

# Resources for responding to adult users of domestic, family and sexual violence

Compilation written by Rodney Vlasis  
during 2025

These resources are freely available to download and share with practitioners and responders to men and other adults who cause harm.

They might be helpful for a variety of workforces who engage with adults who cause harm, including those without DFSV specialisation.

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# Entitlement and other factors in contributing to coercive control



Mostly other factors, some entitlement

Both entitlement and other factors are significant

Mostly entitlement and some influence of other factors

Mostly or purely entitlement

Entitlement is generally a necessary condition for the use of coercive control. It can also be a sufficient condition – entitlement in and of itself can be the primary driver. The relative role of entitlement and other factors in contributing to the use of coercive control varies from person to person, and from situation to situation.

What other factors can contribute to the use of coercive control, in combination with various degrees of entitlement?

- Coercing family members into particular actions or behaviours that directly or indirectly support the person's **substance using lifestyle**
- Structuring the relationship and family environment to avoid triggering the person's **anxiety** (e.g., social anxiety, OCD) or other **mental health issues**
- Attempting to prevent their partner from engaging in behaviours, responses or conversations that might lead them to feel intense shame or other disintegrative emotions stemming from a **trauma background**
- Structuring home and relationship spaces and routines so that they do not **overwhelm the person in the case of neuodiversity**

There is a continuum from a person attempting to meet their needs in a fair, respectful and equitable way without the influence of entitlement → meeting their needs influenced by entitlement in a way that impacts partners and family members but which stops short of the use of violence and coercive control → the use of coercive control to force behaviours from others

No/little entitlement	Moderate entitlement	Substantial entitlement
Considers others' needs Negotiates Self-manages AOD/MH/trauma/ neurodiverse issue still impacts others	Focuses more on own needs Expects others to accommodate his needs Some self managing AOD/MH/etc has major impacts on family	Self-focused Demands others to accommodate his needs Makes others responsible Perpetrates DFSV

For example, an autistic man and his allistic (neurotypical) partner might each learn about each other's different ways of processing, and make adjustments to each other. Or the man might use his male privilege to try to structure his home and family environment in ways that don't take much account of other people's needs (a complex situation, where he both uses gendered entitlement, and is also marginalised outside his family from constantly having to adapt to a neurotypical world). Or the man might go further and perpetrate coercive control to manage his partner's and family's responses.

## Masculinity, trauma, humiliation, entitlement and intersectionality: An annotated poem from the perspective of an adult user of domestic, family and sexual violence

This is an intense poem highlighting how the above factors can intersect for some adults in their choices to use violent and controlling behaviour against partners and family members – reading this might have an emotional impact.

How dare you make me less of a man.

Being a MAN is the only thing I have.

You women chatter and scheme, you never stop. I keep to myself. Trust no-one but myself, it's got me through this far.

Being a MAN is the one thing that protects me from entering the black hole. You want to take that shield away from me?

Being a MAN dullens the shame of who I was, who I must have been, what I must have deserved.

Dullens the shame of who I have become... or so I whisper, too softly for me to hear.

If I was man enough then, I would have stopped him. He would not have done what he did to us, to me, to my sisters.

Yes, I was a boy. But a boy needs to be a man in moments like that. Not a sis. Not running to the bedroom with his tail between his legs.

If I was a full man, I would have confronted my Mum. She was never there to protect me. Women are weak, indecisive.

My mates were right back then. My new mates are right now. You can't trust them. Sleeping around. Manipulating us, going behind our backs. At least us men, we fight it out.

I learnt my lessons early, what you need to do to survive.

How dare you make me less of a man.

So what if my skin isn't exactly white. Or if I can't get a stable job or a deposit on a house. I can still be a full man, just as much as any other man, can't I?

I can, I must, I have to, what am I if I'm not? A girl?

You make me shake with anger. You make my insides collapse.

You don't know the half of what I do to manage this, to manage you. I need to make you feel crazy. To stop those idiots from egging you on. How else do I disarm you?

And you blame me for exploding when everything I try doesn't work and you still challenge me!

I'm hurt. Don't you care? Why do you twist the knife?

I survive through you I whisper inside, and cry out loud to your mother heart.

You think you can see through me. You think you can call me out. You seemed to be different – no, you're just like all the other women controllers in the world. Backing us into a corner. Getting all the big wigs on your side.

No more! I'm getting back what's mine, what's been taken away from me.

How dare you make me feel less of a man.

[end of poem → explanation of each line in the poem begins on the next page]

How dare you make me less of a man.

Being a MAN is the only thing I have.

Many men who use violence are very sensitive to 'being made' to feel less of a man. Being a 'full man' can be a highly important part of their identity. Of course, being a 'full man' can mean different things to different men, and in different cultural contexts.

For reasons partly revealed through this poem, these men can feel significant masculinity threat and sometimes deep humiliation when their masculine identity is not affirmed. The patriarchal society they swim in, funneled through their entitlement-based worldview and the rules they set for their partner, mean they can get away with holding her / him / them 'responsible' for his felt humiliation.

You women chatter and scheme, you never stop. I keep to myself. Trust no-one but myself, it's got me through this far.

Misogyny is not just an attitude, it's structural, it's in the fabric of our society. Sexist attitudes both feed and are fed by misogynist structures, systems and myths. Some men affirm their sense of being a full man at the expense of women. 'I am not her, I am better than her, I don't stoop to her level.' They define their masculinity through being not-woman.

For some men, particularly those with a complex trauma background, genuine intimacy can be frightening. They might yearn deep down to truly connect with someone, rather than only demand things from them, but that yearning can be suppressed. It's not a simple case of 'teaching them' emotional literacy skills. Whether we call them beliefs or embodied schema, they can hold a black-and-white sense of how the world works based on entitlement and on protecting themselves from emotional pain.

Being a MAN is the one thing that protects me from entering the black hole. You want to take that shield away from me?

Being a MAN dullens the shame of who I was, who I must have been, what I must have deserved.

Dullens the shame of who I have become... or so I whisper, too softly for me to hear.

Shame can come in many forms. It can mean different things in different cultures, and be expressed and felt differently. For people who have experienced complex trauma and shame-inducing events repeatedly in their childhood, the shame can be chronic. It can be an overwhelming sense of "I am bad... unlovable... worthless... undeserving..."

This sense of 'I deserved what happened to me' can set them up to blame victim-survivors for the harmful behaviours they perpetrate against them. It's like the father who says "my old man was harsh, but I was a little sh.., he did what he needed to do", who takes this attitude into blaming his children for the harsh parenting he uses against them. Of course, it's not just the meaning the adult makes out of his own painful childhood experiences that sets him up to blame those who experience his harm. His victim stance thinking is also a product of entitlement: blaming women is something he is expected, as a man, to do.

People who experience chronic shame due to a trauma background will try very hard to avoid feeling it. Of course, shame can also be experienced when one's behaviour contradicts deeply held values or cherished aspects of identity ("I can't control myself, I beat women, I am a monster."). Whether it be chronic shame or the more acute shame that might occur as a result of their harmful behaviour, the identity of being a 'full man' 'protects' him from it.

If I was man enough then, I would have stopped him. He would not have done what he did to us, to me, to my sisters.

Yes, I was a boy. But a boy needs to be a man in moments like that. Not a sis. Not running to the bedroom with his tail between his legs.

Responses to traumatic experiencing, and the meaning made out of it, can be gendered to a degree. Boys who experience domestic and family violence, and/or sexual abuse, can experience this as a major threat to their sense of developing masculinity. They might find it hard to feel like a 'real man' if they believe that a 'real man' would have somehow been able to stop the abuse. Of course, these types of experiences are deeply humiliating and degrading, 'but' there is a particular thread to the humiliation that some boys experience. A humiliation to their developing masculine identity where they inherently feel 'less of a man', and subsequently struggle into their young adulthood and later years to restore a sense of being a 'full man' and to avoid impending humiliation.

If I was a full man, I would have confronted my Mum. She was never there to protect me. Women are weak, indecisive.

My mates were right back then. My new mates are right now. You can't trust them. Sleeping around. Manipulating us, going behind our backs. At least us men, we fight it out.

I learnt my lessons early, what you need to do to survive.

Sexist attitudes and misogynist structures and systems can influence the meaning that boys make out of their traumatic experiences. It's not uncommon therefore for boys who experience violence and abuse from their father to blame their mother. Our society still often blames mothers for 'not protecting' children rather than holding responsible the father or other adult causing harm.

And children often do not get to see or understand the full range of controlling and entrapment tactics used by the father against their mother, and how this can severely limit her options and safe choices. Fathers are often able to manipulate family law and other systems to pathologise their ex-partner – it's still not uncommon for violent and abusive men to win majority or full custody of their children.

The boy's hostility towards (or at least, distrust of) his mother can be reinforced by the sexist attitudes of male peer groups, resulting in highly problematic and harmful gendered beliefs into young adulthood and beyond. Beliefs that women cannot be trusted.

Some boys and young men are of course also influenced by a sense of collective grievance pipelined through the 'manosphere'. A grievance that it is now 'women who pull all the strings', and who are denying men the opportunity to be 'full men'. Masculinity threat becomes amplified through this sense of collective grievance, of women taking away a masculinity that men are entitled to by virtue of their biological sex.

Attempts to restore a sense of being 'a full man', and the practices of male supremacy, can become a heavy investment. The young man's use of coercive control becomes a way to protect himself from the humiliation of 'being made' to feel less of a man, and from chronic shame. He learns that being a 'full man' is to expect that he can extract sexual and other benefits from his partner, and that he can punish her for 'causing' him to feel humiliation.

How dare you make me less of a man.

So what if my skin isn't exactly white. Or if I can't get a stable job or a deposit on a house. I can still be a full man, just as much as any other man, can't I?

I can, I must, I have to, what am I if I'm not? A girl?

The quest to be a 'full man' is not a level playing field. Some men have substantially more privilege levers than others. Men who lack white, able-bodied and/or cisgender privilege might still feel that they should succeed as a 'full man', but in reality the odds are stacked up against them. Rather than focus on the structural and systemic causes of socio-political, economic and other forms of marginalisation and disadvantage, influencers manipulate fear, bigotry and sexism to scapegoat immigrants, women and 'elites'.

The experience of humiliation and structural violence due to oppressive social conditions and power structures becomes further fuel to reclaim a 'lost masculinity'. In a world seen in black-and-white terms, the alternative (to be like a woman) is unconscionable.

You make me shake with anger. You make my insides collapse.

You don't know the half of what I do to manage this, to manage you. I need to make you feel crazy. To stop those idiots from egging you on. How else do I disarm you?

And you blame me for exploding when everything I try doesn't work and you still challenge me!

For those men who use violence with a trauma background, the somatic disruption experienced when feeling 'triggered' can be quite intense. However, they still choose to give themselves the green light to use violence, via the meaning they make of their partner's actions. The choice is made in the moment, like many times before, to cause fear, terror, humiliation, psychological injury or degradation to control her behaviour. He might lack distress tolerance and emotional regulation skills to a degree – but he gives himself permission to not use the skills he has.

He also makes more upstream choices to 'manage her' that form patterns of coercive control. To stop her from doing things that 'threaten his masculinity', whether that be expressing her intelligence about something (that he takes as being made to feel wronged), spending time with male friends, dressing up for others, not following a rule he has set, or attempting to call him out for his harmful attitudes and behaviours. He can't tolerate her being 'right' and him being 'wrong', in his black-and-white worldview. He won't accept being challenged for his harmful and entitlement-based behaviour, blaming her for 'making' him feel humiliation.

I'm hurt. Don't you care? Why do you twist the knife?

I survive through you I whisper inside, and cry out loud to your mother heart.

Men who use violence with a complex trauma background can experience intense psychological pain. They can also use emotional displays strategically to entrap their partner into taking care of him emotionally. Living their emotional world through their partner, rather than maturing as an emotional adult, is an entitlement our society offers to men in general, not only to those who use violence. An entitlement that results in his partner becoming heavily objectified, an object to restore his sense of being a full man, and to restore a parental attachment he might not have had securely as a child.

Why does he so desperately want the relationship to continue, if he sees her as a threat, and as constantly 'wronging him'? On his own, he would no longer have her to live his emotional life for him. He would have to face what he currently avoids facing through controlling her. He would no longer be able to force the emotional and other benefits he extracts from her.

You think you can see through me. You think you can call me out. You seemed to be different – no, you're just like all the other women controllers in the world. Backing us into a corner. Getting all the big wigs on your side.

No more! I'm getting back what's mine, what's been taken away from me.

How dare you make me feel less of a man.

Men who perpetrate violence with a trauma background can experience what has been termed shame anxiety. The experience of shame can be so intense, that they will actively attempt to avoid situations or events where they might feel it. This can be compounded by an underlying sense of masculinity threat, of needing frequent reassurance that they are a 'full man' so as to avoid feelings of humiliation.

When his partner does something that taps into his anxiety about experiencing shame or humiliation, he can feel a very deep sense of injustice. It might be that she stands up to him. That she doesn't accompany him to a cultural event and he feels 'humiliated' having to attend without his wife. Through his entitlement-focused worldview, he feels that he has been 'wronged'. He feels justified using controlling and violent behaviours to prevent her from repeating this 'injustice', from 'making him' feel shame and/or humiliation.

When anxiety is intense, the person experiencing it often wants to make 100% sure that the event or situation they fear will never happen. This is how anxiety can be so self-reinforcing. Absolute assurance is impossible, yet because reassurance seeking can result in a temporary reduction in anxiety ("phew, I've made sure that it can't happen for now"), the fruitless search for 100% sureness can be 'addictive'. The anxiety alleviation is only temporary, as it is only a matter of time before a new or repeat situation arises that evokes the anxiety.

Men who cause violent harm often not only feel driven to avoid shame and humiliation, they feel entitled to use violent and controlling behaviour to seek this reassurance. To control their partner's actions so that she does not threaten his masculinity, nor 'bring him close' to his well of underlying shame.

When a victim-survivor attempts to increase her resistance to his violence, such as by trying to push back against his rules and fence-wires so that she has more moments of being herself rather than his object, risk can increase. Not only might she experience humiliation and shame more frequently. He might also come to believe that his partner has taken something big away from him that he feels entitled to make her restore.

He might blame her for having less access to their children (e.g., due to a protection order). For having suicidal thoughts and for his mental health spiralling down (that's of course not her responsibility). For losing status and privilege if systems and his community start to treat him differently after becoming identified as a perpetrator of violence. In some situations, this blame can build into an intense grievance, that the victim-survivor has taken away something big and enduring that he feels entitled to.

Turning this around can be a long process. There are many interlocking pieces, and change can be approached in different ways.

The combination of entitlement and trauma varies amongst men who perpetrate violence. For some men, the trauma is very large in their pathways into using violence... but the entitlement is even larger. For others, the entitlement might not be as substantial. However, it's rarely *just* trauma when adult men use DFSV. Addressing the trauma alone can be counterproductive (and make things worse). Whereas not uncommonly, it *is* just entitlement with little or no trauma – sometimes it is sufficient to 'just' focus on entitlement-based beliefs and behaviour.

# 15 signs that a trauma-informed approach to working with male users of domestic, family and sexual violence is becoming de-gendered



The program focuses more on men's traumatic backgrounds than assessing and responding to the traumatic impacts of their violent and controlling behaviours on women & children



Practitioner feelings of compassion for the men's traumatic experiences outweigh felt disgust and felt outrage about their violent and controlling behaviours



There are few or no experiences of practitioners needing to stop themselves from going too hard at the men, and of needing to pull back from being over-confronting



The program, curriculum and approach for working with men who use violence would require few changes if it was to be run for women who use violence



The program assumes that most or all of the men who participate have poor distress tolerance and emotional regulation skills



Practitioners assume that the men know little about domestic & family violence, and are generally unaware of the impacts of their behaviours and need to be educated about them



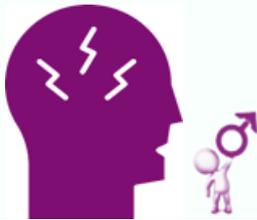
The approach focuses on differentiating instrumental from reactive violence, and assumes that some men's violent behaviours are triggered by traumatic re/experiencing



Practitioners believe that if the trauma responses are healed, and maladaptive family-of-origin attachment issues are resolved, the man's use of violence will largely stop



Practitioners believe that the most important question to explore when working with an adult user of domestic & family violence is "what has happened to you?"



Trauma backgrounds and traumatic experiencing are seen as the fundamental drivers of violent and controlling behaviour, and more 'core' than the influence of gender-based beliefs



The program describes its model as mostly or solely therapeutic, and (inaccurately) refers to the Duluth approach as being 'too challenging and shaming' of the men



Practitioners would struggle to answer the question "how does male entitlement and a trauma background intersect in pathways towards the use of violence?"



Assumptions are made that improving self-soothing capacity in the context of complex trauma, and the ability to care for inner-self, will automatically result in the man becoming safer



Men's gender-based righteous grievances are missed as potential warning signs of serious risk to adult and child victim-survivors



Practitioners draw a parallel between the need for First Nations communities to heal from the traumatic impacts of ongoing colonisation to stop intergenerational and lateral violence, with a 'need' for all or most non-Indigenous men to heal from trauma to become non-violent

# Four considerations in understanding and assessing choices to use violent and controlling behaviour

This is an intense and dense read (conceptually and emotionally), designed for practitioners and other responders to adults who cause domestic, family and sexualised violence harm. It is not something that can be read lightly, and is perhaps best to absorb when you have a bit of space.

Adult users of domestic, family and sexualised violence (AUV) are of course not all the same. There are strong commonalities in the violence-supporting (victim-stance) thinking and narratives that many adopt to minimise, deny and rationalise their violent and controlling behaviour (and often, to call it something else), in ways that give themselves the 'green light' to continue to cause harm. However, there are also important differences between them.

Understanding where a user of violence currently sits in relation to these differences can help us adapt our work to be more responsive to the choices he is making, and to the harm caused to adult and child victim-survivors. This understanding can also help us in our ongoing assessments of risk, and of the harm caused by his patterned behaviours.

One set of differences between AUV concerns the nature of the choices they make to use violent and controlling behaviour. The 'little' and big choices involved in creating regimes and systems of coercive control are of course numerous - made daily, sometimes hourly. At the same time, choice is a complex issue.

Unpacking the notion of choice in the context of using DFSV would take a thesis. There's four considerations, however, that I'm finding particularly useful in my supervision (including case discussions), skill-sharing and training provision.

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Capability

- What intersecting factors (AoD, MH, complex trauma) might be making it harder for the adult to choose non-violence?
- To what extent do they have existing non-violence skills (but choose not to apply them)?

Lever

- Privilege-based levers
- Cultural, extended family or community-based levers
- Peer group association levers

Planning

- What degree and type of planning and premeditation that has gone into executing particular DFSV tactics
- How much time is spent planning how to humiliate, punish, degrade and/or terrorise the victim-survivor?

Intention → specific impacts

- How much of the impacts of his use of DFSV – on the adult(s) and child/ren experiencing his violence – is he already aware of, but still chooses to use violence anyway?
- What impacts does he **intend** to deliberately produce? What impacts is he aware of but **doesn't care about**?
- What impacts doesn't he know about, that if he knew about, might motivate him to take steps towards changing his behaviour?

## Capability

I have to believe that every adult, in every moment of their lives, is capable of making a choice not to use violent and controlling behaviour. No matter what the circumstance, no matter what is occurring, no matter what the person is experiencing, no matter what they are feeling, no matter what the context. There is never an excuse for the use of domestic, family and sexualised violence.

That doesn't mean that I expect everyone, in every circumstance, to make a non-violent choice (I'm not talking about adult users of DFSV here – there is never an excuse for them to continue to use violent and controlling behaviour). I'm not a pure believer in non-violence, neither philosophically nor even strategically (though non-violence very often has strategic advantages, and ethically I support non-violence very much most of the time). I don't even know if a world *completely* free from violence is even possible.

Oppressed individuals and minority groups facing sustained precarity should be able to use a range of acts of resistance to survive and to limit harms for themselves and their community, including, when absolutely necessary, force. Of course, this can be reappropriated by those with power... we see, again and again, those who are causing harm believing that they are 'the victim' and therefore that they have the right to 'defend themselves', when in reality they are the oppressor and not the oppressed.

My point is that I need to believe that everyone, in every circumstance, is capable of making a choice to use non-violence. That every AUV is *capable* of making choices not to use violent and controlling behaviour. The video [I Am I Can](#) by Insight Exchange shows this clearly.

AUV, however, are not on a level field in how easy, or difficult, it might be for them to make non-violent choices. A range of factors influence how easy or difficult this might be for the person.

We need to be clear here that none of these factors relate to the victim-survivor, as they are *never the slightest bit responsible* for making it easier for the AUV to make non-violent choices. If a victim-survivor tries to do something to prevent or stop the person using harmful behaviour – something for example to interrupt his pathway of building up to use violence – this is not the same as making him more capable to choose non-violence in these moments. This is about protecting herself and her children. The fact that she is trying, in the moment, to influence his behaviour, to try to make it more likely that he will not use violence, does not mean in the slightest that she is in any way responsible for his capability to choose non-violence.

Where an AUV lays on issues related to capability matters a lot for our approach. They differ greatly, for example, in the skills they have to manage intense emotions.

Many of the men we work with *have* emotional regulation skills, and *have* proven track records of managing uncomfortable emotions in a range of situations. Rather, they choose not to apply these skills with those who are experiencing their use of DFSV because they give themselves the green light not to. Their violence-supporting beliefs (and other factors) not only lead to them experiencing righteous anger, humiliation, intense vulnerabilities, etc., but also, to them making a choice not to use the skills they have to self-manage these things.

These are men who often use overt forms of physical violence only with family members (but who might use some controlling behaviours in some other contexts as well as with their family). Like all(?) men, they draw upon their male entitlement, to varying degrees, to make women responsible for managing their vulnerabilities, a task that is impossible and totally unfair to expect (and demand) of women.

Then there are other men – who while still capable of making choices not to use violent and controlling behaviours in any situation – are perhaps *less* capable of doing so in certain situations (e.g., when feeling ‘threatened’, ‘abandoned’, or ‘humiliated’). These men not only choose not to use the skills they have, but they genuinely have less capability in making non-violent choices in certain situations, when experiencing certain things. These might be adults who use violence beyond their family members (e.g., a history of using violence against other men). They might be men who have experienced repeated complex trauma.

There’s a lot one could unpack here. But it highlights the difficulty when we work with a diverse group of men or adults in a program, some of whom do need assistance in skills to understand and manage emotional vulnerabilities, and others where ‘teaching’ them skills they already have might be counterproductive. And this is a continuum, not a binary like the attempt to divide between ‘generally violent’ and ‘family only’ perpetrators that we see in some of the literature.

The adults we work with differ in the extent to which they do have skills to manage emotional vulnerabilities. They also differ in the intensity of these vulnerabilities, in what happens for them somatically, physiologically, and emotionally. They further differ in the extent of their entitlement-based, victim-stance attitudes and the degree to which they will choose not to use the skills they have or are learning. It’s not binary.

Some might have experienced intense repeated trauma, have totally unfair and unreasonable expectations towards their partner (based on male entitlement and on their ‘need’ for their partner to ‘mother them’ towards healing), become totally ‘discombobulated’ when they perceive themselves to be the victim or that they are being ‘abandoned’ or ‘threatened’, have genuinely limited skills to manage these vulnerabilities, and be very unlikely to use the skills they are learning through a program because they are so intent on enforcing their demands and punishing their partner when their expectations (demands) are not met. For others, the relative intensities of some of these things might be less.

