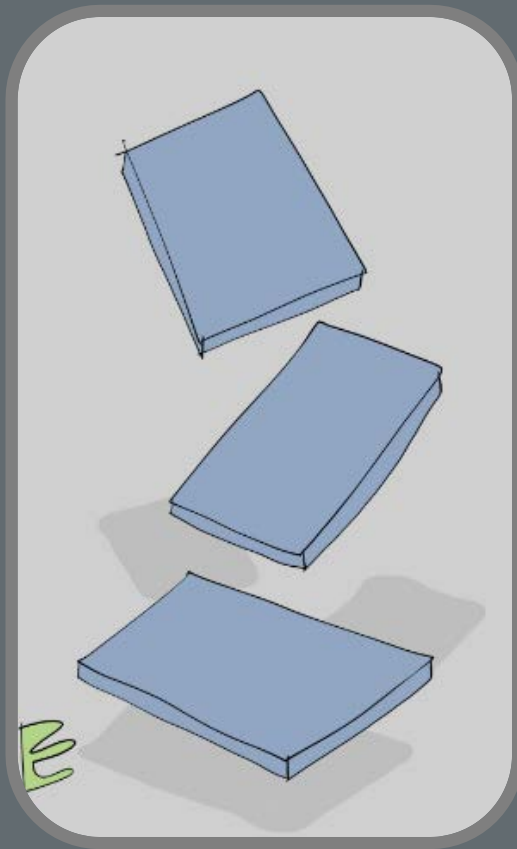


Guide to selecting a counsellor

MY
GUIDE



Introduction

Talking with someone about your experiences of violence and abuse is a personal decision. It can be valuable but is worth thinking carefully about. One of the people you may choose to talk to is a counsellor or therapist. There is a wide range of different types of therapy available and every counsellor will be different in some way. Finding the right counsellor isn't always straight forward.

What is most important is to find someone who you feel comfortable talking to and who helps you to be clear about your hopes in talking together.

Feeling comfortable includes feeling safe, being listened to in a way that supports talking openly about what is important and personal to you, and knowing that the person you are talking to respects you and believes in you.

Hopefully you find a counsellor that will ask you for feedback about how you are finding each session. It is good too if they check in with you as to how helpful your counselling sessions together are in making a difference in your day-to-day life.

For the purpose of this guide we will simply refer to a 'counsellor', however you may find the guide useful when thinking about talking with a:

- **Counsellor**
- **Psychologist**
- **Therapist**
- **Social worker**

Selecting a counsellor who understands domestic violence and abuse:

It can be very challenging for anyone to talk and write accurately about violence, abuse and forms of control. It's useful to consider if a counsellor you are thinking about talking with has a clear understanding of some foundational facts about violence (A to F below). This will support the way they work with you.

A

People always respond to and resist violence and other affronts to their dignity.

Whenever a person is badly treated they resist and respond in visible and invisible ways (sometimes in the privacy of their own thoughts). Nobody just goes along with being hurt, humiliated or disrespected by others and we always respond to and resist that sort of behaviour.

To other people the ways you respond and resist might not seem obvious or directly related to the violence and/or other unwanted things that are happening. Sometimes people don't even think about their own responses as being 'resistance' until another person specifically asks. However once you are able to describe a more accurate picture of your situation, context and important relationships, your responses may make more sense as forms of resistance.

When experiencing abuse you will have been figuring out how to best uphold your dignity and safety and that of other people you care about.

A counsellor who appreciates this will ask you about what you did when you first became aware of the person's violent, abusive or controlling behaviour. How you figured out what to do, what action you were able to take (or not) and how your strategies made sense for you?

**B**

The use of violence (in the vast majority of experiences) is intentional and deliberate.

A counsellor who recognises that people who use violence in a deliberate way will draw out the agency and careful choices that person makes in using violence. They will challenge the idea that a person using violence is 'out of control' or somehow 'driven' to violence.

**C**

Violence is social and interactional – it occurs between people in a specific situation or 'context' (part of the context for Domestic Violence is that violence is not 'one-off' but part of an ongoing pattern of coercive control).

