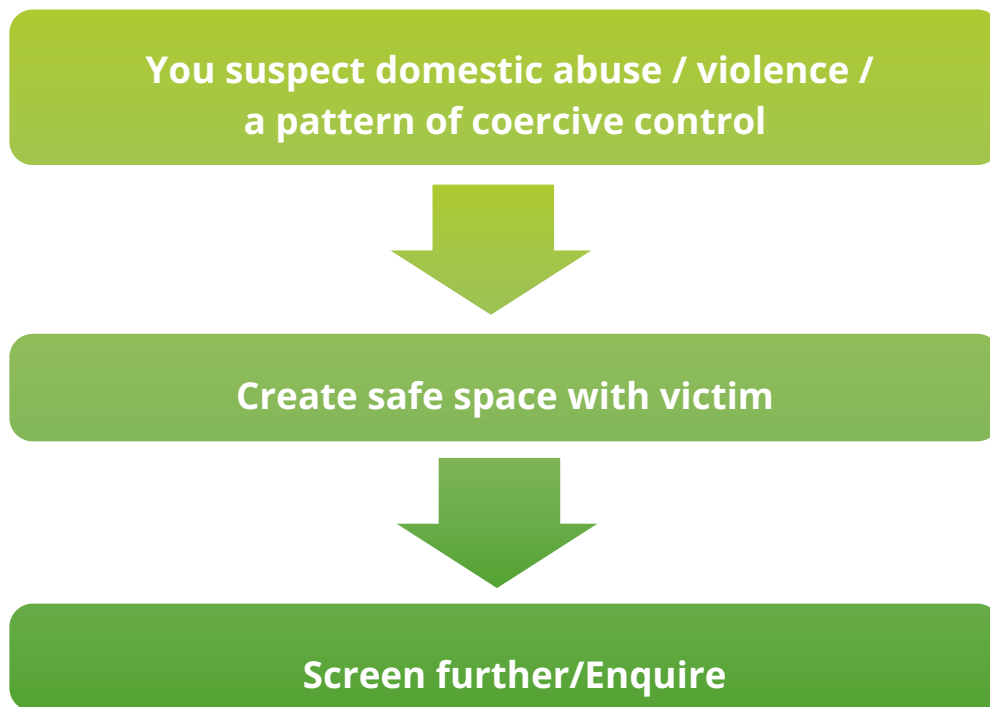


Practice Tool 12

What to do if you suspect domestic abuse or a pattern of coercive control*



Screening: How to ask the question

In a clinical setting, or if you don't have an ongoing professional relationship with the person (i.e. adult at risk of abuse), the following approaches could help:

- Enable the disclosure: create a supportive environment, e.g., display Domestic Abuse/Violence posters, information leaflets, helpline phone numbers etc.
- Only ask about domestic abuse if the person is on his/her own, to ensure safety
- Frame the question: "As domestic abuse is such a widespread issue nowadays, we ask everyone who comes into our service about it"
- Be direct: "Are you afraid of your partner? Is it safe for you at home?"
- Offer domestic abuse support information: whether or not abuse is disclosed, and if it isn't, keep an open-door policy - "I'm here if you want some more information"

*For the purposes of this tool the term domestic abuse is taken to include all forms of domestic abuse/violence or pattern of coercive control.

What to do if you suspect domestic abuse or a pattern of coercive control

If you have concerns about someone you know, a patient or a client, the following could help:

- Your response can make a big difference, and though it may be hard to avoid telling someone what to do, it is best practice to let him/her know that you believe them, don't blame him/her, and aren't going to minimise their experiences. People experiencing abuse often feel powerless – their voice isn't heard, their opinions aren't respected, and the ability to make choices for themselves is compromised by fear, threats or violence
- Find a safe time and place to talk, if you are the one approaching the person about the issue. You might want to start with "I've noticed, or I saw/heard"
- Respect his/her decision if they do not want to talk, but let them know that you are there for them if they do. Many people experiencing domestic abuse can feel ashamed
- If and when he/she does talk, it is important to let them know that you believe them. Many abusers can be charming and use friendships and family friendships to further isolate their victims.
- Ask how he/she is coping and how the behaviour has been affecting them and if they have any children/grandchildren living with them
- If he/she has children/grandchildren, you may want to ask how the behaviour is affecting them. Domestic abuse is the emotional abuse of children, whether they are the direct targets of the abuse or not.
- Focus on the safety of the person, and if there are children in the situation, their safety. If you have a concern that a child is at risk of harm, a referral to Tusla is required. <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/report-a-concern/>
- Let the person know that the abuse/violence is not their fault, and there is help and support they can access.