The extent to where an AUV lays in each of these things matters in how we work with him. It also matters in terms of our assessments of the degree and nature of the risk he poses to adult and child victim-survivors, the situations in which this risk might escalate, and of the nature of the harms he is causing to child and family functioning.

We need to expect each and every one of these men to make non-violent choices, every time, all the time. Every AUV is capable of stopping their use of violent and controlling behaviour, *right now*. That doesn’t mean, however, that each AUV is *equally* capable of making non-violent choices. Capability is more complex than understanding it as a binary.

## Contributing factors and complex needs

Also related to capability are contributing dynamic risk factors, of complex needs such as alcohol and other drugs, mental health, housing insecurity, gambling harm, education and employment, financial precarity, and so on. While these are contributing and not causal factors, we know that they matter.

An AUV experiencing complex needs might have less willingness and interest to focus on his use of violent and controlling behaviour through a men’s behaviour change program. Factors such as AOD use and mental health can also contribute to the severity of violence or risk, such as the AUV whose agitated, anxious ruminations about his partner ‘cheating on him’ intensifies while intoxicated. Or the man with intensified beliefs that his former partner has ‘ruined him’ by ending the relationship, due to depression with a strong hopelessness component, and due to him having very little in his life to fill the vacuum created by the ‘identity loss’ that his former partner and service system responses have ‘caused him’.

Addressing complex needs such as these (AOD misuse, depression with a strong hopelessness component, loss of employment and identity) will not in itself make the AUV a safe man for current and/or future family members. However, doing so might make it less difficult, and possibly somewhat more likely, that he will choose to use non-violent and non-controlling behaviours at least in the short-term.

Again, we need to take a stand that irrespective of how many and how intense the complex needs are that he experiences, that he is capable, every time, of making non-violent and non-controlling choices. This is the expectation we need to have of each AUV we work with, every time.

Holding this expectation every time, however, doesn't of course mean that we flood him with it, or that we moralise at him. Overly confrontative, moralising approaches, as we know, can lead to felt experiences of shame and humiliation. Inducing shame and humiliation in the AUV is the last thing we seek to do when trying to ally with adult and child victim-survivors in their efforts to build safety and to prise open some space for action back into their lives. How we communicate this expectation that there is never any excuse for violence, will differ from perpetrator to perpetrator, and at different points across our work with him.

While we hold this expectation unwaveringly, at least in the background of our work with each AUV, we also need to be 'real'. Victim-survivors face the realities of the perpetrator causing them harm all the time, and the reality of the systems and institutions in our society that 'shoulder him up' and enable him to continue and intensify the harm. Often having to compromise. Often wondering whether 'small wins' is enough. Often experiencing, again and again, how he 'has won'.

The choice to use non-violence might be harder for an AUV struggling with complex needs. The choice might be genuinely more difficult. As practitioners and responders, we want to *make it easier* that he will choose non-violent and non-controlling behaviours in situations where he often hasn't. Especially at the beginning of our work with him, when we are trying to make some rapid and initial gains in building safety for those who experience his violence.

This is also about making it easier for the AUV to start desisting from some of his coercively controlling behaviours. We know, for example, that an AUV's substance using lifestyle can be intricately interwoven with his coercive controlling patterns. He might be using economic violence, in part, to maintain his family's financial capacity to support his habit. He might be engaging in a range of controlling behaviours so that during times in which he is obsessed with obtaining supply or is craving the substance (and therefore, has a very narrow focus), he can continue to force his partner to be responsible for just about everything required to keep family life ticking over. He might be forcing her into unwanted sex work or criminal activity to acquire money to feed his habit. He might be using a range of social violence, emotional abuse and acts of micro-aggression and micro-humiliations to make her cover up for the impacts of his substance use to his employer, friends, extended family, etc.

Think of mental health, for example anxiety. It is likely that an AUV with an anxiety disorder might use coercive controlling behaviours to make his family members act in ways that don't 'trigger' his anxiety. An AUV with obsessive compulsions, for example, might coerce family members to comply with his compulsive routines or anxiety-avoidant behaviours. The anxiety disorder doesn't cause his use of coercive control, but addressing it might make it easier, in the short-term, to work with the AUV on the factors that are driving his coercive controlling violence.

The AUV's experience of anxiety is no excuse for his use of coercive control. We want to make it easier, however, for him to choose non-controlling alternatives, rather than keep choosing to draw upon his male entitlement, keep choosing to feed his violence-supporting beliefs, and to keep choosing to blame his family members for 'making him feel anxious'.

Again, we need him to make non-violent and non-controlling choices even when he's intoxicated. Even when he's craving the substance. Even when he's coming down from a period of intoxication. Even when his anxiety is hitting the roof. Even when he's feel totally distraught due to intense feelings of trauma-related abandonment and unworthiness. 'But', particularly in our early work with him, when we are trying to make 'quick' gains in building safety for family members, doing what we can to make these choices easier for him can really matter.

All this differs between each AUV we work with. Not all of the men have experienced repeated, complex trauma. Some men who have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences have genuine difficulties in regulating emotions in a range of situations, others have more skills to draw upon. Not all of the men have complex needs as contributing factors, and for those this do, how this impacts their capability to make non-violent choices differ. This matters in our approach, and in our assessments of risk and harm.

## Shame

To briefly pick up a thread introduced a few paragraphs ago, AUV differ in their capacities to sit with shame. Some AUV will ignore experiencing shame at almost any cost. These can be adults who experience considerable shame anxiety, where shame is a chronic issue. They don't just experience intense, acute shame (that rises and falls 'rapidly') when they allow themselves to face up to how their behaviour has violated core aspects of their identity and values system; they also experience a constant underlying sense of shame in who they are, and are underlying highly anxious that they will be exposed as the worthless individuals that deep down they believe themselves to be.<sup>1</sup> And of course, there is collective shame, that AUV can experience when they are part of a minority group or community that suffers repeated experiences of being hated at, receiving messages and responses frequently that they shouldn't exist. When trauma is collectively experienced and intergenerational.

Shame is complex, and the men we work with differ in how they experience shame, and in their skills in being able to sit productively in shame. I believe that with *some* men, we 'molly coddle' them maybe just a little bit too much, perhaps even mother them too much, and inherently give them the message that we don't think they can deal with strong emotions like shame. Maybe this thinking comes from the part of me that just wants to yell at these men "grow up, stop acting like a three year old!".

We also, however, understandably need to be careful not to flood men with experiences of shame. There are definitely some men where we need to be very careful not to lead them into shame states that they can't handle, as for these men shame can so easily equal humiliation and therefore danger to those who experience his violence.

## Being shouldered up to use violence and control

Another issue regarding capability is to what extent has the AUFV been shouldered up to use DFSV by influential others in his life, and by the communities and institutions he's been a part of. It could be argued – bleakly and bluntly – that for men in general in a patriarchal society, a journey towards non-violence and non-controlling ways of being, to not cooperate with the male privilege and entitlement men have by virtue of being socialised as men, is a radical journey. That the default option is to use violence and control because systemic and structural patriarchy shoulders men up to benefit from male entitlement and privilege in a number of ways, including through the use of violence and male supremacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Note, this does not mean that these men need more 'self-esteem'.

Without opening up debates and complexities that would require yet another thesis, there is no doubt that some of the men we work with, more than others, have been shouldered up by their communities over the course of their life to use violence and control. Some men's use of coercive control is *heavily invested*, and has been so since they were young. Coercive control in the context of DFSV is patriarchal, *and* it is sometimes heavily biographical.

Some men began using patterned coercive control in their teens, shouldered up by peers who, like them, experienced repeated abuse and/or neglect, and began to build an identity of value and acceptance through dominant masculinities associated with violence and control, risk taking behaviour, and substance use. Coercive control becomes wrapped up in an attitude towards relationships and life, of how one needs to relate to others to ensure respect and to not be taken advantage of. And wrapped up in what it means to be a man in a heterosexual relationship. A way of being and understanding the world that becomes heavily invested (and entrenched, to various degrees) in his 20's and 30's.

Some men are shouldered up by other influences to use DFSV (discussion of child sexual abuse to follow – if you'd like to skip this, ignore the rest of this paragraph and continue from the next paragraph). For example, the boy who was sexually abuse by his father or an elder sibling, blames his mother for 'not protecting him', becomes exposed to misogynist influencers on social media, and develops an orientation towards degrading and punishing women in his relationships (and expecting that they should heal him). His experience of child sexual abuse in itself isn't responsible for him developing controlling and demeaning ways of relating to women in his adulthood intimate relationships (and more broadly). The social media and other micro- and macro-communities (e.g. peer groups) that he belongs or belonged to have shouldered him up to do so, by influencing the meaning that he makes out of events in his life such as his experiences of being abused.

Being shouldered up to use DFSV doesn't mean that one isn't capable of making non-violent and non-controlling choices. But the more that one has been enabled by communities and influencers that one feels akin to, especially if this has occurred biographically over long periods of time, the more difficult it will be for the AUV to make these choices. This relates to the second general consideration of choice I will explore below – privilege levers.

There are many factors that can influence how difficult it might be for an AUV to make non-violent, non-controlling choices. It's no wonder that AUV who participate in behaviour change programs respond in different ways and journey towards non-violence (or even further away from it) at different paces. This work requires us to not come from a singular stance that all (or even most) AUV need skills in emotional regulation, or that all (or even most) have been deeply traumatised, or that all are equally capable of making non-violent and non-controlling choices.

There is so much to assess – and of course, our assessments will always be imperfect. I liken assessment to having a suitcase or an internal USB drive in our minds full of the important things that ideally we'd like to assess each time with each AUV – and to assess on an ongoing basis as new information and insights come to hand.

We need to console ourselves however to the reality that with each assessment, we might only get a window into a few of the things, and not necessarily most of them. It feels important to be on a journey to understand the fullness of the contents of the suitcase or USB drive, so that we know what's important to assess when we can... so that we can take opportunities as they come to identify serious risk and harm.

And so that we can predict the types of (possibly upcoming) circumstances in which the AUV might escalate their use of violent and controlling behaviour.

## Levers

Related to the concept of shouldering-up are the levers that an AUV might draw upon, that:

- enables him to extend his tactics of coercive control, and/or to introduce new ones, either because the lever knowingly supports and colludes with his behaviour at least to some degree, or is unknowingly being manipulated or used without intending to collude;
- provides access to resources that he can use to maintain or extend his tactics of coercive control;
- covers up for his use of DFSV; and/or
- participates directly in the use of DFSV against the victim-survivor(s).

Of course, there are levers everywhere that AUV can use and deploy – this is why the odds are so often stacked up against victim-survivors, why their options and choices can be so limited. The numerous levers available to AUV enable them to enact the ‘trap wires’ or ‘fence wires’ that victim-survivors often experience for themselves and their children (see the excellent Insight Exchange resource [Being Safety](#),<sup>2</sup> one of the most important reads for any practitioner or responder seeking to support women and children experiencing DFSV).

While levers are ‘in the water’ of our patriarchal society, AUV vary significantly in the extent, nature and range of levers that they can draw upon. For example, some have greater access to *privilege levers* than others, such as through being in hierarchical positions of corporate or other forms of economic, social or political power, or through being part of law enforcement or intelligence agencies, defence forces, or legal systems. Some have peer associations that can act as levers. There are also extended family or cultural contexts, such as when the extended family of an AUV joins in with the use of honour-based violence.

The lever considerations here are of course numerous. However, assessing which levers – privilege levers and otherwise – are being used by the AUV, matters a lot in understanding the choices he is making, and in understanding the risk he poses and the harm caused by his coercive controlling patterns. Knowing the range and nature of these levers also matters in how we respond to him, including in our risk management plans and strategies.

They further matter in how we partner with adult and child victim-survivors to reduce these harms: sometimes, the most important work we can do is to help them to open up the space between the trap/fence wires to improve their space for action, by focusing on the levers being used by the AUV... where we can, where we might have some influence.

Understanding privilege levers also helps us to ally with victim-survivors in not leaving them alone to manage risk. Some risk management options are not easily available to victim-survivors because the perpetrator would have ‘too much to lose’. Users of DFSV who benefit from significant leadership, executive, reputational or other forms of status and power might become more dangerous if their status and entitlements are threatened due to service system and victim-survivor responses.

As a result, victim-survivors are often left carrying risk for themselves and their children over years, yet our service systems are not set up to support her over this long-term. With AUV who has significant privilege levers, often our most important work is patient, multi-agency collaboration to try to open up more options for her to take to manage risk and limit harms.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.insightexchange.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Being-Safety.pdf>

It is crucial that victim-survivors are not left alone to manage the blowback if as a result of service system and other responses, the AUV feels that his status and entitlements are being 'taken away from him'. AUV make meaning out of each and every response directed towards them. We can anticipate and monitor the meaning that the AUV is making. We can do our best to [follow the victim-survivor's lead](#)<sup>3</sup> to determine what responses to the AUV might or might not be safe at the current point in time, versus what might be taking too much of a risk. We can collaborate across services, led by the victim-survivor's voice, to try to make options and responses that might be too much of a risk now, more possible at a later or upcoming point. Too often, victim-survivors are left along to manage the blowback.

## Planning

The use of each violent and controlling behaviour by an adult causing DFSV harm is a choice, each and every time. However, when and how the choice is made differs.

Sometimes, a choice is made 'in the heat of the moment', where the AUV didn't wake up that morning choosing to engage in a particular act of violence or coercive control, but rather, chose to do so perhaps minutes or even seconds before carrying out the act. Of course, what makes the choice easier in these moments is that the AUV has made the same or similar choices before, over and over again.

Indeed, the AUV has not only made the choice during these moments to use violence and control, they've made choices not to engage in efforts to pay attention to the numerous signs that they are on a path towards making that choice in the moments and hours leading up to the act. Of course, he might not be very motivated to understand this path, due to his violence-supporting thinking and beliefs system giving him the green light to use these acts to control, enforce his demands, and to punish. He might, or might not, have much genuine interest at a particular point in time in our work with him towards learning about these opportunities to disrupt the path. Each AUV differs, and will respond differently to behaviour change program explorations of mapping chains of circumstances — body-reactions — feelings — cognitions — decisions/actions leading up to the 'incident'.

Other choices, however, are not made in the 'heat of the moment'. Many coercive controlling behaviours require planning, thought, even a degree of research. They can't just be implemented in the moment.

We can talk here about 'upstream' and 'downstream' choices. As mentioned above, even downstream choices, where the choice is made in the 'heat of the moment', involve a series of choices made a bit less downstream that work towards the user of violence making that downstream choice (maybe you could call these choices 'midstream', or 'midstream entering downstream'). Earlier series of choices that lay the ground/foundations for this downstream choice.

This is of course at the heart of preliminary safety planning and early behaviour change work, to help the AUV identify the choices he makes that are a bit less downstream and that lay the foundations for the downstream act of violence, and to see the extent to which he is motivated to make alternative choices that interrupt his characteristic pathways towards choosing to use violence 'in the heat of the moment'. By doing so, we get to learn the belief-based, motivational and other barriers that lead him to hesitate putting effort into addressing these choices that he often makes along the path towards using violent and controlling behaviour.

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<sup>3</sup> See the great Insight Exchange resource <https://www.insightexchange.net/follow-my-lead/>

We also of course explore with him values, core aspects of his identity, aspirations, etc. that are not consistent with these choices, and help him to use this dissonance as motivational fuel to work towards making different choices. As we go along, we assess:

- the extent to which he can genuinely reach into values, aspirations and aspects-of-identity inconsistent with the continued use of violence;<sup>4</sup>
- how other parts of his value system might continue to support his use of violent and controlling behaviour;<sup>5</sup>
- how he might weaponise values such as trust, fairness, respect and safety to justify his behaviour rather than critique it;<sup>6</sup> and
- where self-efficacy<sup>7</sup> and response-efficacy<sup>8</sup> sits in relation to him being able to be a preferred self even if he allows himself to experience the dissonance and sit in the resulting shame.

We also get to see what other acts of violent and controlling behaviour he makes along this path towards the ‘incident’ of violence. The various controlling and harmful behaviours he uses in the moments and hours leading up to the ‘incident’ together make up the whole *episode* of his use of violence.

But in addition to these less downstream choices made and behaviours used in the moments and hours leading up to the ‘incident’, some AUV, more than others, engage in substantial upstream planning and efforts to conceive of and execute their coercive controlling tactics. A lot of thinking and research time, done when they are not ‘in the heat of the moment’ in terms of heightened emotion.

AUV vary in the amount of time and effort they put into upstream planning of coercive controlling tactics. Most put at least some planning and effort in – I haven’t met many AUV who *only* make violent and controlling choices in the heat of the moment. But AUV differ significantly in the amount of upstream time and effort they put in to control family members. Even amongst two AUV who both adopt significant patterns of coercive control, the nature and degree of upstream planning can differ. Some put in substantial planning, such that it’s their ‘mission in life’ to control, degrade, punish, humiliate her. Others put in much less, or relatively less.

The breadth and width of a perpetrator’s tactics of coercive control, and the amount and nature of the upstream planning and preparation adopted to execute them, can say a lot about the seriousness of risk, and the extent of harms on child and family functioning.

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<sup>4</sup> Just supporting the AUV to choose a few values from a values list and to talk about them for 20 minutes or so isn’t sufficient... working with him to identify, keep coming back to, thicken and to genuinely explore a value system that is incompatible with the continued use of violent and controlling behaviour, a value and ethical system that *is meaningful for him*, and not just something we superficially attempt to impose through a single ‘becoming the man you want to be’ activity (as useful as these activities can be), is one of the many core challenges of our work.

<sup>5</sup> AUV sometimes have ‘elephants in the room’ values that they draw upon to support their use of violent and controlling behaviours. These values and aspects of their identity can be deeply held.

<sup>6</sup> “She is never *fair* to me!” “You can’t *trust* women these days...”

<sup>7</sup> “I couldn’t be that man even if I tried... that man I’d like to be is out of reach ...”

<sup>8</sup> “I’d like to be that man, and I could if I tried, but that’s not going to wash in my world. Take your lattes and your feminist beliefs to a café. Out here, you have to be tough to be fair, and being honest means calling a spade a spade...”

## Intention to cause specific impacts

The final consideration focuses on the intention of the AUFV to cause specific impacts stemming from the use of violent and controlling behaviour. This is complex to outline, as of course all violent and controlling behaviours are intentional, in the sense that each behaviour is designed to produce one or more specific impacts.

Even when a choice is made to use violent or controlling behaviour in the heat of the moment, the choice comes with an intention to produce particular impacts. An AUV who calls his partner a 'slut' is often (though not always) intending to demean her sense of worth so that, in his view, she is less likely to want to 'sleep with other men'. An AUV who makes a rapid choice to stand over and punch the wall next to her is intentionally using fear to try to control her behaviour ("don't you ever do that to me again..."). An AUV who follows his partner while they are moving to another room to escape his escalating violence is making a deliberate choice to attempt to overpower their resistance and to tune out (or not care about) their signs of distress and their humanity, and to tune into his own ruminative victim stance cognitions and thought-stacking.<sup>9</sup>

There is always intent. However, each violent and controlling behaviour, and each pattern of behaviours, has a range of impacts. And of course, the impacts of any particular violent or controlling behaviour depends on the previous impacts of this behaviour, how and when this behaviour has been used in the past, and the impacts of other behaviours that the AUFV uses.

While an AUV engages in a choice to use violent and controlling behaviour to produce particular impacts – whether that choice is made downstream in the heat of the moment, or upstream involving significant research and planning – he is generally not aware of the full range of the impacts of that behaviour. In other words, there are some impacts he is aware of and is intending, and other impacts he is probably not aware of.

For example, he might be aware that the impact of a particular behaviour is to make his ex/partner too afraid to do something that he doesn't want her to do, or too afraid to not do the behaviour he believes she should be expected to do (the behaviour he believes he is entitled to). He might be deliberately using fear in these situations as a means of control, and to silence resistance or dissent. Or he might deliberately be using gaslighting so that she continues to doubt herself and her reality. Or he might use numerous other tactics, all with intent to cause particular impacts towards a goal of controlling her behaviour.

He is aware of these particular impacts – he is *intending* to produce them.

However, there are other impacts of these behaviours that he might or might not be aware of. He might or might not, for example, be aware that she is losing all respect for and trust in him. He might or might not be tuned into how real intimacy between them has been eroded in their relationship. He might or might not be aware that he is actually losing a lot of self-respect (within himself) by continuing these behaviours. He might or might not be aware that his son is starting to disrespect girls at school, or that his children are falling behind academically or are beginning to act very cautiously around him.

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<sup>9</sup> Because these cognitions are so automatic, and often because there is ruminative anxiety associated with them, AUV generally aren't very aware of the specific thoughts they are thinking when making heat of the moment choices to use violence, and aren't aware of the choices they make to thought-stack and to stew in these thoughts. Some of the choices made by AUV are without the adult being aware at the time that they are making the choice, such as to stew in particular violence-supporting cognitions. Of course, other choices are made with full awareness at the time.

And if he is aware of these impacts, or some of them, he might, or might not, care. Or he might care (or not-care) about these impacts in particular ways.

AUV differ in the extent of awareness of the impacts of their violent and controlling behaviours. One AUV might become distressed to learn of the specific impacts of his behaviour on his children, and potentially become motivated to change some aspects of his behaviour as a result;<sup>10</sup> another might be seeking to produce these very impacts on his children, to prove to authorities that his partner is not a fit mother, or be attempting to alienate his children from her.

As a further example, one AUV might not be attempting to place a wedge between their children and his partner, or not be attempting to destroy her worth as a mother, but nevertheless his violent and controlling actions towards her produce these very impacts; while another AUV might not only be producing these impacts, but be *intending to produce them and knowingly produces them*.

It's fair to ask “but doesn't it matter what the intention is, we don't consider behaviour to be violent or not according to the intentions behind the behaviour, we focus on the impacts. If the impacts are the same, why does it matter?”

I believe it does matter, as the intention behind the behaviour says something about the seriousness of risk, and the degree of harm caused to adult and child victim-survivors. In general, AUV who are more aware of the range of impacts that their violent and controlling behaviour causes, and who continue these behaviours despite knowing these impacts, are likely to be further along the high-risk high-harm spectrum.

Not only does it matter when it comes to our risk and harm assessments, it also matters in terms of our approach.

We often hear that ‘perpetrators are not aware of...’ as a blanket statement, rather than taking the approach of being curious about what each AUV is and isn't aware of. If an AUV is knowingly producing particular impacts because that's tied up in his mission to control, punish and to hurt the victim-survivor, or he considers these impacts to be ‘collateral damage’<sup>11</sup> based on his righteous sense that he is being denied his ‘rights’ and denied what he feels ‘entitled to’, then we need to think carefully about our work with him. ‘Educating’ him about these impacts might not be a useful approach – it might even cause inadvertent harm if the AUV is left with an even better understanding of how to approach their mission to control, entrap and punish.

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<sup>10</sup> As I might outline at another time, I find overall assessments of ‘motivation to change’ simplistic. I've come across so many AUV where it seems not very helpful – if not counter-productive – to ascribe a singular ‘motivation to change’ stage. The motivational journey by an AUV can be uneven across different parts of their patterns of DFSV. An AUV might be in contemplation or action stage with respect to not exposing his children to his use of violence, but be deep in pre-contemplation in relation to his use of sexualised violence. Or he might be at the action stage with respect to desisting from the use of physical violence, but just entering contemplation in terms of the use and impacts of emotional violence. I have found so many AUV who have been assessed as being in the ‘contemplation’ or even ‘preparation’ stages who are still firmly pre-contemplative in the use of some of their coercive controlling behaviours that have a substantial impact on his family members.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, many AUV will not describe these impacts as ‘collateral damage’, as they do not want to appear as ‘callous’. However, while they might not use this language, we can assess the extent to which they truly do care about these impacts, through how they respond to our engagement and interventions with them, the discourse they use during sessions, and what violent and controlling behaviours they continue to use.

