intimate relationship. For these men, their experience of this behaviour in their intimate relationship can be complex, confusing and difficult to understand.

Their options to address this part of their lives can at first seem limited, particularly when the behaviour has been longstanding or where there are others involved such as children or other family members. Men in this situation may perceive their problems as caused by weakness or not being able to stand up for themselves – which is not the case – and may be hesitant about trusting someone else with their problem. But often these men do approach someone they trust or have an existing professional relationship with to ‘sound them out’. Alternatively, you might already have some concerns that they are experiencing violence or abuse in their relationship.

Whatever the starting point of your conversation, you can play an important part in assisting men experiencing violence or abuse in their intimate relationship and start the process with them of addressing and resolving their situation.

Your role will be critical in:

- Recognising and understanding that abuse is occurring and is unacceptable
- Ensuring that they are safe and that the abuse and violence cease
- Providing opportunities to look at short and long-term solutions
- Identifying other services, resources and expert advice that they can use

- Guiding and supporting their recovery and exploring strategies for managing their relationships.

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

Violence and abuse in an intimate relationship can occur without the use or threat of personal violence, although these are usually the most obvious signs. Violence and abuse can take many forms, but the most common include overt physical violence and threats, emotional abuse, social and financial control, and persistent, demeaning comments.

How to identify a history of violence and abuse has taken place

The man may:

- Tell you outright
- Show signs of a history of unexplained violence or injury
- Refuse to discuss aspects of his relationship, despite obvious signs something is amiss
- Have been referred to you for general or unspecified relationship issues
- Suggest in conversation that there is something worrying in his intimate relationship.

You should use this opportunity to explore more about the quality and nature of this relationship, often by asking direct questions and showing concern for their wellbeing. Start by asking general questions and, if you remain concerned about the possibility of abuse or violence, you can focus on specific issues such as:

- Do you feel safe in your current relationship?
- Are you insulted, demeaned or criticised in public by your partner?

- Is living with your partner like 'walking on eggshells'?
- Does your partner prevent you from doing things that are important to you? E.g. seeing family or friends.
- Does your partner threaten you?
- Do you feel like you are in an abusive relationship?
- Do you feel that you are being unreasonably controlled by the other person?
- Are your partner's needs the only ones allowed to be met in the relationship?

Safety

Immediately consider the safety and potential risk to the man or other members of his family. Managing risk is essential where there are elements of physical violence, abuse or neglect.

Where the issue of safety is not clear or not resolved, you must meet your professional obligations by acting to ensure that all parties are safe or will be made safe. If this is not possible through your actions alone, you must follow any reporting requirements inherent in your registration obligations and/or articulated through your professional body.

Consider consulting with a colleague or professional supervisor outlining the situation and their recommendations for managing the issue of safety and ongoing professional contact with the man.

Important things you can do from the outset

Create awareness and understanding and explore:

- Why have they come to see you now?
- What would they like you to do?
- Do they see these behaviours as a problem?
- What does the man 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?
- What needs to happen for things to be different?

Ensure that this is not another issue

Outside observers can often mistake a poor functioning, unhappy or unequal intimate relationship for one where there are elements of violence or abuse. Is the issue more about the general quality of the relationship in the absence of firm evidence showing violent or abusive behaviours? If so, the focus of your contact will be more about options, strategies and referrals for addressing these relationship issues.

Validate and support

Be clear that it is not uncommon for men to experience domestic violence, they are not alone, and they are not responsible for the abuse.

Educate and empower

Talk about responsibilities and obligations by all parties in a relationship and the rights that individuals have by the conventions of society and by law. No matter what has happened to them in the past, they have choices as to how they react in a responsible manner to this behaviour and how they exercise their rights in their relationships.

Assist in developing strategies

This may involve a gradual and monitored approach to address the behaviour in the relationship rather than immediate action. Otherwise, additional expert advice by referral to a family relationships specialist or a consultant more experienced in addressing matters of abuse in intimate relationships may be appropriate – and you can assist and encourage the man to prepare for a further discussion with another professional.

Be realistic

Initially, the man may only have the strength and capacity to move slowly in addressing a long-standing and debilitating situation. You may focus on rebuilding their ability to manage and make decisions about their options in their relationship and their realistic long-term goal. Where possible and safe, it may be important to ensure the man gains a better understanding of the implications of any decisions he makes about his relationship – fundamentally, whether he will remain or leave – and the issues that flow from these major life decisions.

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.