A counsellor who is mindful of this will help you to describe the pattern of the abusive behaviour, when, where and how the person using abuse was violent or coercively controlling over time. They will be interested in how the person using abuse tried to overcome your resistance.

**D**

Violence is 'between people' but that does not mean that it is a mutual act. It is an act by one person (or group of people) over and against the will and wellbeing of another. For this reason, violence is best described as 'unilateral' not 'mutual.'

A counsellor who recognises this will appreciate that a victim is not in any way ever responsible for someone else being violent. Also that 'victim blaming' is an injustice and further affront to your dignity.

E

The problem of violence is linked to the problem of how it is talked about and represented.

A counsellor who is mindful of this will:

- check that the words you use fit as accurately as possible with the experience you are trying to describe; and
- check with you, how your friends, family and other social responders talk about and represent the violence used against you.

They will be alert to how others may have inaccurately represented and labelled you or the violence.



A tool for people with lived experience of violence to check how language is being used in representing your experiences is: [www.insightexchange.net/publications/Language and Violence Tool for People with Lived experience of Violence](http://www.insightexchange.net/publications/Language%20and%20Violence%20Tool%20for%20People%20with%20Lived%20experience%20of%20Violence)

F

Social responses* are the responses (both formal and informal) that you receive from any person you look to for understanding or support. The quality of 'social responses' is very important.

When it comes to experiences of violence it is often not just violence alone that is distressing but the quality of the social responses received over the time that violence and abuse was experienced, and in the days, months and even years that follow.

A counsellor who understands the continuing importance of social responses will ask you about the quality of the responses made by family, friends, health and justice professionals, and others and how you responded to them. They are mindful that social responses make a big difference not just to your choices and strategies but also to what things mean to you.

*A **social responder** is anyone who is responding to a person experiencing or using domestic and family violence. This includes social networks (family, friends, neighbours, colleagues), people working in organisations, institutions, and communities. **Social responses** can also be indirect for example, through media and social commentary, laws, mandates, policies, procedures, commissioning, publications and everyday conversations etc.

Other things to consider BEFORE the first session

Different counsellors might draw on different sets of ideas to assist you to achieve similar goals.

Before you meet a counsellor in person, it can be hard to know if they are a good fit for you. There are some things you can do in advance of meeting to help with your decision about whether to meet at all or to keep looking. When you look at websites or speak directly with a counsellor or their office you might like to consider these questions.

1. Do you see your job as 'fixing' me, or my problems or as something else?

It is useful if the person you are seeking support from does not see it as their role to fix you or offer solutions, rather as playing a small part in creating safety, and affirming your skills and resourcefulness. Counselling can also help with identifying the signs that your hopes can be achieved, or steps in that direction.

2. Will our conversation be more about problems or more about my hopes?

Some counsellors will guide conversations in a 'problem-focused' way. They will tend to listen for and ask questions about what has happened in your life and how that has impacted you. This way of seeing and working can often mean the counsellor will use assessment and diagnostic tools to label and measure the impact of the problem and how you have been affected, 'damaged' or 'traumatised'. The effects of violence are important to think about. For example there may be impacts on your finances, health, housing or even your freedom of movement.

However, your responses and resistance to violence are also significant. They reveal a great deal about your efforts, struggles and suffering and can be easily understood without need for a further label or diagnosis.

When a counsellor works in a way that is problem-focused they might have more difficulty following your lead.

Some counsellors will be more directly interested in what you hope for in meeting with

them and in your hopes more generally. You might find that they ask more about how your skills, qualities and values are important in your day-to-day life, relationships and responses to others. A counsellor who is thinking in this way might be curious about what you already do that works for you and about the next small signs in realising your hopes. People who are guided in their conversations about what you hope for might be better at following your lead.

3. How important is having experience or expertise in the area of Domestic Violence?

It can be very valuable for a counsellor to have specific knowledge about and experience of domestic violence (see points A to F above). However, it is the way a counsellor listens and then asks questions that tap into your experience that is going to be significant in how you feel about the counselling.