And amongst those who are aware of more of the impacts of their behaviour, there's still nuanced considerations.

One AUV, for example, might be aware that his partner's mental health is suffering badly because of his sustained use of coercive control – and that's exactly what he's intending to produce. Another, however, while equally aware of these impacts, isn't so much on a mission to undermine his partner's mental health, but rather simply doesn't care if this is a 'by product' of his behaviour, because he so intensely believes that he has been wronged by them and that "if they can't take what I'm dishing up to them, they should get out of the kitchen and stop being in my face all the time about...". A third AUV might be somewhat oblivious to how their partner's mental health state is deteriorating because he is so self-focused; this AUV, if supported skilfully and at the right time to become aware of these impacts, might become somewhat motivated to change some aspects of his behaviour.

In other words, key questions include:

- What impacts of his use of violent and controlling behaviour is he aware of?
- To his ex/partner? To his children? To others? To himself?
- What impacts is he not aware of?
- What impacts is he intending to produce?
- What impacts (to his ex/partner, to his children) is he not intending to produce?
- What would his reaction be if he started learning about these impacts? (noting this could be different depending on who is being impacted)
- Would he care? Does he seem to care? What might be care about?
- Would he feel some shame or distress, would 'facing up' to the impacts assist him towards developing some degree of internal motivation to change (some aspects) of his violent and controlling behaviour? Can he be helped to see how these impacts are not consistent with who he wants to be, for how he wants to live his life?
- Is there potential for an awareness of these impacts to create cognitive dissonance with his values, aspirations and cherished aspects of his identity?
- What impacts can be explored with him 'safely' within his current zone of shame tolerance?
- Or would he consider these impacts to be 'collateral damage'? How strong is his righteous sense of vindication and justification to continue using these behaviours?
- What impacts is he willing to walk past, to tune out of, because of the strength of his mission to control, punish, seek 'justice' or entrap?
- What impacts can he justify living with because he doesn't see them as impacts of his behaviour, but rather, the result of his ex/partner's actions?<sup>12</sup>
- Would he be interested in learning about these impacts because he is looking for new ways to intensify or maintain his control and social entrapment, new ways to punish and make life hell for his ex/partner, particularly given now that the system is watching and he has to learn new ways to achieve his goals?

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<sup>12</sup> "These impacts on our children will stop right now if she drops her unreasonable demands..."

## Concluding thoughts

Our behaviour change work with adults who use DFSV continues to evolve. I've written about a tiny fraction of this learning here. Or maybe it's not all learning, but rather new ways of describing what we always knew, or sort-of knew.

How do we apply this learning? In part, the implications are spending more time with each AUV in our interventions and programs, to understand them more as individuals, and to combine this individual-based understanding with the power of the group. But we come up against constraint after constraint – funding limitations, workforce limitations, contractual limitations and the administrative pressure of 'moving bums through seats', and of course AUV pressures (who do not want more intense or longer programs).

It's glib to say that we need to work 'smarter' with the time we have with AUV in our interventions and programs. I don't know what the 'answers' are. I just know that despite all the pressures, we can't have monolithic expectations of our programs.

Desistance for the use of violent and controlling behaviour is a journey. Especially when we consider secondary and tertiary desistance.<sup>13</sup> Our programs and interventions are one, and only one influence on AUV desistance journeys. Where each program participant is at on a desistance journey at the end of their participation in a program, compared to the point in which they started, will differ from participant to participant.

Being responsive to these differences perhaps means, in our men's behaviour change programs, combining group-work with some 1-1 sessions. Not as an add-on, but as an essential component of the program.

It also means thinking about how we respond when someone is down very deep rabbit holes of feeling justified to hurt their family members. Or when the task for them to stop using violent and controlling behaviour might be harder for them than it might be for others. Or when they are starting to put, or have been putting, a lot of upstream planning into their controlling behaviours. Or when they appear not to be motivated to take steps towards behaviour change through increased awareness – even when introduced very carefully and gradually – of the harm they are causing. Or when they might be aware of these very harms, and are intending to cause them, or when for various reasons they don't seem to care.

Or when they are some of these things, and not others. Or all of these things. Or some of these things at this current point in time, but maybe not at another time.

Sometimes, having a responder(s) who knows where an AUV is at with some of these things, even when the adult is not likely at the moment to take significant (or any) steps towards behaviour change, can be of help to victim-survivors. Sometimes it can help them to feel and be less alone in managing risk, and in trying to limit the harms caused by the person's behaviour.

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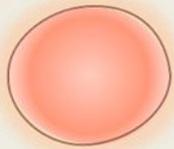
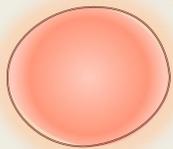
<sup>13</sup> Primary desistance = stopping the behaviour. Secondary desistance = becoming a 'new me' who no longer wants to engage in the behaviour. Tertiary desistance = finding a community that values this 'new me' and with whom values and aspirations of non-violence are shared.

I want to talk with him about his behaviour and it's impacts on his ex/partner and family

I want to talk about what's been done to me... by my other half / my ex, by the cops, by the feminazis...

I must hold him accountable!

No one wants to listen to me!



A practice model for responding to the "I'm the victim here!" thinking of adults who perpetrate violent and controlling behaviour



practitioner / responder

adult user of domestic, family and sexual violence



**Male entitlement:** setting unfair expectations on his ex/partner to manage his emotions (to do all the emotional labour work he should be doing for himself / with his support networks / with her/him/they as part of connected intimacy), and blaming his ex/partner when they do not conform to his entitlement-based and patriarchally-informed rules he sets for their behaviour

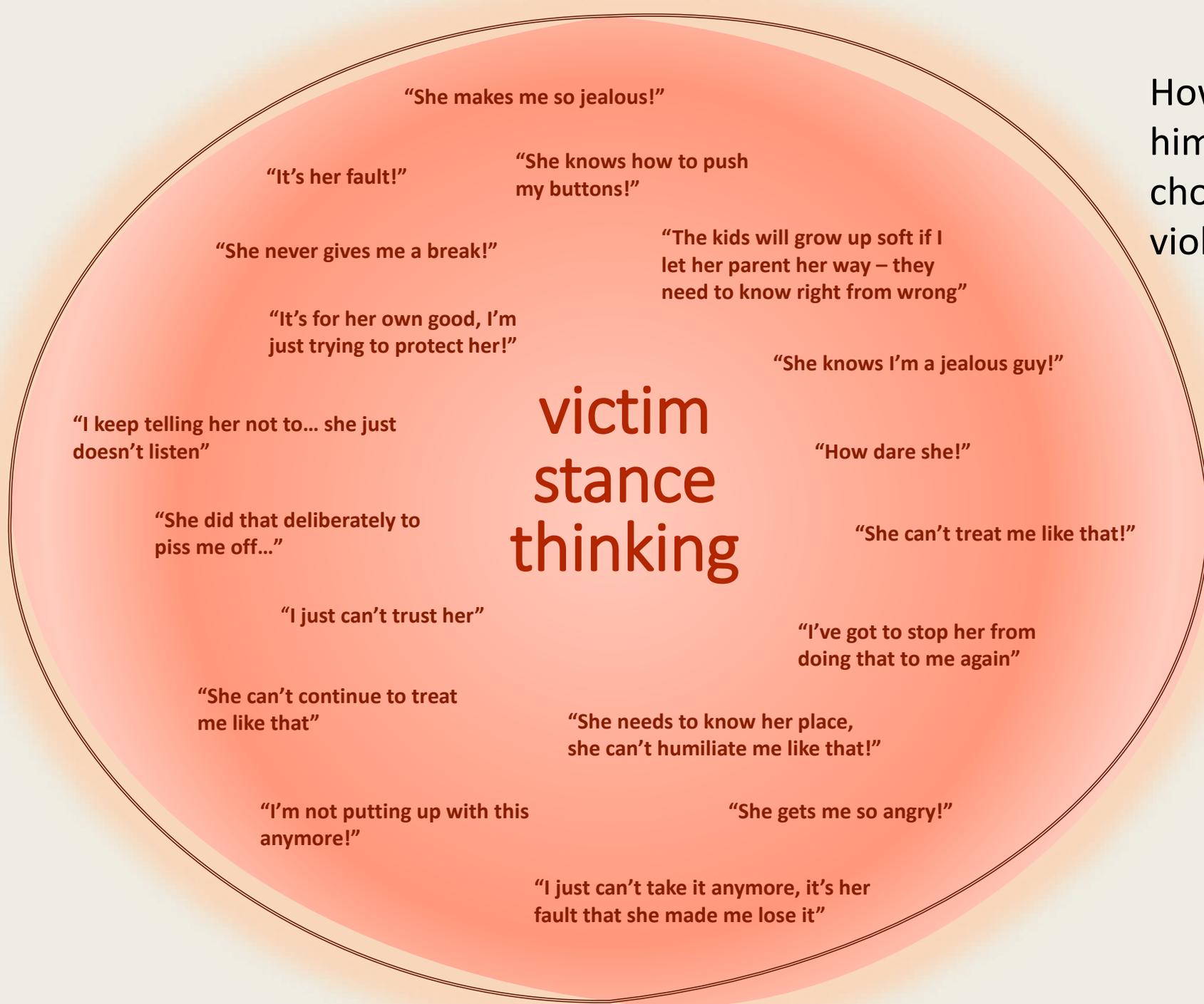
**Complex trauma** (interacting with male entitlement): Totally misperceiving and misconstruing her/his/their actions based on his intense emotional vulnerabilities and experiences of being 'triggered' by her needs to have a life not governed by his vulnerabilities... when she is not the 'mother' he expects her to be, he feels hostility and abandonment

## victim stance

**Repeated experiences of victimisation** (not from his ex/partner), due to being part of one or more minoritised communities who are deliberately marginalised and hated-against due to structural and systemic oppression... users of violence who do not have privilege levers other than gender, and who use violence *in part* as a chosen way to cope with oppression

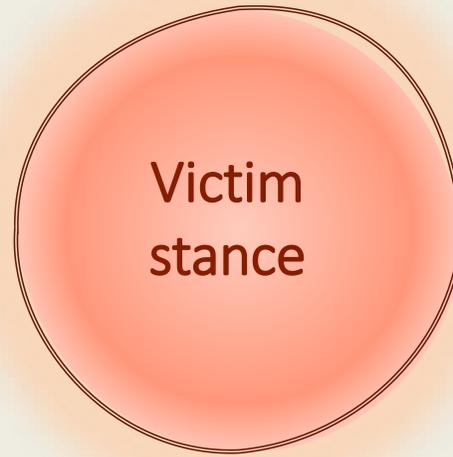
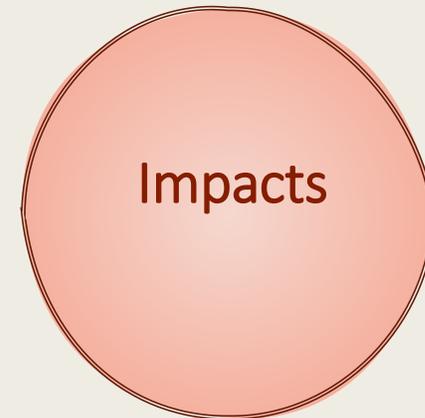
**Users of violence who have privilege levers in addition to gender** and who might 'play up' "I'm the victim here!" impression management as part of systems abuse tactics... who put more upstream planning into attempting to convince responders that their ex/partner is 'the problem' or the 'unfit parent'

These thoughts, fed by entitlement-based beliefs (sometimes intersecting with the meaning he makes of and his responses to any complex trauma he might have experienced), provides himself with permission to use a range of coercive controlling tactics to shut down behaviour that he sees as 'unfair', 'unreasonable', 'defiant', or as 'victimising' or 'bothering' him



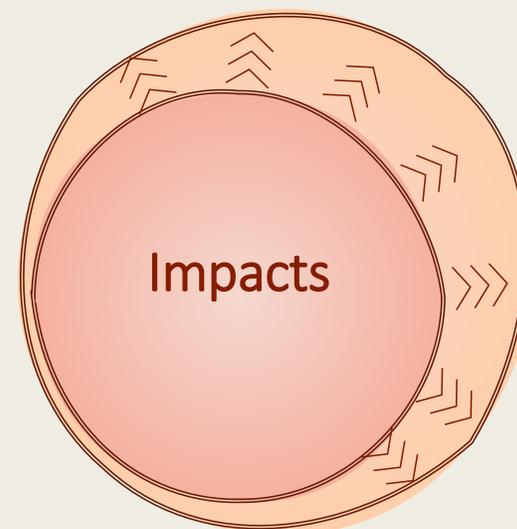
How he winds himself up to choose to use violence

Some adult users of DFV are able to conceal their behaviours from service systems, and from other potential responders in their extended families, natural networks and communities. However, in other situations, their harmful behaviours become more visible over time, due to the problems that their behaviours cause for family members and for their own lives. As their harmful behaviours become 'bigger' and cause greater impacts – and as service systems and other responders possibly begin to intensify their responses to the adult's behaviour – the adult can tend to 'double down' in their victim stance orientation.

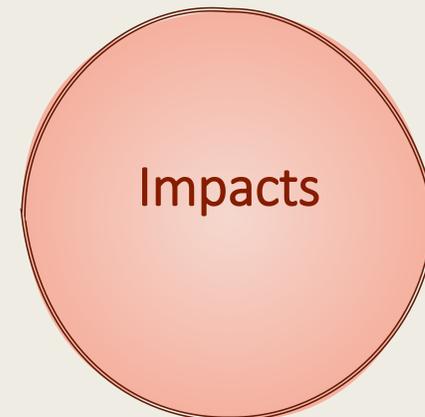


Much gratitude to MBCP practitioner, supervisor and trainer Phil Jones for introducing me to an earlier version of this 'four circles' model, that he in turn developed from practitioners in Western Australia. Thank you also to Sarah May (MBCP practitioner, supervisor, trainer, anti-violence mobiliser) who helped me work through some of the nuances and complexities.

It is quite common for adult persons using DFV to interpret actions by police, courts, corrections, child protection and other authorities in response to their behaviour as an 'injustice'. For First Nations, LGBTIQA+SB folks, and for communities of colour, the structural and systemic violence from these institutions has indeed been colonial and highly destructive (even genocidal). These institutions also respond, however, to attempt to manage risk and build community safety. The accountability and risk management mechanisms enacted by these service system responders often result in the adult feeling more aggrieved as they retreat further into their victim stance.

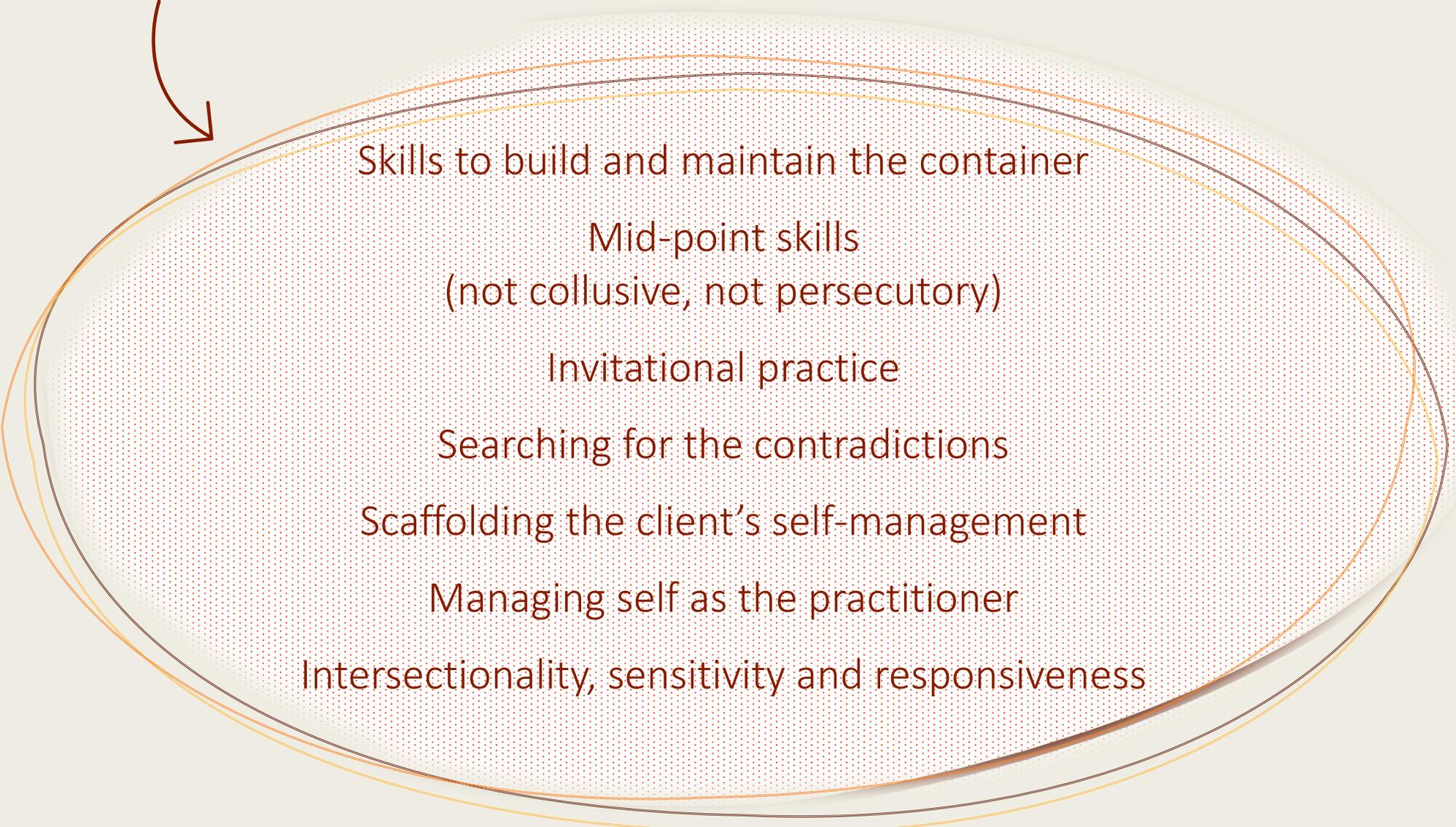


The adult is likely to be very enmeshed in victim stance thinking when a program starts work with him. While some adult users of DFV will deliberately 'play up' their victim stance orientation to win your agreement that they have experienced a series of grave injustices, to a greater or lesser extent, their victim stance thinking is the 'sea that they swim in'. Many adult users of DFV genuinely believe that they have been treated highly unjustly both by their ex/partner and by service system responders.



# Conversational container

One approach is therefore to patiently create a conversational container that scaffolds and supports the adult user of DFV to venture out from his victim stance orientation to a place where he can begin to take a look at his behaviour and its impacts, and to explore his values and aspirational self.



Skills to build and maintain the container

Mid-point skills  
(not collusive, not persecutory)

Invitational practice

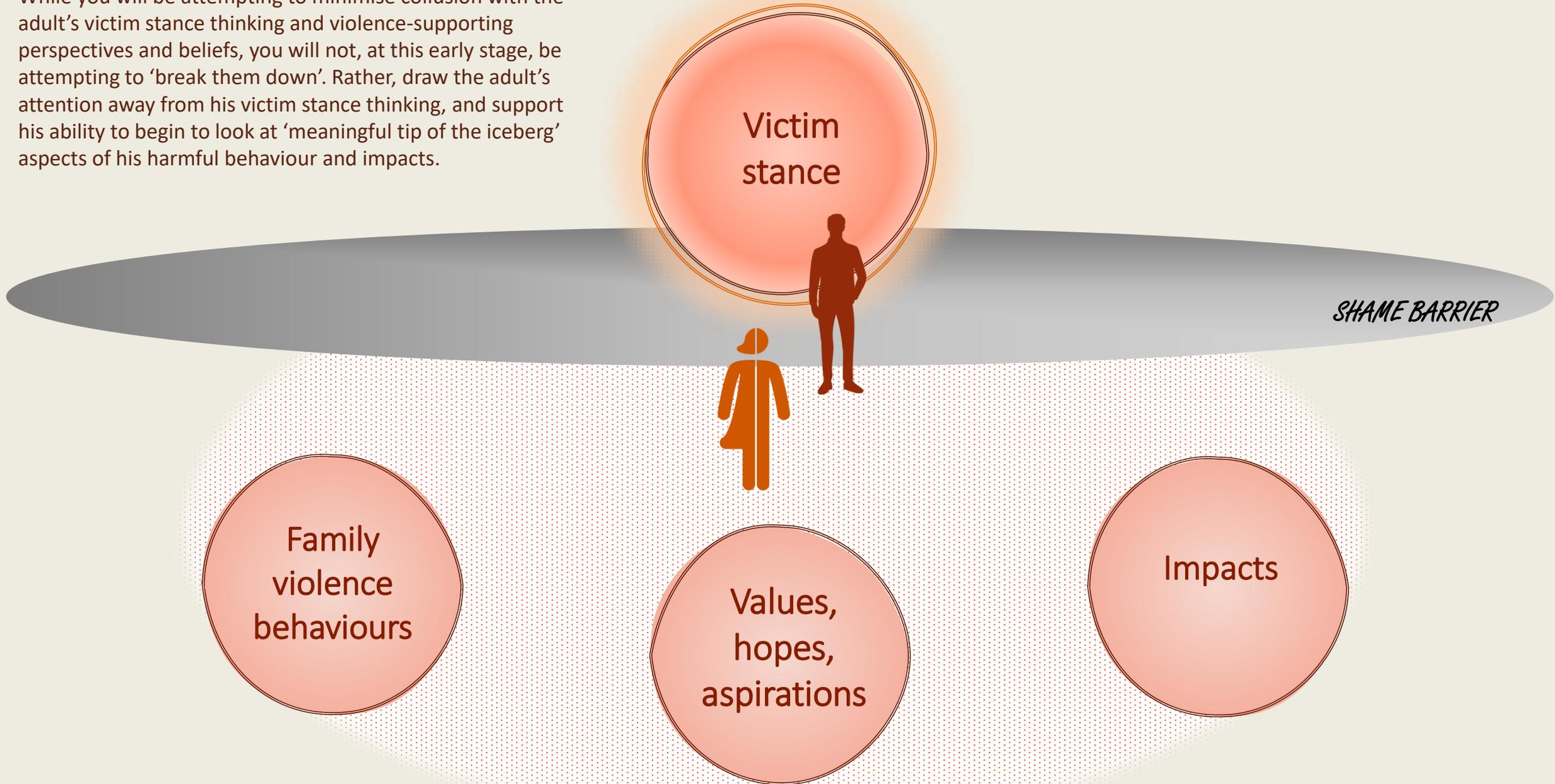
Searching for the contradictions

Scaffolding the client's self-management

Managing self as the practitioner

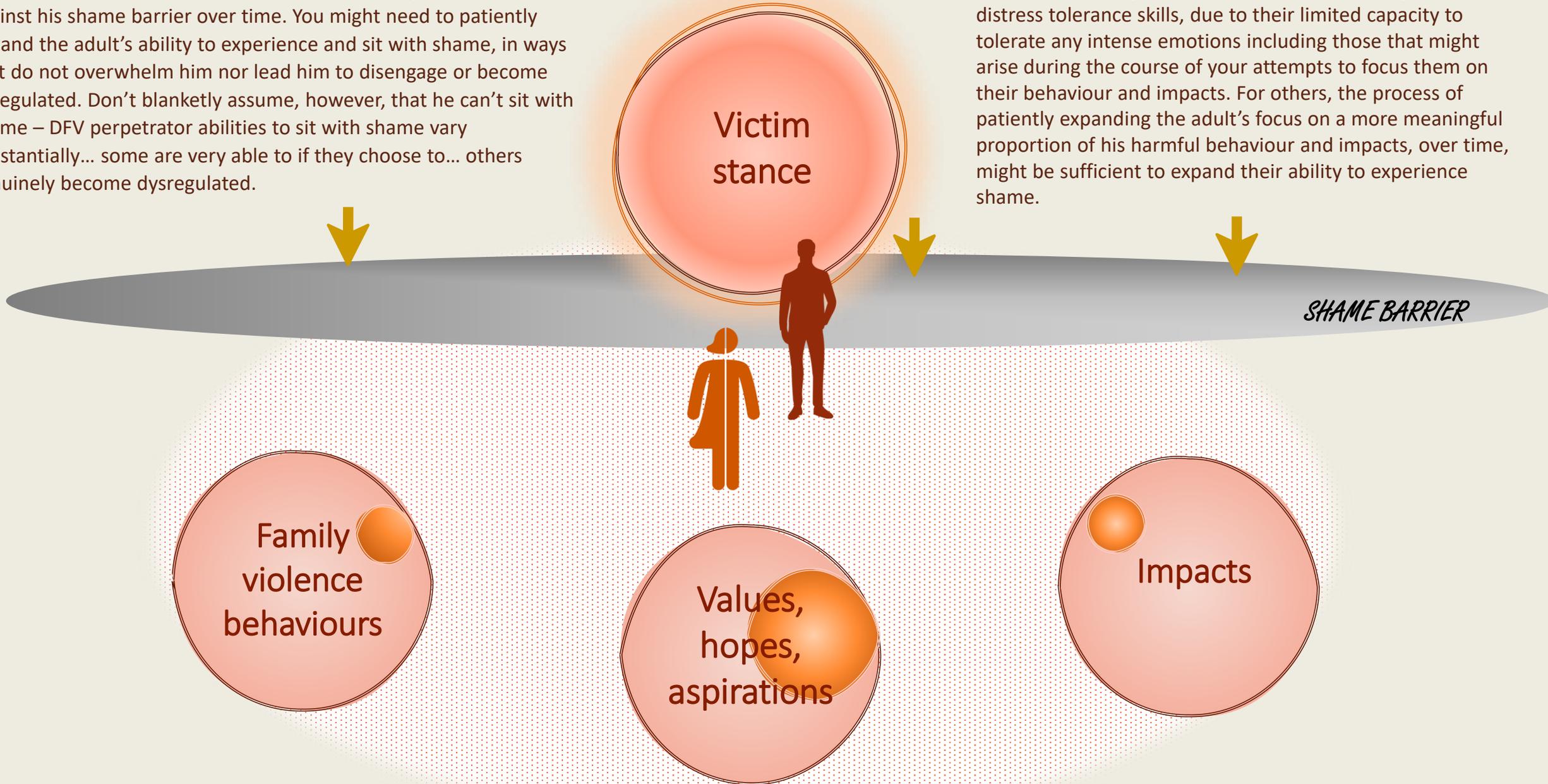
Intersectionality, sensitivity and responsiveness