Screening/Further Tips for making a safe enquiry

Ensure confidentiality and safety by making sure you:

- Are alone with the person
- Can't be interrupted and have sufficient time
- Only use professional interpreters
- Consider the requirement for advocacy support
- Record the person's response (but not anywhere that the perpetrator may have access to)
- Explain the limits of confidentiality

Give opportunities to disclose by explaining your reasons for enquiring into domestic abuse, for example:

- Explaining it is common and lots of people experience it, so it's normal for you to be asking
- Explaining it's not just about physical violence, and is underpinned by controlling and coercive behaviour.

Ask direct questions, for example:

- Has anyone close to you made you feel frightened?
- Does anyone close to you bully you, control you or force you to do things?
- Has anyone close to you ever hurt you physically (hit, pushed, choked you?)
- Has anyone prevented you from getting food, clothes, medication, glasses, hearing aids or medical care?
- Has anyone prevented you from being with people you want to be with?
- Has anyone forced you to sign papers against your will?
- Has anyone talked to you in a way that made you feel ashamed or threatened?
- Has anyone taken money belonging to you?

What to do if you suspect domestic abuse or a pattern of coercive control

Assess Immediate Risk: Assessing different levels of risk allows workers to develop appropriately targeted interventions



Five key questions, which are helpful to assessing immediate risk:	Key Messages in Relation to Domestic-Violence Risk
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the abuser have access to weapons, or has s/he threatened to use weapons? 2. Has the victim ever been hospitalised or injured by the abuser? 3. Have there been previous or are there current threats to kill (e.g. the victim, self, child, pet)? 4. Has there been extreme physical abuse, e.g. choking? 5. Has there been previous or is there current stalking behaviour, e.g. possessiveness/control? 	<p>Change in Risk: Any escalation in the frequency or severity of violence (this requires immediate action by a health- or social-care professional)</p> <p>Power and Control: Extreme possessiveness, jealousy or obsession with partner</p> <p>History of Violence: Profile of abuser, criminality, threat of suicide, previous relationship abuse</p> <p>Context: Pregnancy, new baby or recent separation</p>

Intervention: Safety Planning



Staying Safe while living with your partner	Staying Safe while you are preparing to leave
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If in immediate danger – get out. Think about escape routes • If you cannot get out, try to go to a lower risk area of the house • Get to a room with a phone or carry a mobile with you • Awareness of perpetrator’s aggression triggers; identify high risk times • Be aware of places to avoid when the abuse starts (e.g. kitchen or garage where there are potential weapons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If possible, tell someone you trust about what is happening. They can check in to see if you are safe • Make up a code word to let the children, friends, family, or a neighbour know that you are in trouble and need help • If it is safe to do so, keep a handbag/ overnight bag with important phone numbers and items in a place where you can grab it if you need to leave in a hurry

Intervention: Safety Planning (continued)



Staying Safe while living with your partner	Staying Safe while you are preparing to leave
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to avoid rooms with small areas like closets or crawl-spaces where you can be trapped • If/when physical abuse starts advise survivor to curl up in a ball with hands over their head • Scream/shout loudly whilst being hit • Call the Gardaí 999/112 when you can. Call the 24hr Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline on 1800 341 900 or women's aid instant message support • https://www.womensaid.ie/get-help/talk-to-us/instant-message-support-service/ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Or leave money, spare keys, copies of important documents and clothes with someone you trust • Save money that your partner doesn't know about • If you can, open a savings account in your own name so that you have access to money when you leave • Plan for who to ring/where to go e.g. friend, family, refuge, secret safe location • Try to memorise and/or save emergency numbers

Refer to the below resources for additional information regarding domestic violence

DASH: <https://proceduresonline.com/trixcms/media/6627/dash-risk-assessment.pdf>

HSE Practice Guide on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/domestic-violence/hsepolicydomesticsexualgenderbasedviolence2010.pdf>

HSE National Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Training Resource Manual:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/about-social-inclusion/news/dsgbv-training-resource-manual.pdf>

Dewis Choice; Domestic abuse and the co-existence of dementia: https://dewischoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Dewis-Choice-Dementia-and-DA_COMPRESSED.pdf

Women's Aid: <https://www.womensaid.ie/get-help/support-services/>