When your conversations with someone help you to develop a more accurate description of your experience, you may feel:

- an increased sense of hope
- confidence in what you want to do; and
- more certain of your existing skills and competence.

If you have been experiencing violence for some time you probably already have a well informed view about the lack of 'quick-fixes', and how ideas about 'recovery', 'learning to live with it', 'needing to relax' or 'getting over it' can be inaccurate and unjust. These ideas might also feel insulting and isolating. If you talk with someone about your experiences and after the interaction you feel less hope or confidence about what you can do, or are more doubtful about your skills or competence, then that is a sign that this may not be the support you need.

4. Am I able to give you feedback about our conversation/s together? Do you ask about my sense of safety, comfort and satisfaction with the counselling?

A sign that a counsellor is orientated to your hopes and desired outcomes is that they'll use formal and informal feedback tools or questions to gauge that your conversation or work together is 'on track'. Counsellors who have a strong view that they are 'experts' tend to assume that their conversation, ideas and interventions are useful. But, how would they know if they don't ask? And continue to check? The counsellor really needs your feedback to be able to follow your lead. 'Following your lead' means that what it looks like to be 'on track', is determined by you not the counsellor.

5. How will I know what my rights are and what the responsibilities of the counsellor are (especially around sharing information, privacy and confidentiality)?

Professional codes and guidelines

Counsellors can be bound by different 'professional codes', guidelines and legislation. Not all counsellors are similarly qualified or necessarily registered as a member of a professional organisation. It is a good idea to check what the professional status, codes, guidelines, legislative requirements and responsibilities of a counsellor are. It can make a big difference to your rights to privacy and confidentiality if a counsellor is registered as a health professional such as a registered psychologist or social worker.

Information about codes of ethics and guidelines are available online from the relevant professional organisations.

- Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA): www.ahpra.gov.au/ (Only registered health professionals are regulated by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency.)
- Australian Psychological Society: www.psychology.org.au
- Australian Association of Social Workers: www.aasw.asn.au
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia: www.pacfa.org.au
- The Australian Counselling Association: www.theaca.net.au
- Australian Institute of Family Therapists: www.aaft.asn.au

Knowing how information is shared

If you see a counsellor who is a psychologist they are required to keep notes for a specified length of time and to give written feedback to the GP if you are referred under a mental health care plan. They are also mandatory reporters about risks to children. Again, what 'mandatory reporter' means exactly might vary for different counsellors and from one Australian state to another. It is worth clarifying with your counsellor what limits to confidentiality are in place and what would be considered a notifiable/reportable risk to a child.

You may also want to establish how the counsellor will manage enquiries from a family member and whether or not that changes if the family member also comes to some sessions.

Knowing how information is secured and stored

You might want to know exactly what is written in notes, where, how and for how long they are stored, who has access to them and how they are destroyed.

Confidentiality and subpoenas

If a criminal matter arises, the defence or prosecution can potentially subpoena notes from your counsellor. It might be useful to discuss confidentiality and subpoenas with your counsellor.

Boundaries and clear expectations

Boundaries between you and the counsellor can help maintain safety. You might want to ask about how the counsellor does/doesn't respond to phone calls, emails or messages via social media, and how they manage chance meetings, such as on the bus or at the local shops. Your counsellor will most likely be able to give you clear reasons for how they manage boundaries and examples of what they do or avoid doing.

Costs and cancellations

Lastly, counselling can be expensive if you are not able to access a free service or low cost service. Even then there may be cancellation fees or limits on the number of sessions. It's a great idea if a counsellor is clear about these things before you start.

You might have other questions, for example 'Does gender matter?'. You may or may not feel more comfortable talking with a person who is male or female or non-gender binary, for good reasons of your own. It is your right to bring this up and to be sure.

DURING a counselling session

If you do not already know the answers to the questions above before you start counselling you will hopefully become clear about them as you and the counsellor start talking together in your first session.