While you will be attempting to minimise collusion with the adult's victim stance thinking and violence-supporting perspectives and beliefs, you will not, at this early stage, be attempting to 'break them down'. Rather, draw the adult's attention away from his victim stance thinking, and support his ability to begin to look at 'meaningful tip of the iceberg' aspects of his harmful behaviour and impacts.



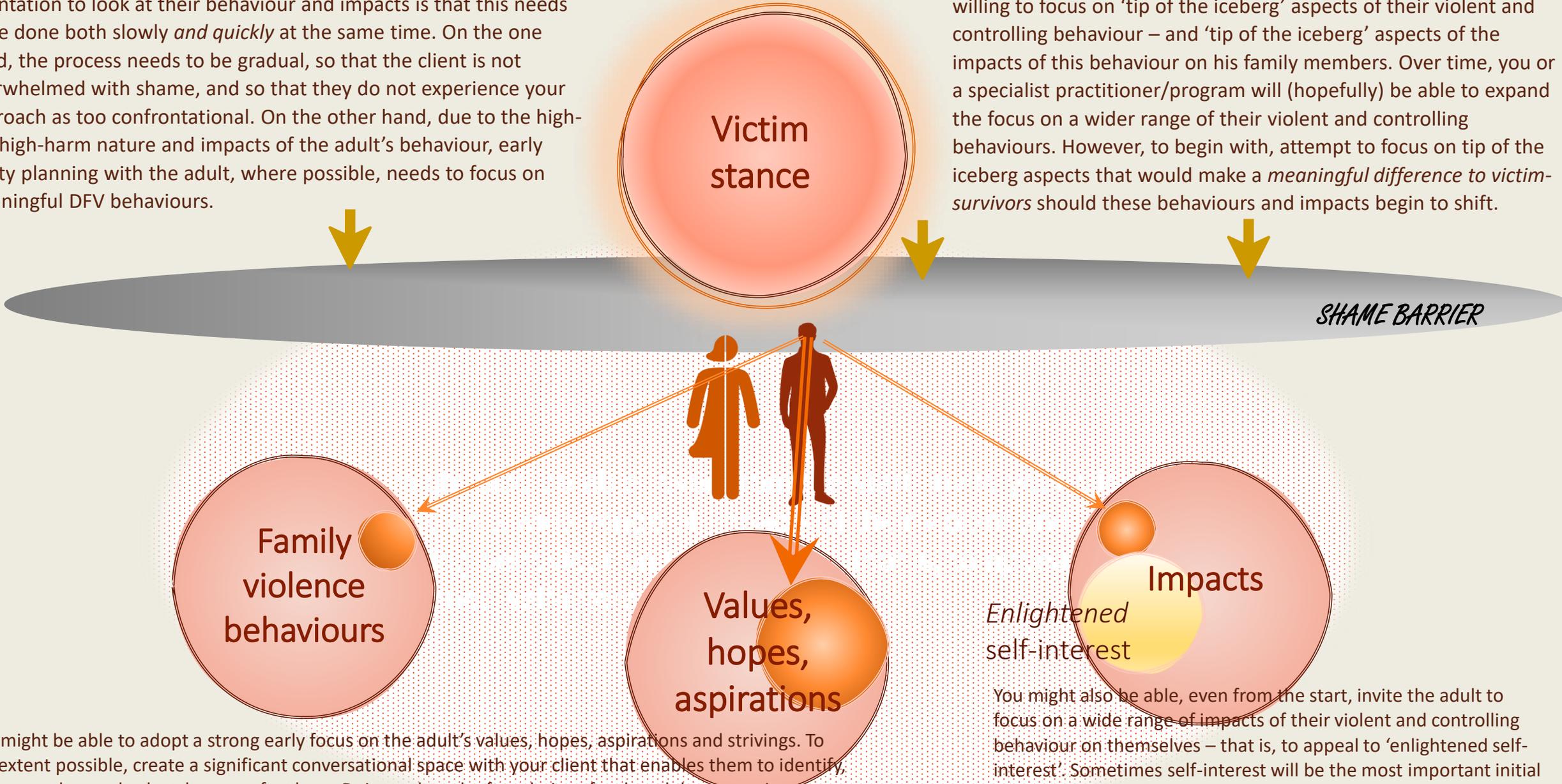
To do so, assess the adult's shame tolerance, and gently push up against his shame barrier over time. You might need to patiently expand the adult's ability to experience and sit with shame, in ways that do not overwhelm him nor lead him to disengage or become unregulated. Don't blanketly assume, however, that he can't sit with shame – DFV perpetrator abilities to sit with shame vary substantially... some are very able to if they choose to... others genuinely become dysregulated.

For some, this might require early work to strengthen their distress tolerance skills, due to their limited capacity to tolerate any intense emotions including those that might arise during the course of your attempts to focus them on their behaviour and impacts. For others, the process of patiently expanding the adult's focus on a more meaningful proportion of his harmful behaviour and impacts, over time, might be sufficient to expand their ability to experience shame.



The paradox of drawing the client out of their victim stance orientation to look at their behaviour and impacts is that this needs to be done both *slowly and quickly* at the same time. On the one hand, the process needs to be gradual, so that the client is not overwhelmed with shame, and so that they do not experience your approach as too confrontational. On the other hand, due to the high-risk high-harm nature and impacts of the adult's behaviour, early safety planning with the adult, where possible, needs to focus on meaningful DFV behaviours.

The adult might, during the early stages of his journey, be only willing to focus on 'tip of the iceberg' aspects of their violent and controlling behaviour – and 'tip of the iceberg' aspects of the impacts of this behaviour on his family members. Over time, you or a specialist practitioner/program will (hopefully) be able to expand the focus on a wider range of their violent and controlling behaviours. However, to begin with, attempt to focus on tip of the iceberg aspects that would make a *meaningful difference to victim-survivors* should these behaviours and impacts begin to shift.

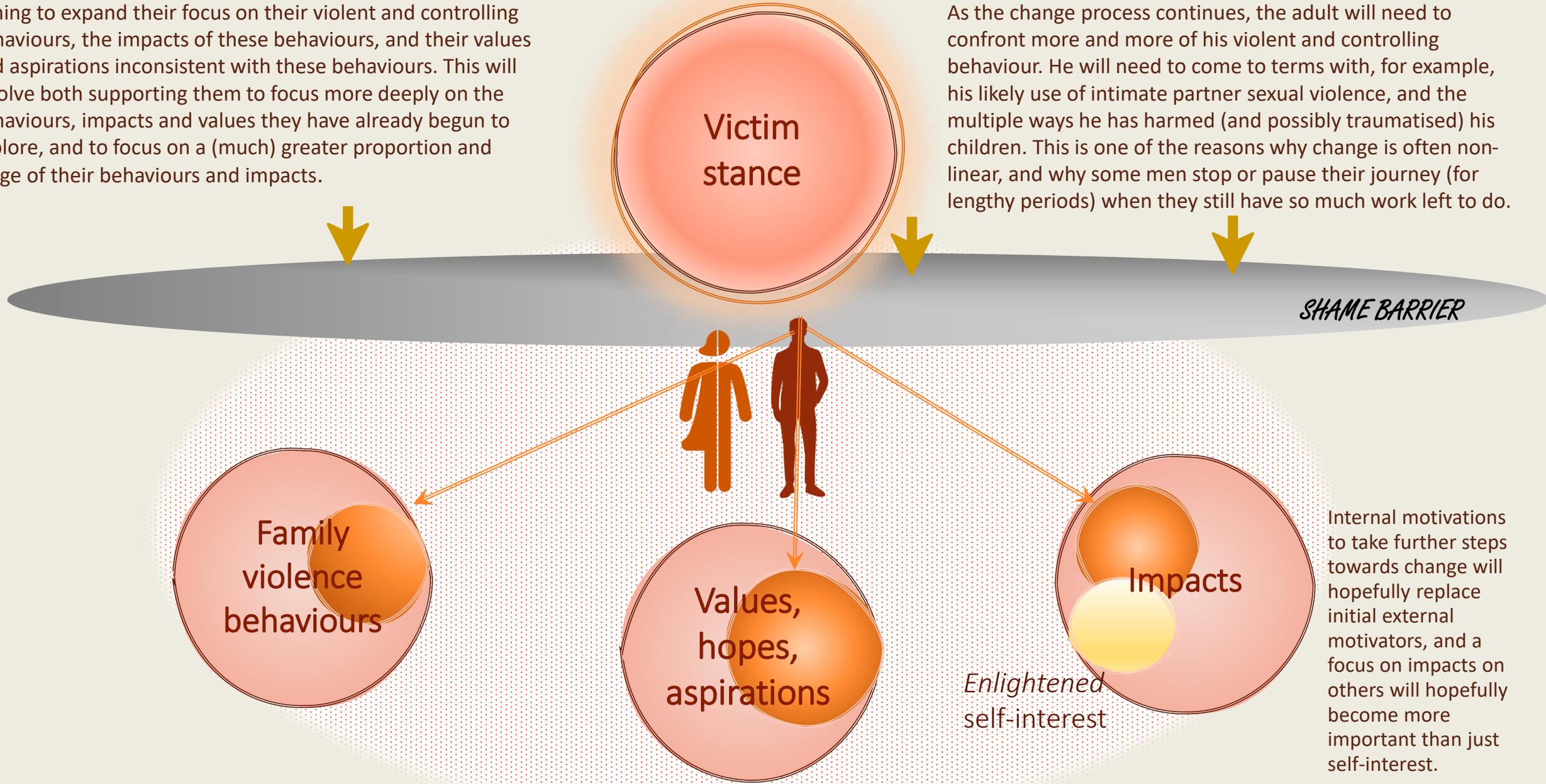


You might be able to adopt a strong early focus on the adult's values, hopes, aspirations and strivings. To the extent possible, create a significant conversational space with your client that enables them to identify, explore and unpack what these are for them. Doing so lays the foundations for the adult to experience dissonance between violent and controlling behaviours and their impacts, on the one hand, and his hopes and aspirations, on the other. That is, dissonance between his behavioural and aspirational selves.

You might also be able, even from the start, invite the adult to focus on a wide range of impacts of their violent and controlling behaviour on themselves – that is, to appeal to 'enlightened self-interest'. Sometimes self-interest will be the most important initial motivators to take steps towards change, before other-centred motivations to stop harming others (might) arise or strengthen.

Over time, you or a specialist program or practitioner will be aiming to expand their focus on their violent and controlling behaviours, the impacts of these behaviours, and their values and aspirations inconsistent with these behaviours. This will involve both supporting them to focus more deeply on the behaviours, impacts and values they have already begun to explore, and to focus on a (much) greater proportion and range of their behaviours and impacts.

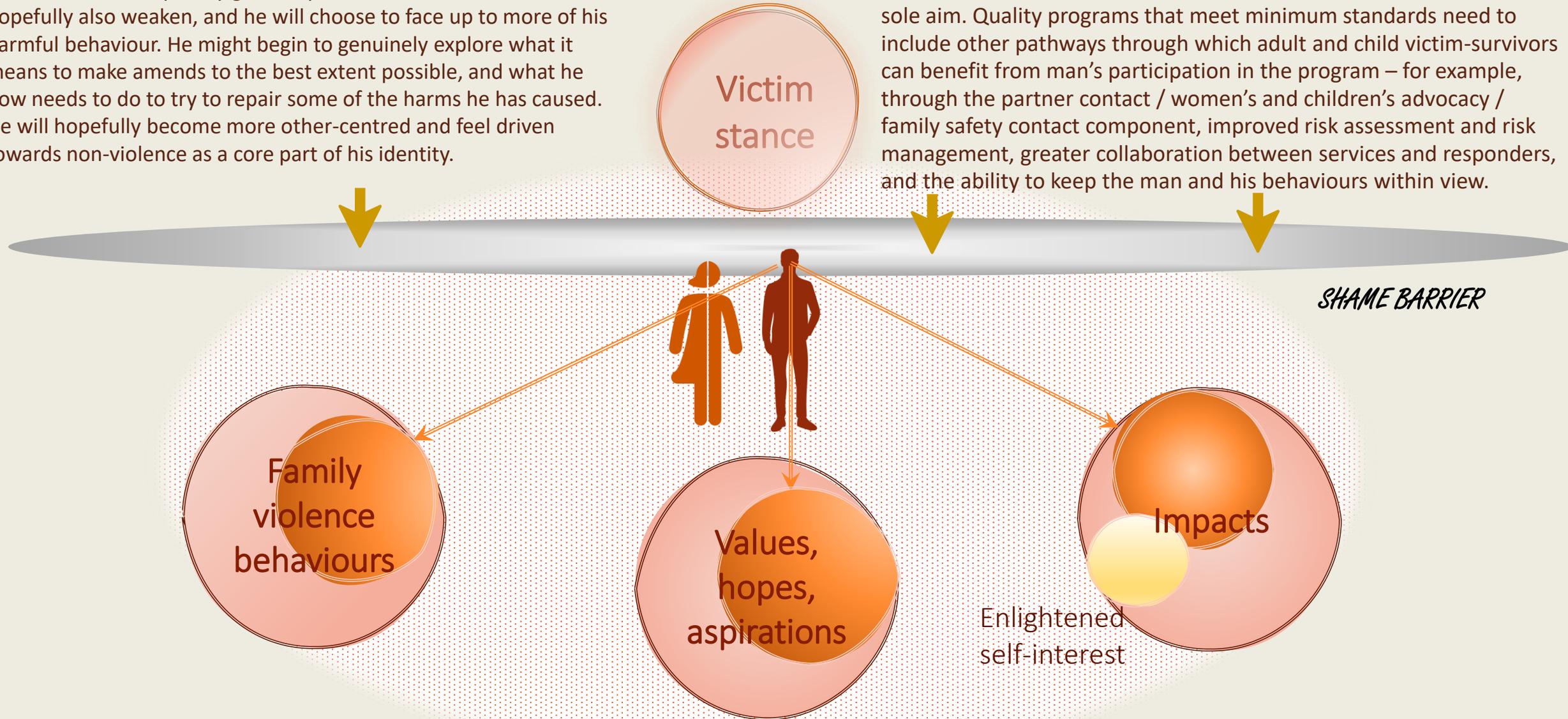
Engagement with shame might if anything deepen over time. As the change process continues, the adult will need to confront more and more of his violent and controlling behaviour. He will need to come to terms with, for example, his likely use of intimate partner sexual violence, and the multiple ways he has harmed (and possibly traumatised) his children. This is one of the reasons why change is often non-linear, and why some men stop or pause their journey (for lengthy periods) when they still have so much work left to do.



Internal motivations to take further steps towards change will hopefully replace initial external motivators, and a focus on impacts on others will hopefully become more important than just self-interest.

If he sticks with the journey, his victim stance and violence-supporting narratives and beliefs – and his associated denial, minimisation and justification for his violent and controlling behaviour – will hopefully gradually decrease. His shame barrier will hopefully also weaken, and he will choose to face up to more of his harmful behaviour. He might begin to genuinely explore what it means to make amends to the best extent possible, and what he now needs to do to try to repair some of the harms he has caused. He will hopefully become more other-centred and feel driven towards non-violence as a core part of his identity.

However, many men who participate in a single men's behaviour change program or other specialist intervention don't get this far. This is why these programs can't just be about attempting to change the men's behaviours – the outcomes are too variable for this to be the sole aim. Quality programs that meet minimum standards need to include other pathways through which adult and child victim-survivors can benefit from man's participation in the program – for example, through the partner contact / women's and children's advocacy / family safety contact component, improved risk assessment and risk management, greater collaboration between services and responders, and the ability to keep the man and his behaviours within view.



# the BEST-EARS approach

responding to blame, minimisation and denial by an adult user of violence



Breathe & manage  
your own anxiety

Empathise  
Selectively

Turn the  
conversation  
towards:

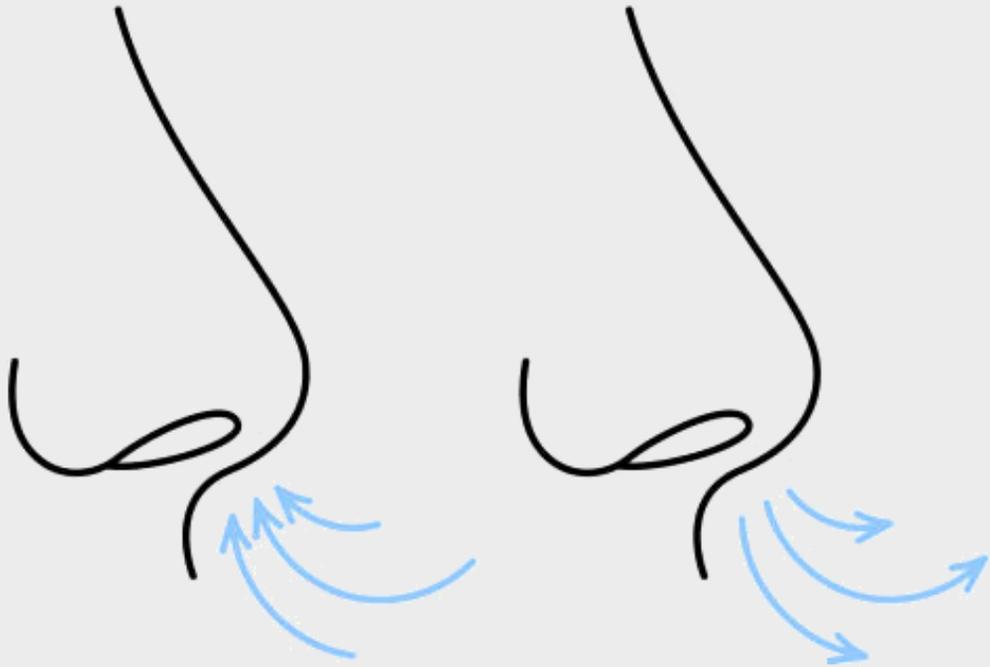
Ethical Aspirations,

Responsibility,

and

Safety.

# Breathe and manage your own anxiety



Expect blame, minimisation and denial (BMD)... it's par for the course

Remind yourself: You do not need to challenge his whole violence-supporting belief system

Ground your senses, soften your tension

Breathe through the force of his BMD

You can **turn** the focus, rather than push back

Expect him to revert back to BMD again (and again)... you might need to turn the conversation towards ethical aspirations, responsibility and/or safety multiple times

# Empathise selectively



If he experiences you as listening to him, you will have more sway to **turn** the conversation

Find something you can strategically paraphrase or reframe to set up a focus on ethical aspirations, responsibility and/or safety

Strip out the responsibility-minimising and sexist aspects of his narrative in your paraphrase or reframe

A degree of care and concern in your voice does not mean you are colluding

“She knows how to hurt me by removing the kids!”

“Being the best Dad you can be means a lot to you...”

“She was hysterical, she was right up in my face!”

“Sally was really upset and wanted you to know it.”

“She wastes all my money buying stuff we don’t need.”

“Sounds like money is tight, and you worry about what to buy.”

“She always going behind my back, I’m sure she’s cheating on me!”

“You’re anxious about keeping the relationship. Can I ask, how do you manage that anxiety?”

# turn to exploring Ethical Aspirations



Use his blame, denial or minimisation as an opportunity to ask about aspirations or values inconsistent with the behaviour he is avoiding taking responsibility about

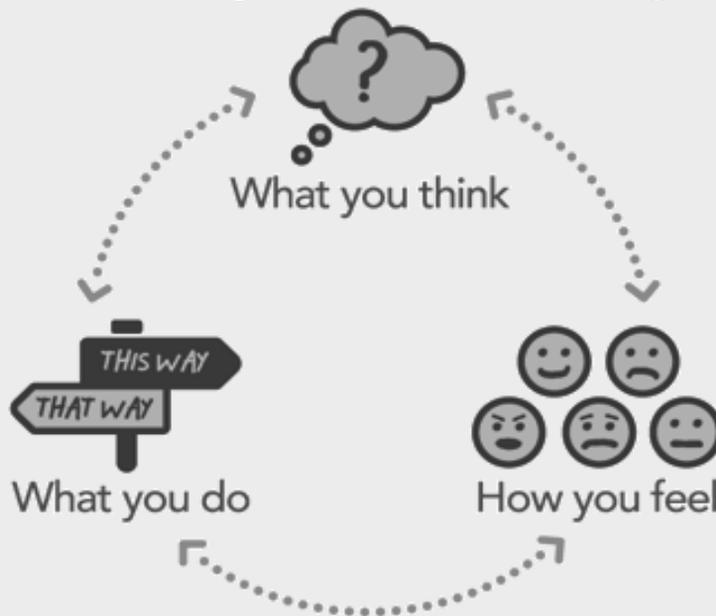
“If she hadn’t have... I wouldn’t have...”; “The police got it wrong, I didn’t...”; “It was only a ...”

