

A Guide for Developing Tools to Assess for Sexual Assault Within the Context of Domestic Violence

Compiled by Kathleen Arledge, MSW

Kathleen Arledge is a former program management specialist for the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (WCSAP). Ms. Arledge holds a Master's degree in social work administration from the University of Washington. She was guest editor of the WCSAP publication *Connections* of Spring/Summer 2008, which brought together these articles on Intimate Partner Sexual Violence.

▼ Survivors of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence often hesitate to define their experience as rape. In addition, there are many reasons why a survivor may never tell a practitioner about the sexual assault, despite the practitioner's efforts to screen victims.

This guide will assist the practitioner in developing screening questions that validate the victim's experiences. The goal is to empower victims to overcome barriers to obtaining help and gaining access to resources.

1. Rapport should be built with the victim before screening questions are asked.
2. Questions should use specific language when referring to the crime. Words such as hurt, threatened, or forced should be clarified by the interviewer (i.e. did she/he hurt you vs. did she/he hit or push you).

3. Due to rape myths, some victims of intimate partner sexual violence may not consider the crime a "rape." Screening questions should use phrases such as "sexual activity" or "intimate experience."
4. Questions should be open-ended and designed to facilitate disclosure.
5. Persons asking questions about sexual activities should first receive training in how to discuss sexual histories and experiences in a non-threatening, non-judgmental manner.
6. Before asking the questions, the interviewer should decide what they will do if the victim provides information that indicates a sexual assault.

Before asking the victim such questions, the interviewer must know the answers to the following questions (taken from Mahoney & Williams, 1998):

- *What kind of answers would lead you to believe that an intervention is warranted?*
- *What kind of intervention are you prepared to make?*
- *What further questions would you need to ask?*
- What resources and/or information do you have to offer?

Possible Screening Questions:


The following list of screening questions has been synthesized from various scholarly resources, notably Mahoney & Williams (1998). This is not an exhaustive list of questions, and they have not been systematically evaluated. These questions are designed to facilitate disclosure from the victim. They are not intended for verbatim use; the interviewer should make necessary revisions to fit specific assessment situations.

- Have you ever been intimate with your partner when you didn't want to?
- Does your partner ever force you to be intimate? How often does this happen and when did it happen last?
- Have you ever been intimate with your partner because you were afraid of him / her?

- Are there times when sex between you and your partner is unpleasant for either one of you? What happens to make it unpleasant?
- Do you and your partner ever have disagreements about sex: for example, when and how often to have sex? How do you resolve those disagreements?
- Do you think you and your partner enjoy your sexual relationship equally?
- Has your partner ever made you have a sexual experience when you had too much alcohol to drink or when you've taken something (drugs, etc.) that made you unable to consent?
- Has your partner ever forced or pressured you into doing things that you weren't comfortable with? What were they?
- Has your partner ever forced you to have a sexual experience by using a weapon, or by physically hurting you?
- Has your partner ever forced you to have a sexual experience by kidnapping you, or by breaking into your home/office/car, etc.?
- Have you ever had sex with your partner because he has threatened, pressured, forced, or hurt you? What happened? (Note to interviewer: Based on your assessment of the situation, clarify for the victim what you mean by threat, pressure, force, etc.)
- Has your partner ever had sex with you when you were physically or mentally unable to say yes or agree to the activity?
- Have you ever "given in" to a sexual encounter with your partner to avoid fighting or being hurt?
- Have you ever had a sexual encounter because you felt overwhelmed by your partner's continual arguing and / or pressure?
- Has your partner ever touched you in a sexual way that has made you feel uncomfortable?
- Has your partner ever said or done sexually degrading things to you?

Follow-up Questions:

These follow-up questions (Fribley & Trujilo, 2006) have been designed to solicit more information from the victim after the preceding screening questions have been asked. These questions solicit additional information from the victim when the initial screening question is closed-ended and the victim has given a positive response to that question.

- How long has this sexual abuse / behavior been occurring in your relationship?
- How often does the sexual abuse occur?
- Are there any patterns between the physical and sexual abuse in your relationship?
- Have you noticed any change in the frequency or severity of abuse in your relationship?
- Was there ever any force or pressure involved?
- Have you ever told anyone or received help?
- Who did you tell or what type of help did you receive?
- How has the sexual abuse in your relationship impacted you?
- Have you noticed any physical or medical changes with your body?
- What have been the emotional or psychological effects you've experienced as a result of the sexual abuse?
- How can I help you? 

References

- Fribley, C. & Trujilo, O. *Sexual violence within the context of DV*. Praxis International Audio Conference Call, September 2006.
- Mahoney, P. & William, L. (1998). Sexual assault in marriage: Prevalence, consequences and treatment of wife rape. In J. Jasinski & L. Williams (Eds.), *Partner violence: A comprehensive review of 20 years of research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.