HOW DO WE ASK THOSE “STICKY” QUESTIONS?

Advocates and other providers are sometimes reluctant to ask about certain issues, lest they offend the people who come to them for help. Substance abuse may feel like a particularly touchy topic – especially if activities such as sex trafficking or illegal drug use are involved. Asking about mental health concerns or suicide risk may also feel tricky, and providers may fear risking legal problems if they ask about disability issues.

However, advocates may miss countless intervention opportunities if they are afraid to ask the important questions (Bland, 2001). And asking the right questions can even be life-saving. For example, advocates should always assess for suicide risk or potential for other self-harm (Pease, 2010).

The intervention is in the asking (Bland, 2001). Fortunately, there are respectful ways to raise sticky issues. Please note: These questions should NEVER be part of the initial screening process. Only ask these questions AFTER the decision has been made to admit a person into your program.

Regarding substance abuse, Cindy Obtinario, a chemical dependency/domestic violence specialist with New Beginnings in Seattle, WA, says: “The way we frame this questioning process is, ‘We are asking for this information not to screen you out, but to help support you in seeking safety, and to be able to give you the best referrals possible’” (Obtinario, 2010).

Individuals may find it easier to talk about stress in their relationships or their partner’s substance use or mental health before talking about domestic violence, sexual assault, their own substance use, mental health concerns or other personal issues. Asking open-ended questions can be helpful:

“What has worked well for you and what has given you problems?”

“Many people tell me a little alcohol helps take the edge off stress. How often has this worked for you?”

As another example, Farley (2003) stresses the need for questions regarding a history of exploitation by the sex industry. Unless screening questions such as these are asked, she says, this type of victimization will remain invisible. Questions she suggests include:

“Have you ever exchanged sex for money or clothes, food, housing, or drugs?”

“Have you ever worked in the commercial sex industry: for example, dancing, escort, massage, prostitution, pornography, phone sex?”
While asking people with disabilities a question such as “Do you have special needs we should be aware of?” may feel disempowering, a more general question would be appropriate to ask anyone seeking services, whether they have a disability or not (Leal-Covey, 2011). Examples of general questions would include:

“Would you let me know if you need anything?”

“Please feel comfortable asking if you need anything.”

If the individual has been a target for oppression due to misconceptions about race, culture, sexual orientation, disability or other status, consider how these other oppressions impact the experience of trauma and access to services. Also consider how the individual’s cultural background may have been a source of support. Questions suggested by Ferencik & Ramirez-Hammond (2011) include:

“What has worked for you in the past?”

“What has helped you within your culture and family of origin?”

Here are some additional examples of questions you can ask to better accommodate individuals participating in your program.

**Sample framing questions about abuse:**

“Women often report feeling stress in their relationship. How does your partner show disapproval?”

“Please describe any threats made by your partner. (How often? When was the last time? Were you afraid? Were you hurt? Can you tell me what happened?)”

**Sample framing statements:**

“Domestic violence and sexual assault are major problems for women. Because abuse is such a common experience for women, I ask everyone I see whether they feel safe.”

“Women in treatment often tell me their partners complain about their using. How does your partner show disapproval?”

**Sample indirect questions:**

“You mentioned your partner loses his temper with the kids. Can you tell me more about that? Have you ever felt afraid for yourself or your children? Can you tell me more about that?”
“All couples argue sometimes. Does your partner’s physical or sexual behavior ever frighten you?”

**Sample questions if partner is user or abuser:**

“Many women tell me their partners don’t want to drink/drug/smoke alone. How often do you find yourself using when you don’t really want to?”

“When a partner spends family money on drug use, it is a form of economic abuse. Has your partner ever used food or rent money to drink or score drugs?”

**Sample framing questions for substance abuse:**

“Women I see often tell me they feel stress. There are several ways to deal with stress. What works best for you?”

“Many women tell me they try to sleep more, eat better or shop for baby things. Have you tried any of those ways of coping?”

“Many women also tell me the best way to cope is to smoke a cigarette, have a drink or take something else. How often has that worked for you? Do you find it is still working?”

“Being involved in a court case/custody dispute can be stressful. Your partner may attempt to undermine you/your parenting skills. Can you identify any reasons why drinking or using drugs right now could be harmful to your case? Can you share with me what your partner might say about your drinking or drug use?”

Remember to ask direct questions tactfully and respectfully! These questions may help advocates and other providers identify accommodation needs for individuals using services. Answers to these questions are NOT used to screen people out. They are provided to help survivors address safety or health risks stemming from multiple abuse issues.

While advocates and other providers may hesitate to ask “taboo” questions because they fear giving offense, for many people seeking help, these same questions can send a positive message:

“**It’s safe to talk about this issue here.**”

When people are respectfully asked about substance use, mental health concerns and other issues that may impact their safety, they hear your message, even if they are not ready to enact change immediately. Often individuals will later share comments such as, “You know, when you said ____, it really made sense to me” (Bland, 2001).
References