“It sounds like X is something you don’t want to do. Can you tell me why?”

“You’re telling me that doing X is not who you are, I’d like to hear more about that...”

“Chris [one of his partners] isn’t here to give their perspective about what they experienced, but you are saying that looking back you don’t consider yourself to have intimidated them. It sounds like you don’t want Chris to feel intimidated?... Could you tell me what’s important about that for you, so that Chris doesn’t feel intimidated by you?...What’s important about that for Chris?”

# turn to exploring Responsibility



Take a ‘curious and dumb’ approach which:

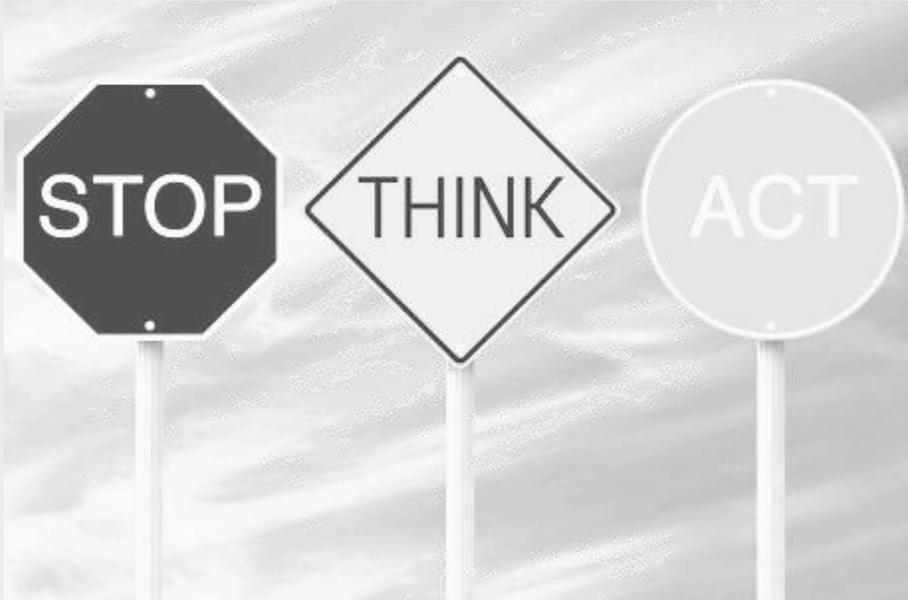
- ✓ Infers that he has a choice in the situation about how he acts, and what he thinks
- ✓ Infers a difference between the emotion he experiences in the situation (anger, jealousy, frustration, anxiety, etc.) and the behaviour he uses responding to the emotion
- ✓ invites him to talk about his actions through the perspectives of another
- ✓ invites him to consider safer and respectful actions more in line with his ethical aspirations

“When you were feeling very worked up in that situation, what did Sally [his partner] see you say or do?”

“You’ve talked about wanting to be a calm Dad who doesn’t lose his cool in front of the kids. What could you have done in that moment to be that calm Dad?”

“What were you thinking at that time?... My guess is that those thoughts were circling around in your head. What could you have told yourself in that moment that would have helped you to stay calm?”

# turn to exploring Safety



Behaviour change is of course a very long journey, often requiring the assistance of specialist services and programs.

You might be able to plant a seed or two towards him accepting a referral.

You might also be able to scaffold some conversation on what he can do to move towards his ethical aspirations in ways that build safety.

“What might being a calm Dad around your kids look like over the next week?... What would your children see?... What would your partner see?”

“Let’s discuss some things you can do to make it as likely as possible that you will be that calm Dad, no matter what the situation is, no matter what you are feeling...”

“What do you need to stay away from, or do less, so that you don’t take steps away from being that calm Dad...”

What are the situations where you will need to be the most careful?... What can you do to stay calm in those moments?”

# Mid-point skills towards minimising collusion and persecution when engaging adult users of domestic, family and sexual violence



collusive

◀◀ mid-point ▶▶

persecutory

You become matey with the man  
 You empathise with his victim stance or criticism of her  
 You signal agreement with sexist comments, even if subtle  
 You blame his violence on his upbringing, mental health issues, substance use or stress  
 You see him as the more 'stable'/'capable' parent  
 He feels validated about his behaviour, and there is nothing in the conversation that, even in a small way, invites him to think differently and to take responsibility for at least a bit of his harmful behaviour  
 You avoid tension/anxiety about raising difficult issues  
 You prioritise your working/personal relationship with him above everything else

You are respectful  
 You empathise selectively (not with violence supporting narratives)  
 You adopt an invitational approach  
 Your tone is based on curiosity, not moralising  
 You are sympathetic to and sensitively find out about the oppression and traumatic experiences he might have faced / be facing, but not see these as an excuse / reason for his behaviour  
 You focus, to the extent possible, on the safety of those affected by his violence, his responsibility for his behaviour, that violence is a choice, and that he is accountable for the impacts of his behaviour  
 You invite him to focus on what it would look like for him to be his best self in the situation

You are oppositional and confrontative  
 You butt horns with him  
 No empathy  
 No listening  
 No interest in his life or circumstances  
 No interest in the oppression he has faced, or the traumatic experiences he has encountered  
 You do not manage your own internal reactions  
 The conversation is too tense, or he zones out  
 He can stay in defensive mode, focusing on arguing his own 'truth' – by doing so, he doesn't need to think differently about his behaviour  
 You feel better by 'making the perpetrator accountable' (but the highly confrontational and moralising approach does the opposite)

Finding the mid-point can feel like a dance. We might veer too collusively at one point in the conversation or become too confrontative at another.

A range of circumstances can also impact where a response to the user of violence might sit on this continuum. In different contexts, the same response might be collusive, in others might sit within the mid-point.

It's OK to make mistakes. Even the most experienced behaviour change practitioners drift or veer too far in one direction and need to correct back the other way.



## What might impact on where the mid-point range is?

How much rapport you have / how long you have worked with him

How he presents in the conversation → his mood, agitation, etc.

What you know about his behaviour from other sources... and what he knows about what you know

Where he is at in a behaviour opening or behaviour change process

His current shame tolerance, both globally and in relation to particular aspects of his behaviour

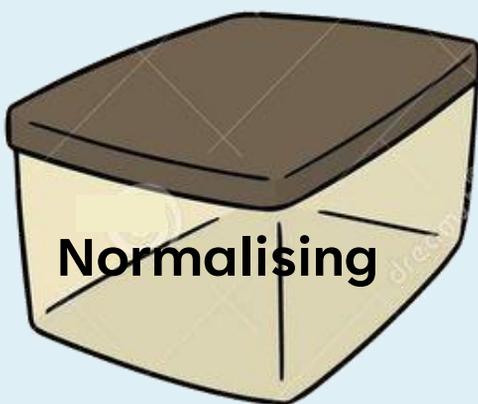
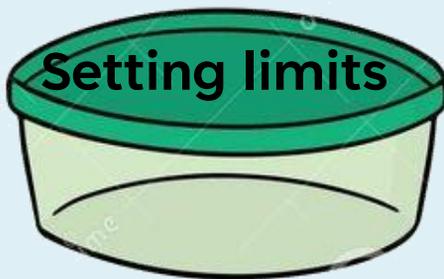
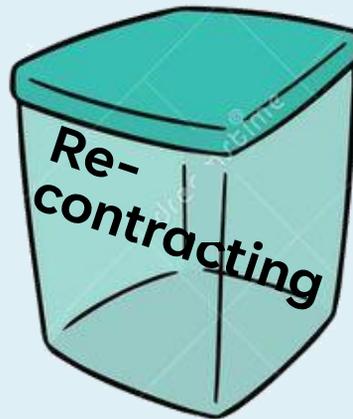
The goals of the current conversation with him about his behaviour

Whether you need to covertly assess risk by giving him space to express what he really thinks and believes

How much time and opportunity you have to repair rupture in the working relationship... and how 'comfortable' he is being 'challenged'

What the risks might be of 'pushing' too hard at this point in time

# Conversational container micro-skills

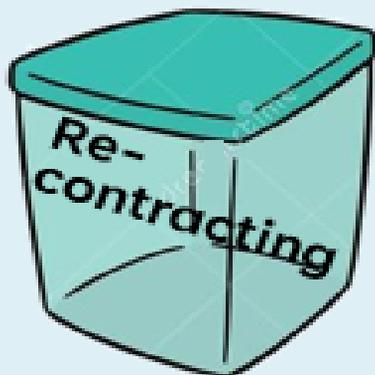


can help you to stay in the mid-point



This micro-skill can help to set an initial container for the conversation. Explain how you would like to focus the conversation and why, and how he would benefit from this focus.

“Because Sally isn’t here to talk about her perspectives, we can only focus on you. Is it OK if we talk about what you can do to make things better – is that ok John?”



Often we will need to remind him of the focus and respectfully bring him back. If we need to re-contract too often, however, it might mean we are too ambitious about what we hope he will focus on at this time.

“John, do you remember the conversation we had earlier about your urge to talk about Sally – this looks like one of those moments where the urge to talk about her is very strong. is it OK if we go back to focusing on...”

“Is there a way to put aside that urge to talk about Sally, so that we can focus on what you can do to make things better? Can we work on that together?”

“If the urge to talk about Sally starts to win out again, is it OK if I interrupt you so that we can come back to talking about...”



Sometimes when the adult user of violence is being critical of or blames the victim-survivor, we can redirect general aspects of his discourse to focus back on him, in positive, non-shaming and invitational ways.

“You’re telling me, from your perspective, that Sally doesn’t manage stress well. Sally isn’t here to say how she sees this. But can I ask, what do you do to manage the stress you feel, the best you can?”



We can interrupt to set limits, or wait for a pause to do so, in ways that do not shame him. Remind him of the benefits of staying respectful. You are inviting him to stay respectful because of these benefits, not because you are scolding him from a ‘politically correct’ position.

“I’m going to need to stop you there, John. I want this conversation to produce things that you can do to help the situation. Talking about Sally in that way won’t help.”

“If I can stop you there, I know there’s some things you want me to understand. Talking about Sally in such a disrespectful way will make it very hard for me to listen.”

“What would it take to be able to stay focused on you for a moment?”

“I hear you want to talk about your partner but its going to be much more helpful for you if we can talk about the things you can control.”

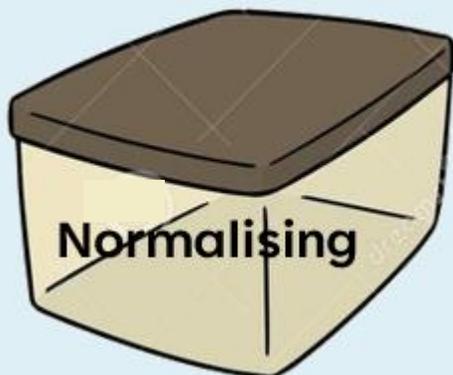


Signal where you are hoping to take the conversation next, rather than just barging into the next bit. He might be more willing to go with your focus if he's not taken by surprise. This can include preparing him that bits of the conversation might be hard.

“John, I think it might be really helpful now for us to focus on... to spend 10-15 mins talking about... is that OK?”

“Some of this stuff is really hard to talk about, it's going to create some discomfort. Are you OK hanging in there for this conversation?”

“Talking about being the best Dad you can be will be both a positive conversation, but also, there'll be some hard bits, perhaps talking about some things you've said or done that you aren't proud of. Are you OK with that?”



Frame the focus of the conversation as routine, so that he doesn't feel that he's been particularly targeted or singled out. This might also help him to become less suspicious about what his ex/partner has disclosed.

“We have lots of conversations with Dads about...”

“How we like to start off these conversations is by... Would that be an OK place to start?”

“I won't beat around the bush, in our experience, having had hundreds of these conversations over the years, you might find it hard to begin with...”



This can be a fall-back micro-skill when other things aren't working, to take a time out and talk about what might make it possible to get the conversation back on track. Try your best to manage your own frustrations!

“Hey, could we take a time out here John. I'm really hoping that we can talk about what you can do to improve the situation, but the urge to talk about Sally seems to keep winning out. Is there a way we can come back to focusing on you?”



There is often a parallel process between a person stepping away from responsibility for their violence through using blame, minimisation, denial and justification, and the person stepping away from responsibility for the conversation about that violence.

“What strategies have you used in the past to hang in there with conversations that are important, but also really hard?” [strengths-based approach – do not assume that he does not have existing strategies/skills]

“It feels like you don't really want to be here? As much as I want to help you and your family, at the end of the day it is your life – how much does it matter to you to be the best dad you can be?... It sounds like you want to be your best for your kids? I'm hearing that they matter a lot to you. What will help you to stay with this conversation about how you can benefit your kids?”

# Selective empathy



If he experiences you as listening to him, you will have more sway to influence the conversation.

Find something you can strategically paraphrase or reframe to set up a focus on ethical aspirations, responsibility and/or safety.

Strip out the responsibility-minimising and sexist aspects of his narrative in your paraphrase or reframe.

A degree of care and concern in your voice does not mean you are colluding.

**“She knows how to hurt me by removing the kids!”**

**“She was hysterical, she was right up in my face!”**

**“She wastes all my money buying stuff we don’t need.”**

**“She’s always going behind my back, I’m sure she’s cheating on me!”**

**“Being the best Dad you can be means a lot to you...”**

**“Sally was really upset and she wanted you to know it.”**

**“Sounds like money is tight, and you worry about what to buy.”**

**“You’re anxious about keeping the relationship. How do you manage that anxiety?”**

# Selective validation



In the understandable desire not to collude, we can rush past opportunities to selectively validate what might be some good intentions of the adult user of violence.

Of course, in many cases, the adult is very deliberately intending to cause the victim-survivor to experience fear, terror, humiliation and degradation. There can still be, ‘however’, something non-collusive to validate.

Selective validation helps to build a working rapport. It doesn’t mean you are taking his side.

“I just don’t know what to do anymore, I can’t do anything right in her eyes, she never gives me a break.”

“I don’t trust her, I’m sure she’s cheating on me.”

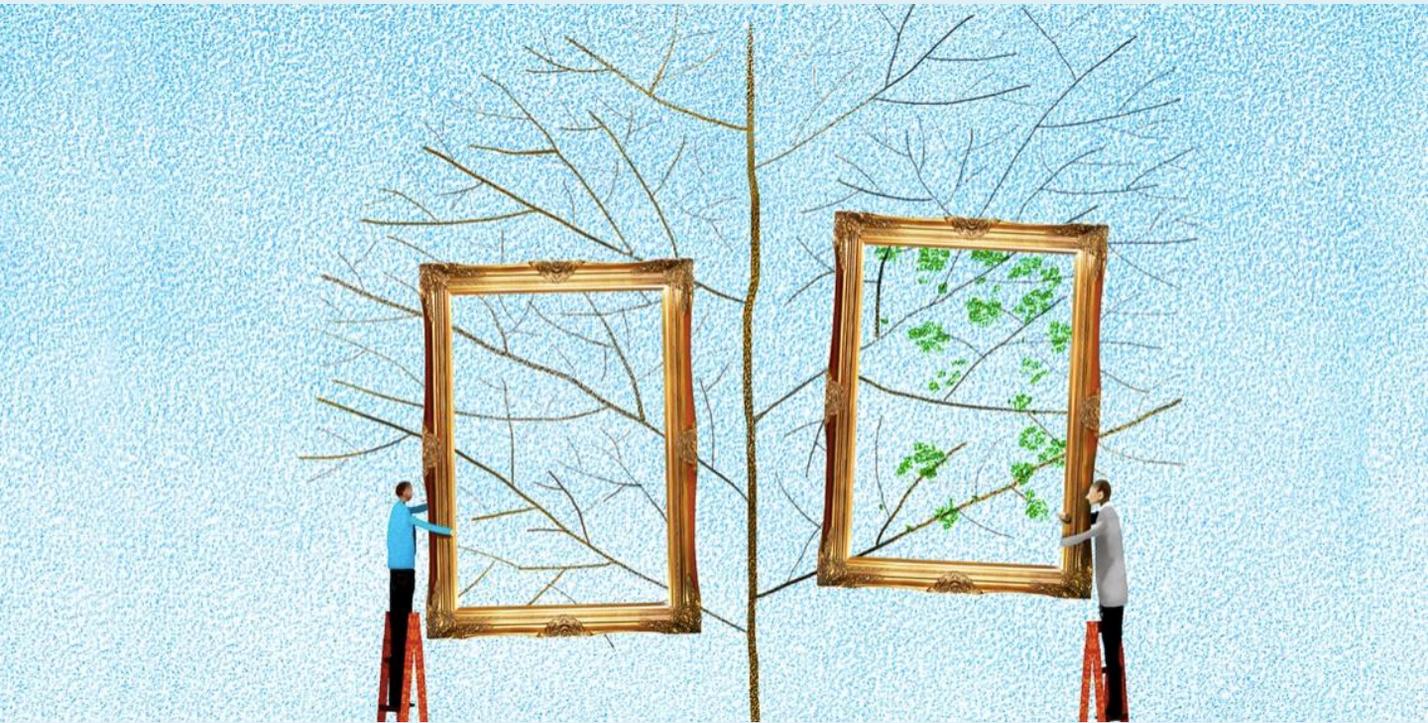
“It’s her fault that I’m here, and the cops didn’t help, they immediately took her side and treated me like a piece of...”

“You’re trying to work out how to make things better, but you’re not sure what to do.”

“The relationship matters to you, and you’re feeling anxious about it.” [preparing to turn the conversation towards how he manages this anxiety]

“I can hear that respect is important for you, and that you want to be listened to. Everyone has that need.” [highlighting values/practices of respect & listening → preparing to invite him to consider that his partner needs this too]

# Reframing



Reframing attempts to shift from a negative evaluation made by the user of violence of another person's actions or decisions, to a more neutral one.

It demonstrates that you have heard the adult.

If your reframe is *too* different from what the person expressed, it might be rejected. It's often enough to strip out the sexist language and meanings in your response.

“She was in my face screaming at me.”

“When she winds up like that there's nothing I can do to stop her.”

“She nags and nags, it really pisses me off!”

“Sounds like Sally was really distressed.”

“Sally was really upset, even distraught by the sound of it. What do you think she was trying to tell you?”

“You find it hard when Sally wants to make sure you've understood something, and you don't want to hear it.”

# Open, directed questions



Open questions that have their own container that try to ‘nudge’ the adult into a particular lane in their response.

These questions can also be used to infer key messages – for example, that the adult has a choice in their behaviour, and that the emotion they experience (e.g., anger, jealousy, humiliation) is not the same as the behaviour they choose. Open, directed questions can also be used to invite perspective-taking.

Remember: we can’t ‘challenge’ or invite focus on everything that he says that’s sexist, blaming of his partner or of others, etc. → doing so is likely to be too confrontative.

“She made me so angry.”

“When you were feeling very angry at that time, what did Sally see you say or do?”

“She was right in my face – again! – I had enough of her dramas and just could not take it anymore.”

“How did your children see you manage those big feelings of frustration that you had at that time?”

“Look, I said a few things I shouldn’t have, but...”

“What did Sally hear you say?”

# Relate to his values and ethical aspirations



Use his blame, denial or minimisation as an opportunity to ask about aspirations or values inconsistent with the behaviour he is avoiding taking responsibility about. This can help you to minimise collusion without him feeling that you are against him. **Find the part of him that does not want to engage in the harmful behaviours (that he might feel shame about) → be on the side of that part.**

“If she hadn’t have... I wouldn’t have...”; “The police got it wrong, I didn’t...”; “It was only a little shove...”

“It sounds like X is something you don’t want to do. Can you tell me why?”

“You’re telling me that doing X is not who you are, I’d like to hear more about that...”

“Chris isn’t here to give their perspective about what they experienced, but you are saying that you don’t consider yourself to have intimidated them. It sounds like you don’t want Chris to feel intimidated?... Could you tell me what’s important about that for you John, that Chris doesn’t feel intimidated by you?...What’s important about that for Chris?”

# Non-verbal communication



- Be mindful of automatic tendencies to nod, smile
- Remember to use soft eyes if you are risk of glaring out of frustration
- Leave a pause after he speaks
- Being expressive with a particularly warm tone at times enables you to be still when you need to without coming across as robotic
- If in-person, sitting at an even height at a slight angle to each other
- Communicate openness, interest, curiosity

Zero collusion is often impossible. Don't beat yourself up if you find yourself veering in that direction. Notice that you have drifted, breathe, manage your own anxiety, and find ways to return to the mid-point.

# Self-reflection

What might you need to learn or become aware of about yourself that might lead you to drift away from the mid-point?

- your attitudes and beliefs
- prior experiences
- how your performance of gender influences your responses, and how the person might respond to you
- particular adults, or particular situations, where you might either collude or be combative
- what's happening in the moment for you, what just happened before or earlier that day



Take a moment to check in with yourself before engaging the adult user of violence – what might you be carrying that could cause you to veer towards collusion or persecution?

Support your colleagues in your teams – look out for each other and give supportive feedback. Staying in the mid-point is a collective endeavour.

# If we are to use the stages of change model, ask ourselves, and document:

**What specific violent and controlling behaviours are we referring to when we say that the adult is at a particular stage of change?**

Coercive control

Psychological and emotional violence

**Is the adult's contemplation, preparation or action in relation to these behaviours conditional on any circumstances or self-centered goals?**

Physical violence & harm

Sexualised violence

**Which of the adult's violent and controlling behaviours appear to be associated with earlier stages?**

Economic abuse

stalking

**Which of his violent and controlling behaviours are we not yet able to judge which stage the adult is at?**

Social violence

Image based abuse

Technology facilitated abuse

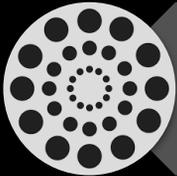
Systems abuse

Cultural and spiritual abuse

Reproductive violence

Keeping adult and child victim-survivors at the centre means not becoming swept away with the behaviours that the person using violence is starting to contemplate changing... don't lose sight of the many more behaviours and greater harms that family members are experiencing that he is pre-contemplative about.

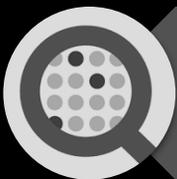
## Signs that an adult user of violence is moving *genuinely* into the contemplation stage concerning a particular aspect or part of his patterns of harmful behaviour



Acknowledges the behaviour is not just a 'once-off', and that willpower alone is not enough to cease it or ensure that it does not happen again



Begins to show some (still very limited) awareness that the behaviour is a choice, and used with intent



Starts to talk about the behaviour with at least a small degree of specificity – not just vague labels



While still strongly in victim stance, shows moments of owning the behaviour to some degree



Starts to name something (even if only the tip of the iceberg) of the impacts of the behaviour on others, and on himself – signs of ambivalence



Starts to sit with a bit of shame / discomfort of how the behaviour & its impacts violates values & ethical aspirations important to him (and his community)



Starts to identify less harmful alternatives to the behaviour, and why it is important to himself and others that he moves towards these alternatives

If the perpetrator of violence is pre-contemplative, shift your focus towards planting seeds, sowing doubt and creating ambivalence → so that you, or the next service, has something to work with

“You’re telling me you believe it’s all your partner’s fault as to why you are here, and that you’ve done nothing wrong. Can I be straight with you about what’s going through my mind?... What if it’s not as simple as that?” [or, if you’re concerned about him feeling insulted by the word ‘simple’... “what if it’s not exactly like that?”]

