Enabling and Managing Conversations and Disclosures about Domestic Abuse

The cross-government definition of domestic violence and abuse is:
‘Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to:

Psychological; physical; sexual; financial; emotional’

Domestic abuse also includes: stalking, so-called ‘honour’ based violence; forced marriage; female genital mutilation (FGM); and forced termination of pregnancy.

Coercive and Controlling behaviour
Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Who is affected?
We know that domestic abuse affects millions of women, children and men around the world each year. Domestic abuse is under-reported and many victims of domestic abuse may not disclose for a variety of reasons: fearful of the consequences ranging from further physical violence or threats, to intervention from statutory services; loss of a relationship; home; money; job; possible cultural, religious or language barriers; guilt or shame; concerns about immigration status as well as the fact that many women may not know how to discuss their experiences and/or may not know the situation is abusive. On average high-risk victims live with domestic abuse for over 2 years before getting help (SafeLives, 2015).

Therefore, how friends, family or professionals screen for domestic abuse and respond to disclosures is important. You as a professional, friend or family member, may be the sole place/person, that a victim might legitimately avoid the controlling presence of an abusive partner/family member and safely disclose.

Things to look out for that may indicate domestic abuse:
• Injuries without a reasonable explanation (normally people will volunteer an explanation)
• Injuries which are minimised or concealed
• A partner/family member who is unwilling to allow a patient or client to be alone with professionals
• A client who appears passive and dominated by their partner / constant phone calls + demands
• Avoidance of talking about home life
• Anxiety, depression and being withdrawn, particularly if this is not usual

Screening should involve asking a series of questions that provide an opportunity to disclose domestic abuse
Find out more:
- If you have concerns, always try to find out more.
- Create an opportunity to see them in a safe place
- Make sure the person you are concerned about is on their own, preferably without older children or other family members but always without the partner or the family member who might be harming them being present.
- If using an interpreter, make sure they are independent of the family.

It is important to:
- Let the person speak at their own speed and in their own words
- Remain calm, sensitive, neutral and demonstrate it is ok to talk about it and people will listen
- Ask open questions e.g. “What happened then?” / “How did that make you feel?” but don’t feel that you have to ask everything at once
- **Do** ask direct questions as needed e.g. “Did he hit you?” / “Are you afraid?”
- **Don’t** ask leading questions e.g. “He hit you, didn’t he?” / “You’re afraid, aren’t you?”
- Don’t be tempted to ask too much
- Acknowledge how difficult / painful / frightening their situation sounds and that it is very brave / a big step they have taken to speak to you
- Reassure them it is not their fault – abuse is never the fault of the victim. The responsibility for abuse lies with the abuser.
- Explain the limits of confidentiality and that if there are children a referral to Children’s Social Care must be made to explore further support to the victim and children; if there are no children but you think the situation is high risk then a referral to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) will also be made
- Explain you are worried about them and want to support them; it’s ok to be honest about your concern – you cannot solve the problem, but you can help them get support
- Ask what support they would like / how they think you can help
- Discuss safety planning (calling the police, staying with family or friends, going to a refuge or approaching housing at the Council about an emergency move, talking to a domestic support worker) and signpost to resources [http://www.hackney.gov.uk/domestic-violence](http://www.hackney.gov.uk/domestic-violence)
- **Don’t tell them what they have to do and do not tell them to give the perpetrator an ultimatum** about stopping the abuse or threats to leave the perpetrator – this can increase risk instead of reduce it; separation is also the most dangerous time.
- Explain next steps about what you will do with the information and how you will update them