Will we talk about whether the session was useful?

One way a counsellor might ask you how useful your session was is using the session rating scale (Johnson, Miller and Duncan 2000). This is a validated measure that some counsellors use to seek feedback about their sessions with people. The questions on the rating scale tap into what is called the 'working alliance' between a 'counsellor and client'. They explore the extent to which a person who has just completed a counselling session is able to say:

- "I felt heard, understood and respected"
- "We worked on and talked about what I wanted to work on and talk about"
- "The therapist's approach is a good fit for me" and
- "Overall today's session was right for me".

These questions are really useful tools for reflecting on a session. They are useful for you in tapping into your awareness, in assessing your interaction with the counsellor and in deciding if you want to come back. And they are, of course, potentially very useful feedback for your counsellor - if your counsellor asks. Your counsellor may not use this exact tool but use something similar. They may also be open to you asking to end each session with these questions.

You may or may not be already confident to ask questions, challenge, or disagree with your counsellor but if the counsellor is able to be warm and open to your direct or indirect feedback that can signpost a good 'working alliance'.

Below are some questions you might find useful to think about when considering how well the counsellor did these things in the session:

Did they follow my lead?

Did they explore and listen to my context?

Did they represent the violence I experience accurately?



Follow My Lead is for any person who at some point may be listening to and responding to their friends, family members, colleagues, peers or to the people who use their service, who are experiencing DFV.

The resource may also have benefits for people who are:

- Thinking about their own relationships and experience of DFV
- Seeking support about their own lived (or live) experience of DFV
- Working as a service responder to people experiencing DFV

www.insightexchange.net/publications

AFTER a counselling session

What is a desirable outcome for when you leave the session?

A sense of hope and/or a sense of increased clarity around your goals and how you might meet them.

Am I under any obligation to return?

Although there can be 'administrative or organisational pressure' on a counsellor to book/schedule a further session you do not need to feel under pressure to commit to a further session. Many experienced counsellors will invite you to take some time to think about the session, and if and when you would like to meet again.

Who knows best?

If a counselling session is not comfortable for you, you probably want to find someone with whom you feel more comfortable. Although word of mouth and testimonials might be a guide, everybody is to some extent different, so remember even if someone is highly recommended, you are probably your own best guide.

Is there anything I can give to a counsellor before we start?

You may find it useful to give the person you are thinking about doing counselling with a copy of *Follow My Lead*. This resource is free and speaks from the voice of people with lived experience of domestic and family violence who need the professionals and social networks to be more prepared to respond effectively. You can access a copy here: www.insightexchange.net/follow-my-lead/

If the counsellor I am seeing ends up not being a good fit what can I do?

If the counsellor doesn't feel like a 'good fit', you do not have to return. You might instead look further afield for someone who makes you more comfortable. It is up to you whether or not you want to provide direct feedback to the counsellor about this.

If you feel the counsellor was negligent, unsafe or inappropriate in some way, you could consider making a formal complaint; either directly to the counsellor or to the relevant body in your state. For more information, visit the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency: www.ahpra.gov.au/Notifications/Make-a-complaint.aspx

PDF
COPY

www.insightexchange.net/publications

This guide is a first edition.

We welcome continued
[feedback about this guide](#)
in order to improve future editions

Learn more about insights from lived experiences of violence and other adversities through the videos, narratives and resources hosted on www.insightexchange.net

Domestic Violence Service Management would like to thank Dr Linda Coates and Dr Allan Wade and their colleagues at the Centre for Response-Based Practice, Canada for their visionary and pioneering work on social responses, resistance, language, and the upholding of dignity.

© Words and visuals developed by DVSM Sightlines in collaboration with Dr Linda Coates & Dr Allan Wade 2019.

USING THIS RESOURCE: The information contained within this resource is for general information purposes only. Coates, Wade and DVSM assumes no responsibility for how the information in this resource is used. COPYRIGHT: Coates, Wade & DVSM gives permission for excerpts from this resource to be photocopied or reproduced provided that the source is clearly and properly acknowledged.