“You feel that the police didn’t listen to your side of the story, and that the Magistrate you saw didn’t give you a chance. What if they took the action they did because of concern about your partner’s safety?”

“I can see you feel a lot of anger about being made to come here. What benefits from participating in the program could that anger make you miss out on?”

“You are trying to work things out at home and have some ideas about how to go about this. What if your attempts to solve things are having impacts you might not be seeing?”

“You feel that you are on top of everything and that you won’t repeat the harm you caused before. I can tell you aren’t proud of what you did. Sometimes, we feel so bad about something we’ve done that we don’t want to admit the possibility we could do it again. Could overconfidence be impacting your judgement here?”

Planting seeds, sowing doubt and creating ambivalence can feel collusive → make a judgment call as to whether the technique would be too collusive. Use mid-point micro-skills to try to minimise collusion with his problematic narratives and beliefs.

As with the BEST-EARS approach (see my recent resource), empathise selectively and then turn the conversation → but rather than being too ambitious through focusing on responsibility-taking, follow with techniques such as:

- What if there’s more to the story?
- What might you be missing?
- What if there’s a different way... would you be interested in exploring that?
- What impacts does [this anger, this belief, etc.] have on you?
- Could overconfidence get you into trouble?

# build Rapport



Don't be afraid to build rapport, it doesn't automatically mean you are colluding!

The quality of your working relationship can help when attempting other strategies in this resource.

Manage your frustration and resist the urge to try to corral the adult into change.

Use selective empathy and mid-point skills to minimise collusion.

**REMIND** practice mnemonic for engaging adult users of domestic, family and sexual violence with little or no openness to change

Rodney Vlasis, October 2025

# Explore what's meaningful to the adult



Spend time finding out about the adult's life, what matters to them, what they hope for, the qualities they strive for.

This might identify desired qualities, priority values and strivings incongruent with their denial and minimisation about their behaviour.

This might also identify discrepancies that you can reflect back to them, to lever some cracks towards behaviour openings, and to sow some seeds of doubt in their view that they do not need to engage in change work.

"You haven't shirked away from some big challenges in life, and I imagine looking into how you can improve things at home now and into the future might be one of them."

# hold a **M**irror up to extreme positions



without shaming, in a curious, matter-of-fact and non-judgmental way

“You’re telling me you have no ability to alter your responses in these situations, and you have zero responsibility for your actions...”

“I’m hearing there is nothing you can learn about being the best Dad and co-parent you can be for your children...”

Ensure you do not say this sarcastically or with bite – hold this up dispassionately for the adult to look at → they might back down from the extremity and give you something to work with (“Oh, it’s not quite like that...”). If they double down, at least you have made them own it, and you can document their unwillingness and what this means for risk and unsafe parenting capacity.

# Invite consideration of benefits



“If you were to go through with this program, how do you think you might benefit from it?”

“I know you don’t want to take this step but say that you did. What might you like to learn that could end up benefitting your kids?”

“What do you think some men might get out of these conversations about being safe and calm for their families?”

“If you were OK with me supporting you in an honest way, through speaking up when I have ideas about how you can improve things for your family, would this be of use to you?”

# Normalise hesitancy



without solidifying it → offer the possibility of positive movement

“Many men who talk with us for the first time wonder how we are going to treat them. What fears might you have about our conversations?”

“It’s normal at this stage to not want to talk much, as this is a hard conversation to have. But the experience of many men who stick with it is that they end up benefitting. Would you like me to talk, in general terms, about their experiences?”

“You are wondering what you can get out of this, beyond having to come here to fulfill your order. That’s understandable, you’d prefer not to be here. But given that you are here, I want to make sure this isn’t a waste of your and everyone’s time.”

# Highlight Discrepancies

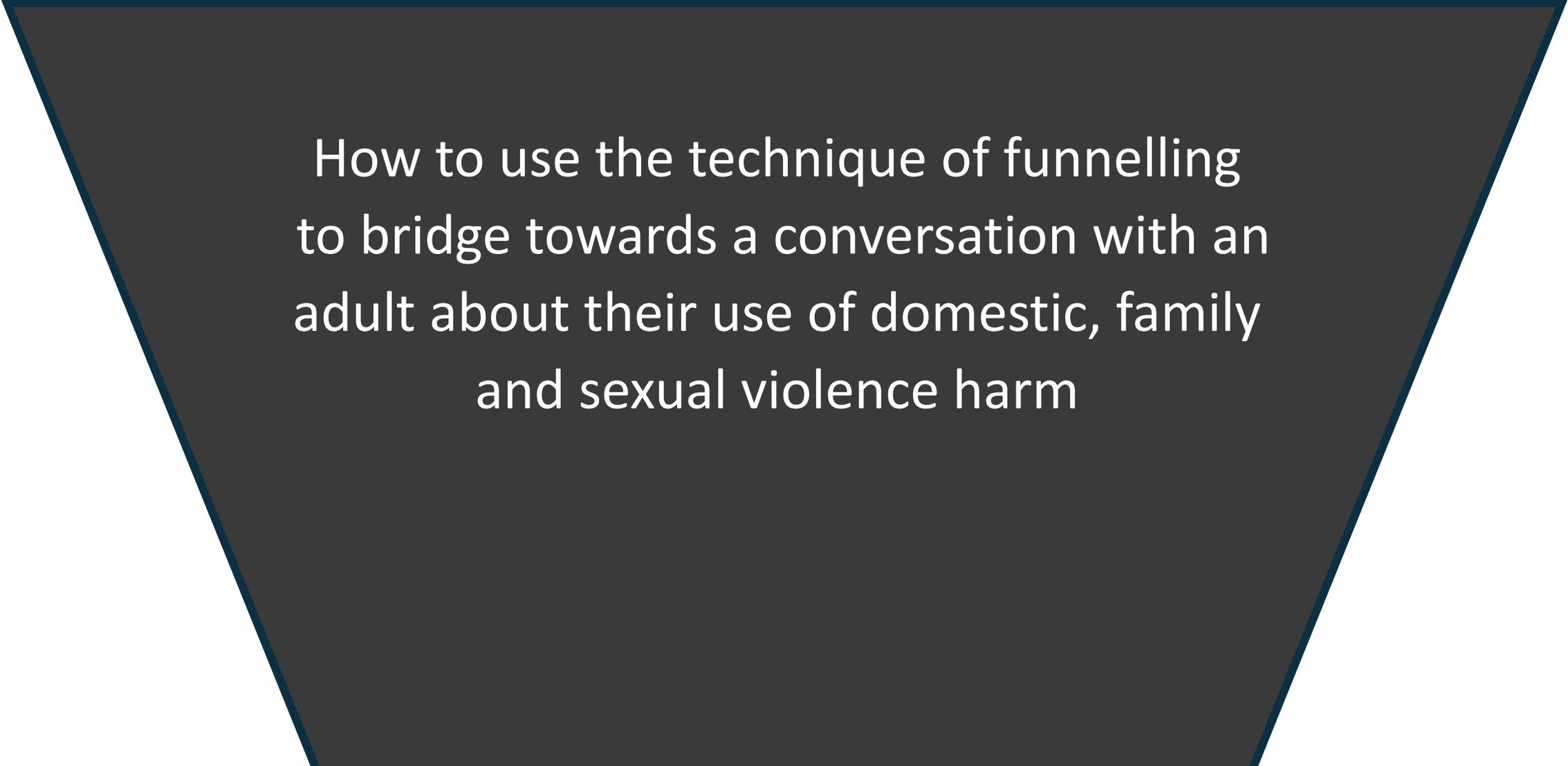


"You don't see yourself as having done anything wrong, yet on the other hand several people have expressed concern about how safe things are at home"

"You see it as a once-off, something that you did a year ago, yet it's always possible there's more to the story."

"You're telling me everything's fine now, but it also sounds as though you are someone who doesn't like to take big risks. What if something's bubbling under the surface you aren't aware of?"

"You're saying that you consider it to be your partner's fault for what you did. It also seems to me that you see yourself as someone who is capable and can make decisions for yourself."



How to use the technique of funnelling  
to bridge towards a conversation with an  
adult about their use of domestic, family  
and sexual violence harm

# When might we use the technique of funnelling?

- A client or a patient shows some indicators that point to an increased possibility that he's using violence (e.g., he talks about his partner just leaving him, he's depressed).
- You are enacting a routine process to attempt to identify users of violence (not screening... see slides 11 - 16 of the slides set that you can download from the Featured section of my linkedin profile page, on identifying users of DFSV).
- Someone who you know is using violence, but he doesn't know what you know, and it's not safe to be very direct with him about his harmful behaviour → so you try to approach things in a more indirect way.
- A friend or colleague who you have observed some ways in which he treats his current or former partner that seems 'off' or controlling.

## **Prepare yourself first.**

What do I know about his use of violent and controlling behaviour, that he doesn't know that I know, that if he becomes suspicious that I know, might put those who experience his harmful behaviour at further risk?

What are my goals in starting the conversation?

Am I prepared with conversational container and midpoint skills to respond to his likely minimisation, justifications and blaming of the survivor?

Bridge into the conversation in a way that makes sense to him – so that it doesn't come out of the blue and lead him to think "What did she tell you!"

At this point in a first meeting with a client, we usually ask about how relationships at home are going. We do this because... .. Is that OK?

I notice you've been feeling really tense of late, and I wonder how things are at home. You know I'm your friend and you can tell me anything...

Can we start with how things are going with your partner Jane – how would you describe the relationship?

It's going OK I guess, we have our ups and downs, like every couple.

Can I ask you about some of the good things in the relationship, that you want to keep hold of?

[Practitioner explores the client's aspirations for his relationship, what a healthy relationship might mean for him, etc., then continues:]

You mentioned that you have some ups and downs, what happens when things aren't going so well?

We have fights over money. She spends it like there's no tomorrow.

I can see that you're feeling financial stress.

Yeah, it's like she's never heard that there's a cost-of-living crisis.

I'd like to ask about these arguments, how things are going at home can really matter for our work together on...

Okay

On a scale of 0 to 10, how bad do some of the worst arguments get?

A seven, I guess

When it gets to a seven, if I was a fly on the wall at the time, what would I see?

Jane just goes off at me when I try to explain why she shouldn't be spending money on shit.

I can see that finances is something that you worry about. When you're feeling really worried about money, and you are starting to argue, what does Jane see you say or do?

She's got such a thin skin, she yells and screams at me and I can't get through to her.

This doesn't sound easy to talk about John, I know you want the best for your family. I'm wondering, when you are feeling this stress, do you ever say or do things you later regret?

Practitioner might now explain that he's asking these questions to see if it's possible that Jane might be feeling unsafe when they 'argue' ...

Invite other-centredness increasingly over time (e.g., "If you made this change, what would it mean to your kids...?" "What's the next step that would help your partner to feel safe around you? ... How important would that be for your family? ... What could become possible in your life if you managed those situations in safer ways?")

**Expand the conversation over time, and follow-up on the application of the plan**  
Lay the groundwork to repeat this cycle focusing on other behaviours, as he expands his willingness to talk more about his behaviours

**Focus on a behaviour**  
"What did the children see?"  
"What did getting physical look like for your partner?"  
"When you say you lost your cool, can you tell me what happened?"

Use his words or descriptions of actions as a starting point, but modify if required to minimise collusion (e.g., use "got physical" if he says "got a bit physical")

Search for what he's striving to make better, that his behaviour is sabotaging (e.g., "You want Sally to respect you, but I wonder if your actions are harming her respect and trust?")

**Support his self-competence and engagement with ethics** (e.g., "What did it take to talk about this with me today?... What does it say about how much your behaviour as a Dad matters to your family that you are staying with this conversation even though it's hard?... How might you feel differently in yourself if you took those [safety planning steps]?")  
**Acknowledge discomfort / shame** (e.g., "What is it like to be talking about this?... What can help you to hang in with the conversation?")

**Find the hooks that matter to him, that relate to issues that matter to those experiencing his violence – connect with the part of him that cares**  
"I know that's not how you want to be in front of your kids"  
"My guess is that this isn't the father you want to be?"

Focus on upstream, midstream & downstream safety planning strategies.  
**Upstream:** "What changes in your lifestyle might help you to work on being calm/kind..."  
**Midstream:** "Is there someone you can call when you notice yourself starting to become angry?"  
**Downstream:** "Let's talk about how you can bring yourself back down when the anger/jealousy is becoming really loud..."

**Safety plan focusing on the behaviour, and adjacent behaviours of concern**  
"You're saying that it is 9 out of 10 important that you stay calm around your children. Can I ask, what's your plan to stay calm?"  
"What else would your partner/kids say should be added to your plan to stay safe and calm around them?... What's another step they would like you to take?... What do they most need you to do differently?"  
"How confident are you that you'd be able to put that plan into practice?... "What would you need to work on to be more confident?"

**Encouraging him to take a stand against the behaviour**  
"How important is it, on a scale of 0 to 10, for you to model to your children to stay calm when they are having big feelings" ... "Wow, a 9 out of 10! Not a 6 or 7, I'd love to hear more about why you want to model calmness to your kids..."  
"How important is it for your children to see you treat their mother with kindness and respect?"  
"What might they be starting to learn from you, that you don't want them to?"

Use questions that shape his behaviour as a choice (e.g., if he says, "I just snapped!" you can reply with "What could you have done differently?... What's a safer thing to do when you feel really angry?")

Elicit aspirations (e.g., "What are your hopes for your children?... What would you like them to remember about you when they are older?")

# 16 considerations and micro-skills to help an adult user of domestic, family and sexual violence to (gently) push through their shame barrier



Denial and minimisation can be a way for the user of violence to protect themselves from the shame of realising how they've been far from their best self, and from other sources of shame. Underneath the shame can be values, aspirations or important aspects of their identity that might be inconsistent with their use of violence.

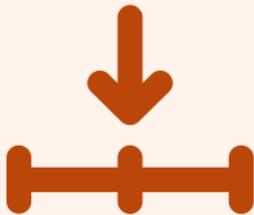
See the demonstration video [Here is a video of some skills...](#)<sup>1</sup> for how you can use their denial and minimisation – often arising in part from shame – as an opportunity to scaffold an approach that supports the user of violence to take a stand against their harmful behaviours.



Do not assume that because a user of violence (understandably) does not *want* to experience shame, he will not be *able* to cope with it. What does it mean if we treat all men who use DFSV as having the emotional capacity and literacy of a three year old? For some, however, the experience of shame can be intense, amplified by traumatic family-of-origin experiences and/or chronic stress associated with being part of marginalised communities.



Signpost that some degree of discomfort is a normal part of the conversation: "To be the best Dad you can be, to show up for your kids in the way that your kids need you to, means being open to how you can do better. We talk with a number of Dads that find sources of strength and courage to learn from mistakes." Use a strengths-based approach to help him identify what might support him to sit with the uncertainties involved in trying out new ideas and approaches.



Adopt mid-point skills<sup>2</sup> that attempt to minimise collusion while not being too confrontative and combative. Take a non-shaming approach focusing on curiosity "Could you help me understand..." and through inviting rather than moralising "I'm wondering if... do you think it might be possible that... I have a thought I'd like to share with you as I know you prefer that I don't beat around the bush..."



Use conversational container skills<sup>3</sup> to bring him back on track in non-shaming ways if he blames his ex/partner or justifies his behaviour. Try to draw him away from his 'I'm the victim here!' thinking and story that he wants to tell, rather than locking horns against it.

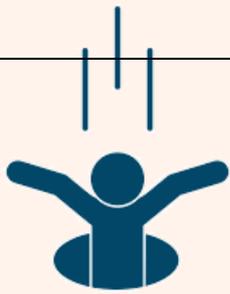
To counter the isolating impacts of shame, stay connected with him and offer hope that he can change.



Support him to feel 'good' about feeling bad. Try to change his focus from 'I'm bad' to 'I feel bad about the impacts on my partner/family':

"What would it mean if you didn't feel bad about...?"

"It's hard for you to have this conversation because you want better things for your family but you're not sure how to get there. You want to handle difficult feelings and situations better. Although it's hard, you're not walking away from striving to be your best you."



Consider using a visual analogy like the shame pit. Ask him what things he might be tempted to do when he's at the bottom of the pit to cope with the shame (e.g., use substances, blame his partner). Explore what can help him to transform the shame (focus on self) to guilt (focus on the experience of those he's harmed), without resorting to these temptations, and what can help him to move towards being his aspirational / best self. Build hope for change.



If the adult appears to be experiencing considerable shame, to begin with focus more on what they would like to move towards in their behavioural choices, and then extend to what they need to move away from: "How do you want your kids to feel around you?" ... "OK, you'd like them to feel relaxed. How might that benefit them, why might that be important?" ... "Yes, I can see how that will help them to concentrate on their schooling and build a happy childhood. What can you do to provide a relaxed environment?" ... "OK you're telling me that being a relaxed Dad means..." ... "What can you do over the coming week to be that relaxed Dad?"

... and then move the conversation to "Can we spend some time talking about what it looks like when you're not that relaxed Dad..." "When you aren't being relaxed around your kids, how would you describe that?" ... "Ok, you'd call that being a cross Dad. What do your children see when you are being a cross Dad?" ... "When you are being a cross Dad, if we were to ask your children at that point, what would they say about how you treat their mother?"



Provide opportunities for them to say more in future sessions without losing face: "This is the first time you've met me, it's understandable if there are some things you don't yet feel comfortable talking about. There will be opportunities later to say more once you have settled in to our work together." Remember that shame overwhelm is not a safe place (for his family, for themselves) to leave a user of violence in.



Invite him to manage feelings of discomfort during the session: "How might you know if I ask you something that hits too much of a raw nerve?" ... "How would you let me know?" ... "Is it OK if I provide a few suggestions about what to do if that happens?" ... "What other strategies could you use to hang in there with the conversation?"

Ask how they've been able to stay with uncomfortable conversations in the past, when they've had to hear something, or chosen to hear something, that they found hard to hear.



Focus on the behaviour, not ascribing anything to negative characteristics or negative traits of the person: "When you were feeling really angry at that point, what could you have done differently?" ... "Ok, you're saying you wished you had kept your cool. What would keeping your cool have looked like?" ... "How might keeping your cool benefit your relationship?"

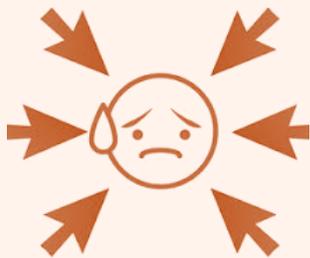


Remember that shame can mean different things for different cultures. Understand the particular ways your own culture views and experiences shame, so that you do not automatically project this on to people from different cultures. Remember that if you are a white Anglo-Celtic person you have a culture too, with worldviews and biases just as much as anyone else.



Adults with complex trauma backgrounds can experience chronic shame. They might not only feel shame in relation to their behaviours that let down their underlying aspirations and values. They might also feel a deep sense of shame about themselves, as being unworthy, unlovable, etc. They might even experience intense feelings of self-hatred and self-disgust. These adults might have very low shame tolerances, and will do what they can to avoid experiences of shame due to the psychological pain involved in encountering such intense negative feelings about themselves.

In these situations, prioritise building the adult's distress tolerance as you work with them towards acknowledging and addressing a more meaningful proportion of their violent and controlling behaviours.



Humiliation can be dangerous for users of violence to experience – when they feel shamed or perceive they've been 'reduced' in front of or in the eyes of others, or if they've been reminded of felt inadequacy. If we confront too hard too soon, some might not only double down on their violence-supporting beliefs and narratives, but also escalate their harmful behaviour due to felt humiliation.

Even if their felt experience of humiliation occurred in the session with you, they might blame their ex/partner for 'causing' them to be in the situation where they felt humiliated.



Some adult users of DFSV (eventually) experience significant consequences due to their use of violence, and sometimes a corresponding aggrieved sense of loss. This might be loss of identity as a father, loss of their 'masculine role', loss of status or standing in their profession or community, etc. Serious-risk perpetrators can develop an intense grievance blaming the victim-survivor for having 'humiliated' and 'reduced' them to feeling 'less of a man'.

Helping the user of violence to restore some meaning, purpose and identity in their lives in healthy, non-violent ways can be a crucial part of managing risk. See the resource *Responding to users of DFSV who pose a serious to severe risk* for more practice suggestions.<sup>4</sup>



Check in with yourself before engaging the adult user of violence, or at least every now and then. Ask:

Am I drifting towards being intolerant and impatient?

Or towards colluding with the adult's violence-supporting narratives ... am I feeling too sorry for him?

Am I losing sight of the ugly truth of his behaviour, that there is probably much more to his behaviour and impacts on his ex/partner or family that I'm aware of?

Have I found the part of him that cares about something other than using power and control to get his 'needs' met and to force his will, even if this part is small? Have I found the part of him that is not defined by his use of violence?

<sup>1</sup> You can view and download this resource from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/> if you have a linkedin account.

<sup>2</sup> See the resource *Concepts, models and skills in engaging adults who use DFV* for examples of mid-point skills, accessible as per above.

<sup>3</sup> See the above resource for a delineation and examples of conversational container skills.

<sup>4</sup> See above details to access this resource.

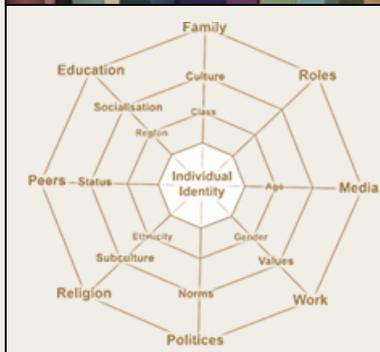
## 20 practice tips for responding to adults who use ethnocultural identity to justify attitudes and beliefs that condone violence, control and male power



It is important to respect every person's culture, and to understand how a person engages with the values, traditions and collective meanings held by their culture. However, the use of culture to justify domestic, family and sexual violence is a smokescreen to avoid responsibility for harmful behaviour. The adult person using violence might be heavily invested in that smokescreen, but there are always choices they can make to be non-violent and non-controlling in ways that are entirely consistent with their culture.

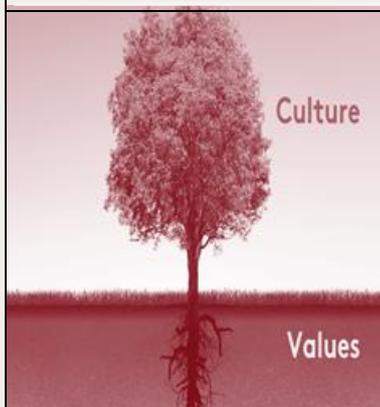


In most cultures, men have found ways to influence community norms, collective stories and institutional structures to enhance their social, economic and political power. Cultures differ, however, in what aspects of these patriarchal stories, and what types of gendered behaviours, are highly visible in a range of societal spaces, versus kept behind closed doors within more private realms. Cultures differ in how men's rights and the rules set for women & gender queer people are enacted, and the extent of visible support that men have to enforce them.

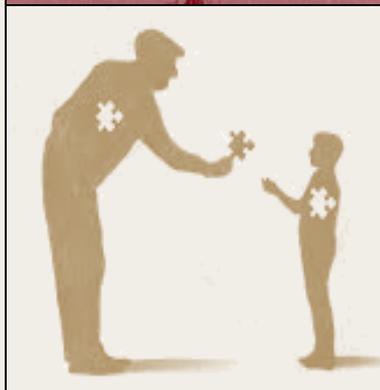


A person's ethnoculture is only one aspect of their identity: everyone has multiple aspects. The particular combination of those aspects most salient to the person can depend on their circumstances and the current moment, and can shift fluidly.

Do not automatically assume that a person's ethnic culture is the most or only important aspect of their identity. Remember to see them in multiple ways. Try finding aspects of their identity that are potentially aligned with values inconsistent with the use of violent and controlling behaviour. Relate to them in terms of those aspects of their identity in addition to as a member of a particular ethnocultural community.



Find collective values in the adult's ethnic culture inconsistent with harmful behaviour, and consistent with safety. Take time to understand the adult's view about what is important about their culture and community – collectively held values, and what their community strives for. Find values and strivings that appear to exist, at least in part, outside or beyond the realm of the adult's patriarchal interpretation of power relations between men, women and (if relevant to the context) gender queer or same-sex attracted people. Create a space of genuine curiosity for the adult to identify and elaborate on collectively held values and pillars to their community & culture that promote safety, empathy and other-centredness.



Invite the adult to express how these cultural values, ethics and pillars are incongruent with his harmful behaviour, and are more aligned with empathy, respect and non-controlling ways of relating:

"I can see that family means everything in your community, in ways that are perhaps richer or different to how families operate in my culture. Families living through harmony. I wonder whether your [harmful behaviour that the adult is willing to admit to] towards your wife is making it harder for your family to live in harmony...?"

"You and your family have sacrificed so much to come to Australia and make a new life, despite all that you've suffered. Sacrifice sounds important to you, listening to what your family needs from you?..."



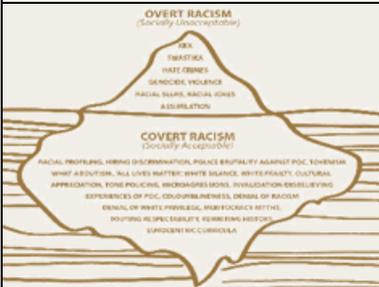
Enquire about the genuinely positive aspects of how women are viewed through the adult's culture, the *diverse* roles that women play in their communities. Focus on how women are viewed positively by different people in the community, to go beyond gender stereotypes. Link this to safety, and to community expectations about how girls and women should be treated. Encourage the adult to articulate this in as much depth as possible, focusing on community values and pillars. "Could you help me understand how women are respected and valued in your community – what does this look like...? What if we were to ask this question to...? How are women supported to be leaders...?" "How do children in your community want their mothers to be treated...? How about grandmothers, what are their hopes for their daughters...? What are their hopes for women's safety and well-being...?"



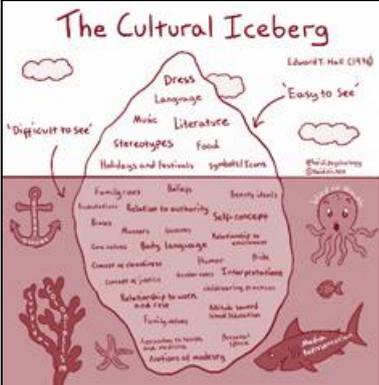
If it is clear that the adult adopts manosphere-type views that 'gender equality has gone too far and now men are the ones disadvantaged', or if he is very strong in claiming that 'in my culture, men have the right to... women know that their roles should be to ...', respectfully and non-shamingly contrast the absoluteness of these views with what he has said about how women are valued in his culture. "You're saying that women have a central & vital role in your families and community. I'm also hearing a belief that women have rules they must follow, limiting their options. Could you help me make sense of this?" Try not to do so with a judgmental tone in your voice. Focus the adult on the contradictions, rather than him feeling attacked for the views he's expressing. Externalise problematic beliefs if this might be helpful: "express a belief" rather than "you believe that" as this might make it easier for the adult to view the belief from different angles.



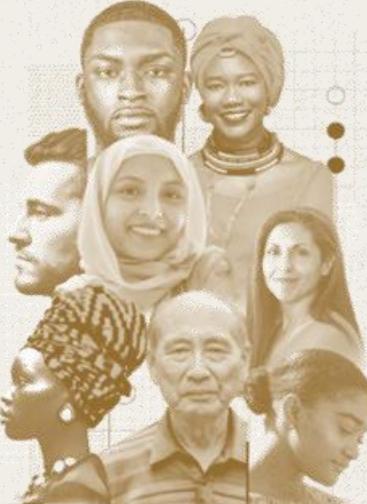
Demonstrate genuine and sensitive curiosity about the adult's culture, without exoticising it. Acknowledge you know little about their culture (if that's the case). Locate yourself in terms of your own cultural identity – don't pretend to know what you don't really know outside of your cultural lane. Ask what's important to know about their culture that might impact how you work together. Admit that you might make assumptions and mistakes, but that you hope to learn along the way. Don't however set him up as the 'sole expert' of his culture – this will marginalise different views and the voices of women and children.



If appropriate, listen to the adult's concerns about how their culture isn't understood by dominant others. Recognise the racism they and their community is facing. The adult's and their community's experiences of racism is no excuse for the adult's use of violence, but if you ignore it, your ability to affect change might be limited. Some men who use violence fossilise hardline views about women's roles, rules for their behaviour and men's rights, as part of defending their 'culture' against assimilationist and colonialist pressures.



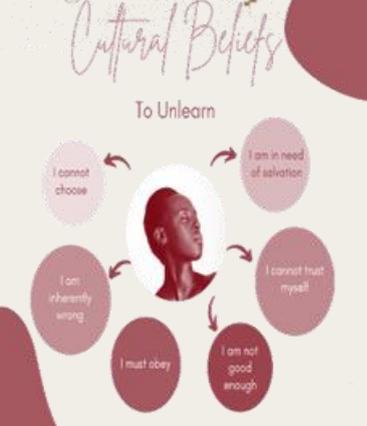
Anchor your engagement in cultural humility. Particularly if you are of Anglo-Celtic background, you might need to remember that *you have a culture too*. Understanding your own culture – the lenses through which you view the world and things you might not see as a result – will help you to not 'other' the adult's culture. Rethink your assumptions about kinship, parenting, monogamy, gender – if you are part of a dominant culture, learn about the weaknesses and challenges your culture faces from the perspectives of marginalised cultures. Acknowledge the struggles and failures of your community to address violence against women and children, and the long history of dominant cultural institutions & structures that have victimised them.



Assume there are different views about gendered roles within every culture, and encourage him to talk about different perspectives. Ask him what other views exist in his community about the beliefs he is expressing. What might be the views of some of the younger men in his community? Younger women? What are they grappling with and learning that's of value to their culture and community?

Frame it as given that a diversity of views exist about these beliefs and issues in every community. Assume that culture is dynamic, attempting to hold on to traditions, pillars and values while also continuing to evolve and adjust to new circumstances.

You could invite the adult to consider how others in his community are trying to navigate the beliefs and ways of being a man, woman or gender queer person inherited from their parents and grandparents, with how they are grappling with these issues and new influences in the country they now live in.



**Cultural Beliefs To Unlearn**

If appropriate, ask how their community is grappling with an issue facing all communities: progressing women's, children's and (if relevant to the context) gender queer people's choices and opportunities when historically they have been disadvantaged. Link this to safety and well-being. The adult might have strong views, and possibly draw upon religious texts or other 'cultural truths' to defend them. Manage yourself to focus calmly on safety and well-being.

"I can hear that there are some strong views about this, that you and some or maybe many others in the community hold. I am not here to judge. I am here to help you be the best father and role model you can be, and am concerned about how these beliefs might be getting in the way of that. I wonder if these beliefs are dominating so much that you are hurting those who you love in your family?"



Try not, however, to frame the issue as gender equality, unless the adult seems comfortable with this. Some men in some cultural contexts can become defensive and animated in pushing back against the goal of gender equality. You might need to work very hard to not be seen as trying to 'impose Western values' onto his culture. Rather, focus on opportunities for girls, women and (if relevant to the context) gender queer people to be safe, thrive and lead fulfilling lives – a focus on expanding opportunities for all in the community.



Invite him to describe what it looks like in his community when men stand with their family members, rather than stand over them. What it looks like when men engage respectfully with their family members in ways that honour their dignity and safety. What it looks like to work hard to ensure the safety of his family.

Use this as a springboard towards a focus on what he might be doing now that is not consistent with community expectations to ensure safety. If he is a refugee or supported his family to migrate under difficult circumstances, what he is doing now that contradicts the actions he took previously to build safety for his family.



Children are at the centre of many communities, with cultural expectations that they will be nurtured and cherished by all kin. Fathers might embody a genuine desire to help their children expand their opportunities and have a better life than they did. Being a good role model and providing guidance can be important not only to their biological children, but to others in the community. Helping violent fathers to be accountable to community and their own expectations in this respect can be a behaviour change motivator for some.



Focus on what behaviour is not acceptable within the community when a man disagrees with his partner or family members over their decisions or actions. Ask what is not acceptable for a man or father to do in these situations – what crossing the line looks like. What does it look like when someone in their community crosses the line from having an argument, into using violence and abuse? What does it look like when the adult behaves respectfully according to community values and expectations, and does not cross this line?

If the adult strongly believes that violence is justified (or even expected) under certain circumstances, be transparent with him that you assume there are different opinions about this within his community, and ask him what those different viewpoints might be. If he falls back on 'everyone in my community knows that hitting is OK when a wife harms a man's honour and humiliates him and his family', focus on the illegality of that violent behaviour where they now live, and how that behaviour will be responded to by police and the courts.



Learn about the culture from cultural consultants. Develop relationships with cultural advisors in migrant resource centres, ethnocultural services, international settlement services, and in centres for survivors of torture and trauma. Learn from women's associations within the culture or community, to help you discern which aspects of the perpetrator's narratives about his culture are patriarchal interpretations that serve male entitlement, and that are not universally held within the community.

While you are unlikely to develop enough knowledge to argue the specifics of any religious texts or spiritual teachings that the adult might use to 'justify' his harmful behaviours and beliefs about gender, if you do your research, you can acknowledge the existence of different interpretations and views with some degree of confidence.



Humiliation can be dangerous for users of violence to experience – when they feel shamed or perceive they've been 'reduced' or made to feel 'less of a man' in front of or in the eyes of others, or if they've been reminded of felt inadequacy. If we confront too hard too soon, some might not only double down on their violence-supporting beliefs and narratives, but also escalate their harmful behaviour due to felt humiliation. Even if their felt experience of humiliation occurred in the session with you, they might blame their ex/partner for 'causing' them to be in the situation where they felt humiliated. In some communities, adult users of violence can perceive that their whole family has been humiliated by the victim-survivor, adding to risk.



Extended families and natural networks within the community can be highly important in either exacerbating, or (to a degree) helping to protect against risk. Consider their role in safety planning and in building accountability supports. Think beyond the nuclear family, and identify communal responses. Remember also that extended family members can also condone and join in with the violence and abuse.



There are some unique risk considerations in adult use of violent and controlling behaviours in some cultural community contexts. Ensure that you are familiar with indicators of, and risk factors for, visa abuse, dowry abuse, honour-based violence, forced marriage, cultural isolation and entrapment, female genital mutilation/cutting, and modern slavery. You might need to look outside of your own particular cultural lens to understand the contexts in which these forms of violence and entrapment operate, and so that you do not collude with overculture/white supremacy and racism towards non-Anglo cultures.

# Engaging fathers who use domestic and family violence

Rodney Vlais, November 2024

Family support (including intensive support) services have a highly important role in engaging fathers who use domestic and family violence. While child and adult victim-survivors actively resist the violence they experience, and constantly strive to maintain some space for action and normality in their lives, they cannot be left alone to limit the harms they are subjected to. Being allies to children, mothers and other adults and family members experiencing violence means attempting to address the source of the harm, where we can, and when it's safe to do so.

There is no doubt that fathers who use DFV can be difficult to engage, or to engage safely. Workers have understandable fears of causing more harm, of inadvertently escalating him or colluding with the excuses he uses for his violent and controlling behaviour. Workers can also fear for their own safety.

These fears are important to listen to. They can direct us towards the need for proper planning, and to equip ourselves with skills to feel more confident to manage the engagement, support the father's self-management, and to manage ourselves during our interactions with him.

Historically, however, we have let these fears immobilise us, resulting in plenty of engagement with the protective parent, and little or none with him - or at least little focus with him on his harmful behaviour. This has added to loading the adult survivor up with an impossible set of expectations to manage safety for her children, on top of everything she is already needing to shoulder due to the father's use of coercive controlling violence.

So what does it look like to make fathers and their patterns of harmful behaviour more visible in our work? What are the skills required to do so?

The good news, and the bad news, is that we don't need to load ourselves up with impossible expectations either. This is good news because it's important to know the limits of our role, and to recognise that some fathers have gone too far down the rabbit holes of believing that they are the victim, of standing behind (and making full use of) their male entitlement, and of developing maladaptive responses to their own trauma-based wounds, for us to effect any significant change.

The good news is that even in these circumstances, there are valuable things we can do. We can document his patterns of harmful violent and controlling behaviour, and the impacts of these behaviours on children's welfare, family functioning, and on the adult survivor's parenting and wellbeing. We can sensitively explore and document everything that the adult survivor is doing to maintain dignity, safety and normality for her family. We can help other services who have an important role in the developmental ecology around the child to better understand the family's experiences of violence, to see the adult survivor in a new, more positive and resourceful light, and to be less susceptible to the impression management and systems abuse tactics of the father causing harm.

We can listen out for indicators of risk. We can share what we learn about the father's harmful beliefs and thinking, any escalation in his instability or in complex needs, and the unhelpful or dangerous meaning he is making out of any new circumstances, with other services involved in managing risk.

And we might be able to scaffold and support him to walk across some small steppingstones towards later and bigger changes in his behaviour. We might be able to open up some motivational corridors, some lanes through which he might be willing to work on some aspects of his harmful behaviour, even if it's only the tip of the iceberg. Small, incremental first steps that might still make a meaningful difference to his family.

The good news is also that we do not need to feel the pressure to become behaviour change workers and to try to 'fix' him. Our work with him is part of what is likely to be a long journey towards change - our role can be important, but it is only one or two steps along the way. Even if we are working with him for many months, we might only get to a few small, incremental changes. We do not need to feel dispirited about this - we are making a start.

So this is some of the good news. It's also some of the bad news. These men can be very resistant to change. They often have many years (sometimes decades) of adopting thinking and beliefs that makes themselves out to be the victim, not the person causing harm. They can see the actions of police, child protection, the justice system and other responders as further 'proof' that they are being 'victimised'. They are often emboldened by male entitlement and broader men's rights movement and manosphere narratives that tell them 'men are no longer allowed to be men anymore'. Some might have developed coercive controlling attitudes and behaviours in part as a way to cope with deeply traumatic family-of-origin experiences, and/or be facing marginalisation and oppression on a daily basis due to their lack of white or other forms of privilege.

The bad news is that many of these men won't be interested in a referral to a men's behaviour change program (the referral of choice - it is not safe to refer these men to couple counselling, family therapy or to private practitioners who don't have specialised expertise in DFV, as this will often just make things worse). Or at least not when you start work with them. The family support or intensive family support service is often left carrying the can of risk, hopefully in collaboration with other services.

This means we need to both peddle quickly, and work slowly, at the same time. Peddle quickly to attempt to engage the father in some early steppingstone safety planning, to try to open up a lane that he is willing to travel through to explore at least some aspects of his harmful behaviour. Peddling quickly to make a start on something, even if it's only the tip of the iceberg, that might start to make even a small positive difference for his family. And while doing so, peddling quickly to do all the behind-the-scenes risk management work that he might not be aware of, such as sharing information with any other services that also might be attempting to keep his behaviour within view.

At the same time, we can only work with him slowly. His defensiveness, his denial, minimisation and other-blaming, serves to protect him. Not only from the risk that he might incriminate himself if he discloses the true extent of his behaviours. Defensiveness also protects himself from experiencing the shame of confronting that he has behaved in ways that is not truly how he wants to be. He might consider himself to be a 'good Dad', a 'strong man for his family', and other such things. He does not want to see himself as someone who has traumatised his children and taken their childhoods away from them. He might not want to see himself as a 'wife beater' (language that of course we would never use, including because it only further obscures the insidious nature of pervasive coercive controlling tactics that do not involve physical violence).

The ugly truth is that some fathers are so down the rabbit hole of wanting to punish their (often separated) partner, due to the righteous anger concerning the 'injustice' that 'she has done to him', that they remain closed off to the harm they are causing their children. They are single-mindedly intent on punishing her, at all costs, irrespective of the impacts on their children. They might also be deluding themselves that "I am the only sane parent!" and that somehow their children would be better off without her (or with less contact with her). Of course, this can smokescreen their sense of male entitlement over their children.

But many fathers can be reached, if we don't go too quickly. If we are mindful of not pushing up too hard, too fast, against their shame barriers. While we want to minimise collusion with men's denial and other-blaming, and minimise collusion with their violence-supporting narratives and victim stance attitudes and beliefs, we can't flood them with shame, humiliate them, or moralise at them. There are a set of *mid-point skills* that we can use between colluding and being overly confrontative.

Finding this balance also involves a dance between three anchor points in our engagement with him.

First, we have bottom lines regarding the behaviours we want him to change. Behaviours that he needs to stop doing, as well as others that we might want him to start doing, or to do more of. Behaviours that we want him to be accountable for arising from what we learn through sensitive engagement with those who experience his violence, and from information obtained through other sources. We might not know all or even many of these bottom lines at the start - sometimes it takes a few months of engagement with family members to discern a clear picture of the extent of his harmful patterns of behaviour, the multiple ways in which his behaviour impacts child and family functioning.

We cannot flood him with demands for behaviour change stemming from these bottom lines. In some situations, it might not be safe to introduce them into our engagement with him, especially if he is not aware of what we know about his behaviour and if he might retaliate against family members for disclosing about his behaviours to us. Ignoring the bottom lines completely however can often be collusive; when and how we scaffold a focus on (some of) them requires discernment.

This also means keeping two other anchor points for the engagement in mind. One of these is to create a 'positive emotional space' (as my colleague and MBCP trainer and supervisor Sarah May from NSW so clearly says) for the father to sit with the discomfort involved in exploring how he could be more of the father that he really wants to be. This involves lots of positive questions about what it would look like to be the best father he can be, about what his kids need from him, what he might be modelling to his children (the good and the bad), what his kids are learning from him that might not hold them in good stead in life, how he wants to help them cope with their own big feelings, what roles he can play as a Dad, and so much more. Invitational explorations that we could ask any father, not just those who use DFV.

David Mandel from the Safe and Together Model emphasises that to prepare ourselves to build fathers' motivation to look at their harmful behaviour, we need to practice engaging fathers per se in positive, energising explorations of what it means to show up for their kids, and to be the best Dad they can be. These explorations can also of course involve helping the father to explore the different ways that he can be a Dad (not just being a 'providing Dad' and a 'decision-making Dad'), and whether he can contribute to his family outside narrow 'man box' confines.

Of course, with many fathers who use DFV, we will need at some point to attempt to open up a positive emotional space for the father to explore the problematic parenting practices that he is using. Many fathers who cause DFV harm adopt authoritarian methods of 'managing' (controlling) children's behaviour, and believe that their partner is 'too soft' on the kids. They are often under-involved in their children's lives, or alternate the provision of affection with the elicitation of fear. These fathers often choose to 'let it rip' in front of their children to control their behaviour, rather than seeing children's 'problematic behaviours' as ways in which they attempt to communicate their needs. We need to work with these fathers to support child-centred, rather than self-focused, parenting.

The third anchor is to create opportunities to help the father see that one of the most important parenting choices he can make is how he treats the other parent(s) of his children. That he cannot be the best Dad that he can be if his behaviour impacts his ex/partner's ability to parent, and her bond with their children. That supporting these relationships - and the family's broader relationships with extended kin, community and health and community-based services - is crucial for his children's wellbeing.

For example, my colleague and friend Peter Thorpe from Queensland, one of Australia's leading subject matter experts in engaging fathers who use DFV in child protection systems, takes opportunities to do this when constructing initial genograms with fathers. He might ask them, when talking about each of his children, some of the vital things that his partner does to support that child's wellbeing, and to meet the child's needs. He writes these positive qualities down on the genogram, as seeds for later conversations to explore in more depth.

If these are our three anchors for the engagement, and we attempt to dance between them, how do we hold the father in a conversation anchored by them? When what he wants to talk about is his story of how 'unfair' he has been treated - a story of blame, the 'problems' that his partner has 'caused him', how 'unfit' she is to be a parent or that 'she is the one who needs help'...

There are several sets of skills involved here. They might seem like a lot, but we might already have more of these skills than what we might first think. Existing skills that we can stretch to apply carefully and discerningly with adult users of DFV, if we are supported through some training, coaching and collaboration with our peers.

One set of skills, as mentioned above, concerns how to stay in the mid-point between colluding with, and moralising at, the father. There's many micro-skills involved here (for a brief snapshot of some, see section five of the practice resource at <https://nada.org.au/resources/engaging-men-who-perpetrate-domestic-and-family-violence-in-the-alcohol-and-other-drugs-treatment-context/>) or the demonstration videos and scripts at <https://nurturing-nonviolence-rccf.sydney.edu.au/safer-children-safer-communities-action-research-project/>

Importantly, the use of mid-point skills requires us to manage ourselves in the engagement, and to know the situations in which we might tend to drift too far towards either collusion or coercion. Self-awareness is critical!

Another set of skills involves creating what could be termed a *conversational container* for the engagement. How to respectfully keep the conversation on track given that we are wanting him to sit in some discomfort to talk about things that he might want to avoid. There's a range of skills involved here - signposting, normalising, 'verbal contracting', re/directing, the use of open directed questioning, talking about the talking and others.

Another involves supporting the father to self-manage difficult feelings during the engagement, and to attempt to prevent escalation. There are a range of things that workers and managers can do to support staff safety, especially in the context of home visits. This includes helping workers to learn the skills to attempt to prevent client escalation, and to open up avenues for de-escalation through how they support the client to manage themselves during the engagement.

There are a set of skills involved in creating a positive emotional space, as mentioned before. How to find the 'hooks' through which the father might be willing to sit in some degree of discomfort - how to adopt invitation practice that might gradually build the father's willingness to open up to more of his harmful behaviours, and the impacts of these behaviours. To help him see that these behaviours and impacts are not in line with his aspirations, his values, his hopes for himself and his family, and with how he sees himself, or would prefer to see himself, as a father and as a man.

It's this dissonance, the discomfort through which he comes to realise that he is not living up to his aspirations, hopes and values, that can create the greatest lever for change. At the same time, flooding him with this discomfort, too fast too soon, might only lead him to feel humiliated - not a safe state to leave a man who is using DFV in.

South Australia is our nation's home to invitational approaches towards helping people address heavily ingrained behaviours. Many of you will have invitational narrative, or maybe motivational interviewing, skills towards helping your clients to themselves articulate goals towards change. Often, building upon a father's articulation of some starting goals that you have 'led him' to articulate through patient questioning, rather than us coming in too heavy with the bottom lines, will result in more productive engagement over time. Peddling slowly to build engagement and commitment, while simultaneously peddling quickly (at least behind the scenes) to respond to any escalating risk.

And there are safety planning skills. When we have been able to open up a conversational container focusing on at least some starting aspects of the father's harmful behaviour, and/or when the father has articulated some things that he realises he needs to do differently, we can commence some safety planning with him. Often, this can't get straight to the heart of the matter. We might need to start indirectly, or with some 'adjacent' safety planning on things that seem to be skirting around the edges, but which nevertheless might make a start towards something more direct in the weeks or months ahead.

Going back to the bottom lines anchor, sometimes it is safe and productive to be direct and honest with him. To not beat around the bush. He might appreciate a 'no bullshit' approach. We might be able to introduce some goals into the safety planning conversation directly and transparently. But other times, we will need to start off at the edges, and focus on something that he has articulated that he wants to change, that if he is able to change, might then make a more direct and central change at a later time that little bit easier. The sort of initial 'little lever' change that might be a steppingstone to later and greater things.

Peddling slowly, and quickly, at the same time.

# Three anchors model when engaging fathers who cause domestic & family violence and co/parenting harm



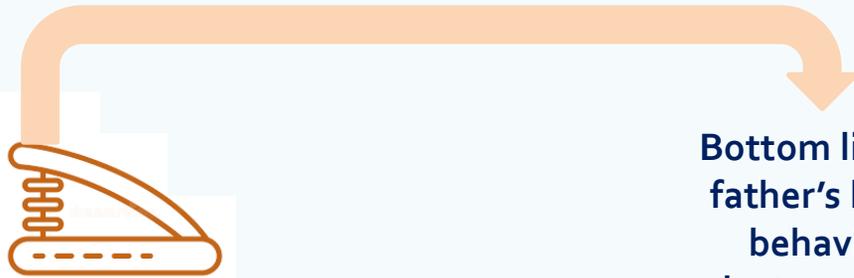
Rodney Vlasis, May 2025

with inspiration from the Caring Dads program,  
Safe & Together Institute, and invitational narrative practice

**all resources mentioned in this guide can be downloaded  
from the Featured section of my profile page**

# We need three anchor points when engaging fathers who cause domestic & family violence, and abusive fathering, harm

Create a **positive emotional space** for him to see what he can gain through the support you and other services are offering him – engaging him like one would with any father about being the best they can be for their kids



-  Patiently open space for him to discuss aspects of his behaviour he's willing to disclose
-  Connect with 'the part of him' that wants the best for his children and his family
-  Find the hook(s) to encourage his stand against the harmful behaviour
-  Begin safety planning: what he can do to move away from causing the harms, and towards alternative behaviours aligned with +ve values
-  Listen out for (and proactively assess) indicators of serious risk and harm
-  Follow-up and extend over time to more of the bottom lines / his harmful behaviours

Bottom lines: the father's harmful behaviour – be transparent with him, **when it's safe to do so**, about what he needs to stop doing, or to start doing / do more of, to cease harming child & family functioning and his ex/partner



Help him recognise, and be motivated by this recognition, that how he treats the mother of their children, and how he supports her relationship with them, is one of the most important things he can do as a parent



**We can springboard toward the bottom lines from an initial focus on healthy fathering and the behaviour that moves him closer to this**

# in a nutshell

- Set up emotional safety for the conversation → adopt a strengths-based approach towards the strategies he uses to manage discomfort, invite him to self-monitor during the session to prevent escalation, signpost and negotiate the agenda as you go along, ground towards self-care at the end to help him leave the conversation safely.
- Create opportunities where you can focus on the bottom anchor → invite him to talk about the positive qualities of his ex/partner as a parent and what she/they means to each of their children.
- Early in the conversation, include a strong focus on left anchor → attempt to create a positive emotional space by exploring his views on what being the best Dad he can be might look like to his children and family, what his children and partner would say if they were asked this, what he wants to model to his children, what his hopes are for his children, what he does and can do to contribute towards these hopes.
- If/when he starts to focus negatively on the actions of others (e.g. his ex/partner) or enters into “I’m the victim!” narratives, use **conversational container** and **mid-point skills** to keep the focus on him and his choices.
- Use positive explorations from the left anchor as a **springboard** towards the right anchor. Explore what his children / their Mum see him doing when he’s *not* that best Dad... what would they say he needs to stop doing... when he *moves away* from being that best Dad, what does that look like?
- Scaffold elaboration, building upon his language while minimising collusion... invite him to talk more about his behaviours... invite him to talk about impacts, noting that he might only be disclosing or willing to think about the tip-of-the-iceberg of his harmful behaviours and impacts.
- Be prepared for him to intensify his victim-stance narratives as the conversation becomes uncomfortable → you might need to increase your active use of conversational container and mid-point skills.
- Be aware of how he is responding, don’t flood him with shame. Check in with him. Support him to sit safely with the tension of how the harmful behaviours he’s willing to admit to aren’t consistent with being the Dad he wants to be... the best Dad he wants to move towards.

# when to use this model

This practice model is relevant for family support, child protection, community-focused or any other practitioners or workers who engage fathers using domestic and family violence, and/or abusive parenting and co-parenting

It's a model about how to focus on our bottom lines about the changes the father needs to make – the behaviours and harms he's causing that we want to hold him accountable for – in the context of a parallel focus on motivational enhancement and positive fathering.

It also incorporates the Safe and Together Model principles on multiple pathways to harm, including how many DFV perpetrators sabotage or impact their ex/partner's parenting, bond with her children, and the child's and family's connections to social, cultural, educational, health and service system supports.

This model is useful when we can't confront the father directly with what we know about his violent and controlling behaviours and the harms caused to children, the adult survivor, and to the family. For example, when we can't confront him because he doesn't know what we know about his behaviours, and if he came to know what we know, might increase his violent and controlling tactics against his ex/partner and possibly also his children

We might also not be able to confront him if going too fast too soon will overwhelm him with shame, resulting in him disengaging, or becoming even more unsafe to his family members.

We also know from the Caring Dads program and other DFV-informed approaches, that to help build a man's focus on abusive fathering and co-parenting, we might first need to engage him on explorations of healthy fathering.

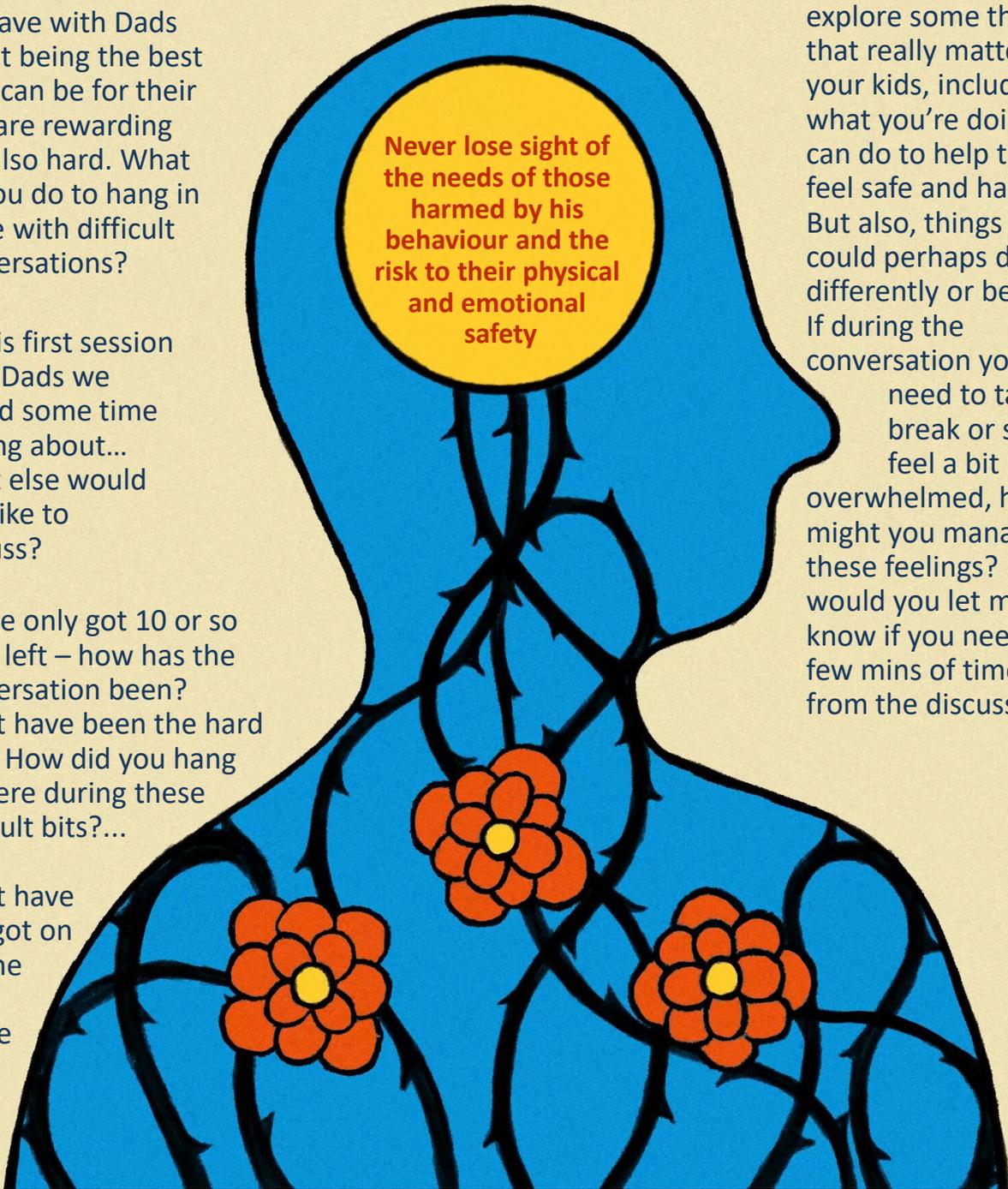
# Set up emotional safety for the conversation, and support engagement

The conversations we have with Dads about being the best they can be for their kids are rewarding but also hard. What do you do to hang in there with difficult conversations?

In this first session with Dads we spend some time talking about... what else would you like to discuss?

We've only got 10 or so mins left – how has the conversation been? What have been the hard bits? How did you hang in there during these difficult bits?...

What have you got on for the rest of the day?



**Never lose sight of the needs of those harmed by his behaviour and the risk to their physical and emotional safety**

We're going to explore some things that really matter for your kids, including what you're doing and can do to help them feel safe and happy. But also, things you could perhaps do differently or better. If during the conversation you need to take a break or start to feel a bit overwhelmed, how might you manage these feelings? ... How would you let me know if you need a few mins of time out from the discussion?

See the post and resource [Concepts, models and skills in engaging adults who use DFV](#) for more guidance

# Create opportunities throughout the conversation to focus on the bottom anchor

**If you are father to a little girl, understand that everything you say and do to the mother of your child is teaching your daughter what to expect from a man.**



If we were to ask your youngest, what would he say are three qualities about his mother that he really loves?

Let's take a look at your children's needs that are met by their mother... what can you do to help her meet these needs? What needs can you help directly to meet?

Parenting is a hard job. If we were to ask your partner, what would she say that she would want you to do to support her in her role as a mother?

On a scale of 0 to 10, how important is your partner to your children?... What makes her so important to them?... What can you do to support their relationship with your partner?...



**Springboard towards bottom lines:**

What might you be doing that hurts your children's relationship with their mother?

What do you need to stop doing that makes it hard for her to meet your children's needs?

It sounds like your partner's Mum means a lot to your kids. What do you need to change in your own behaviour so that you can support their relationship with her?

**Being a good father starts with respecting your child's mother.**



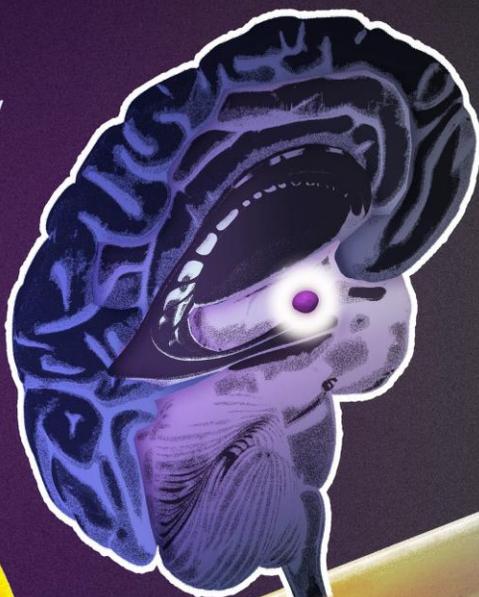
**See the post [Engaging fathers who perpetrate violence and control for more guidance, especially the slide](#)**

Build motivation towards him treating the children's mother with respect through, in part, focusing on what he models to his children

Create a positive emotional space towards the father being prepared to sit in the discomfort of exploring how they are not the father they hope to be... or think that they are...

**help him to ‘feel good about feeling bad’**

What does it say that you are refusing in our conversation to turn away from what your kids need from you, even though it makes you feel bad to realise...



You're telling me you want to move towards being a calm and fun Dad that your children feel relaxed around – that matters a lot to you?

What might it mean to your kids if they knew that you are prepared to learn from your mistakes, and to work hard to be the best Dad you can be?... How might you feel if when your kids are older, you are able to say to yourself ‘the cycle of violence stopped here – I was able to move away from treating my family like how my Dad treated me.’

See the posts and resources **Concepts, models and skills in engaging adults who use DFV and Engaging fathers who perpetrator violence and control** for more guidance. In the latter, for example, see the slides **Examples of questions that work across the three anchor points.**



practitioner  
/ responder

I want to talk with him about his behaviour and it's impacts on his ex/partner and family

I must hold him accountable!

I want to talk about what's been done to me... by my other half / my ex, by the cops, by the feminazis...

No one wants to listen to me!

A practice model for responding to the "I'm the victim here!" thinking of adults who perpetrate violent and controlling behaviour



adult user of domestic, family and sexual violence

While you will be attempting to minimise collusion with the adult's victim stance thinking and violence-supporting perspectives and beliefs, you will not, at this early stage, be attempting to 'break them down'. Rather, draw the adult's attention away from his victim stance thinking, and support his ability to begin to look at 'meaningful tip of the iceberg' aspects of his harmful behaviour and impacts.

Victim stance

SHAME BARRIER

Family violence behaviours

Values, hopes, aspirations

Impacts

See the posts and resources **Concepts, models and skills in engaging adults who use DFV and Responding to perpetrator "I'm the victim here!" thinking** (which describes the practice model above) for guidance on how to apply conversational container and mid-point skills. There are further examples in the **practice discussion videos**.

## Springboard from positive explorations of what the father can do more of in terms of healthy fathering and positive behaviours, towards the bottom-line behaviours of harm you want to address



I see that being a fun and relaxed Dad around your kids is important to you, and to your kids. You've talked about some things that you do, and that you can do more of, to be that relaxed, fun Dad.

No parent is perfect, and I imagine you aren't always that relaxed, fun Dad. What does it look like when you aren't relaxed around your kids?... When you aren't calm, how would your children describe you?... If they were to draw you when you aren't calm, what might that drawing look like?... How would you describe how you appear to your kids when you aren't calm and relaxed around them?... What expression would they see on your face?... What would your partner say?... What does she see you do when you aren't relaxed and calm?

... Ok, you'd describe it as being an aggro Dad, not a calm Dad. What do your kids see you say or do to their mother when you are being an aggro Dad? What might they overhear?... What impacts might this have on them?... What would they prefer you to do?

This sounds hard to talk about. I know that your kids mean a lot to you. You aren't running away from exploring how being an aggro Dad might be harming your kids. It takes strength to face this. Are you OK if we explore this a bit further, to get to what you can do to move towards being that calm Dad, and away from the aggro Dad?

Watch the practice video **"In this video I explore a few more skills..."** for guidance on how to extend these opportunities into unpacking harmful behaviours, exploring impacts, unearthing the father's values inconsistent with his harmful behaviour, and into preliminary safety planning towards him preventing and interrupting the behaviour

**Scaffold further explorations... to the extent that you can push up against his shame barrier, and extend his capacity to experience the shame/discomfort of these explorations...  
keep cultivating and growing a positive emotional space throughout the conversation**

“She doesn’t let up, I don’t want to lose it at her in front of the kids but you just can’t reason with her!”

“Sounds like you were feeling quite worked up?”

“Yeah, she doesn’t give me a break, she makes me feel like a shit Dad in front of the kids”



Watch the practice video **“In this video I explore a few more skills...”** for guidance on how to extend these opportunities into unpacking harmful behaviours, exploring impacts, unearthing the father’s values inconsistent with his harmful behaviour, and into preliminary safety planning towards him preventing and interrupting the behaviour. See the practice guide **Preliminary safety planning to interrupt violent behaviour**

**Remember: even a focus on healthy fathering and positive discussions about the father’s children creates opportunities for continuous risk assessment – see the slide Assessing all along the way in the resource Engaging fathers who perpetrate violence and control**

Domestic  
and family  
violence  
informed  
practice  
concepts  
towards  
safer  
fathering  
and  
co-parenting



It's not just about, or even mostly about, teaching parenting skills or improving his knowledge about child development. If we don't also focus on goals like those to the right, some fathers will use any new or enhanced skills in ways that might further harm the safety and well-being of their children



- Building empathy for his children, their experiences and their needs
- Understanding the benefits of learning to relate to his children in new ways
- Promoting respectful, non-controlling and non-violent co-parenting or parallel parenting with the children's other parent(s)
- Managing his distress in safe, non-violent ways
- Identifying and challenging unhelpful thoughts that give rise to harmful parenting and co-parenting choices, and the unhelpful beliefs that give rise to them
- Moving away from control-based parenting
- Connecting with, rather than demanding of, his children
- Listening, playing, being involved... *consistently*
- Being accountable for and learning from past and current use of violent and controlling behaviours
- Moving away from entitlement-based parenting focusing mostly on his rights, and towards child-focused parenting focusing on his responsibilities and opportunities to be the best parent he can be
- Expanding how he becomes responsible for supporting child and family well-being... *negotiating* with the other parent to expand the ways in which he contributes

Anticipate that he is likely to have mixed feelings about engaging – acknowledge this, and invite him to see the benefits of doing so... patiently search for the hooks

## Building rapport



If you feel dismissed or de-credentialised because of your gender, age or other aspects of your identity, one approach might be to proactively raise this (“I guess you might be wondering what I, as a young woman, is doing here talking with you about fathering...”) and turn this to your advantage (“There’s advantages and disadvantages of you talking to me as a young woman. I’m not here to tell you how to parent. But I am here to help you think about some things so that you can make your own decisions. I’m a good listener...”)

Be non-defensive and non-confronting

Take the approach of “there’s always something to learn that will benefit your kids”

Don’t get drawn/sucked into battles about things (“parents are too soft on kids these days!”) that will make it appear as though you are moralising at him... defer the discussion until more rapport has been built.

Sensitively hold up a mirror to discrepancies and contradictions – e.g. how a behaviour/action/choice contradicts an outcome, value, aspiration or self-perception that the man desires.

Acknowledge his strength in willing to have an uncomfortable conversation, and what this means for his commitment to his children.

Model a non-shaming approach. Men who use violence often constantly using shaming approaches towards managing (controlling) children’s behaviour.

# Overcoming resistance to change: The importance of discussing healthy fathering before challenging abusive fathering

Trust and motivation-building is required for the men to be open to the discomfort of being 'challenged'

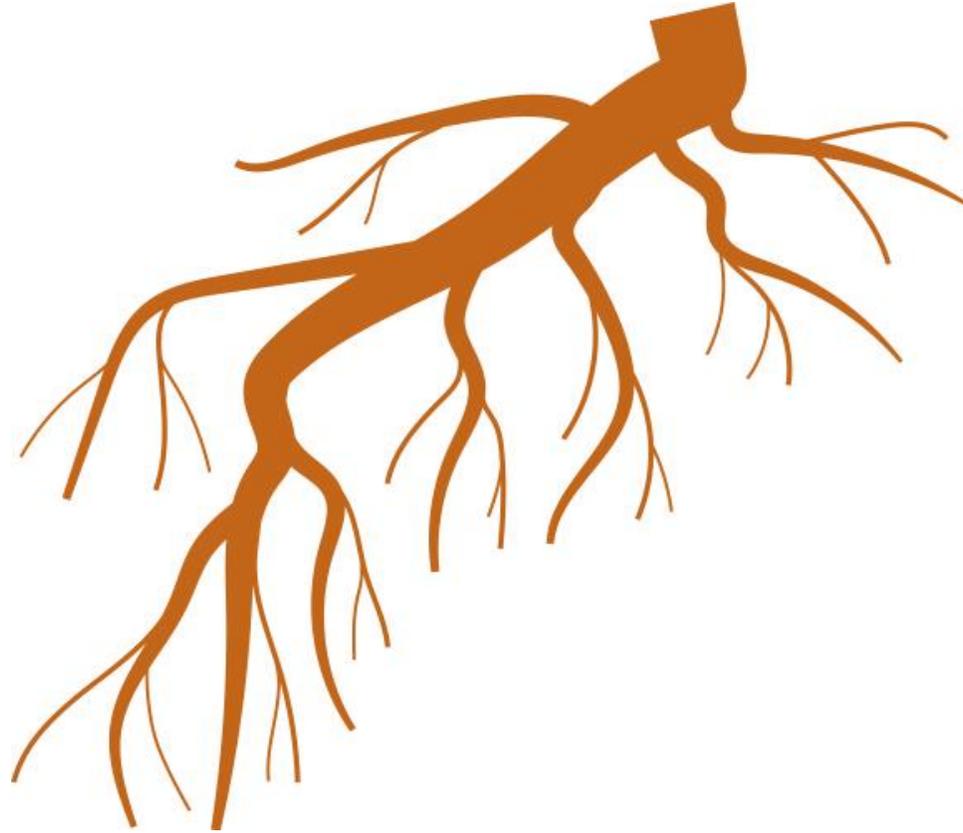
from the Caring Dads manual  
<https://caringdads.org/>

At the onset of our foray into program development, we understood that the men who were referred to the Caring Dads program were likely to be reluctant group participants. Fathers share societal bias towards mothers' responsibility for children. Thus, men often feel that mothers are the ones who should be involved with child mental health or child protection services, and that their participation in such services is unnecessary and perhaps, unwanted. The few men who have a history of involvement with the justice or child-protection systems tend to have even more negative attitudes, and may approach any recommended intervention with hostility, anger, and defensiveness... Given this expected presentation, we began our first Caring Dads group with two sessions focused on engaging men to examine their parenting. This worked well. Then, following traditional practice in batterer intervention, we moved directly to identifying and challenging men's unhealthy and abusive parenting. We soon discovered that this was a mistake. Two sessions were simply not enough to develop sufficient trust and prepare fathers for the difficult work of critically examining their behaviour. Fathers reacted with anger, hostility, defensiveness, and non-attendance.

As a result of our experiences in these early groups, we decided to re-order the *Caring Dads* materials. Rather than address maltreatment first and build healthier models of fathering second, we switched the order. This proved to be a successful modification. Now, fathers begin by considering what it means to be a good father to their children. Facilitators challenge men to get to know their children better, to become more involved, and to relate more positively to children's mothers. With this preparation, men are much more ready to hear feedback about their abusive behaviours. Now, instead of being hostile and resistant, fathers are often able to identify their unhealthy and abusive behaviours on their own, and when challenged by facilitators, they are able to more openly consider their behaviours. Admittedly, as facilitators, we sometimes struggle with the desire to immediately confront men about their harmful behaviours. However, we have confidence that delaying confrontations for a few sessions significantly improves the chances that we can successfully promote men's accountability for past actions and commitment to change.

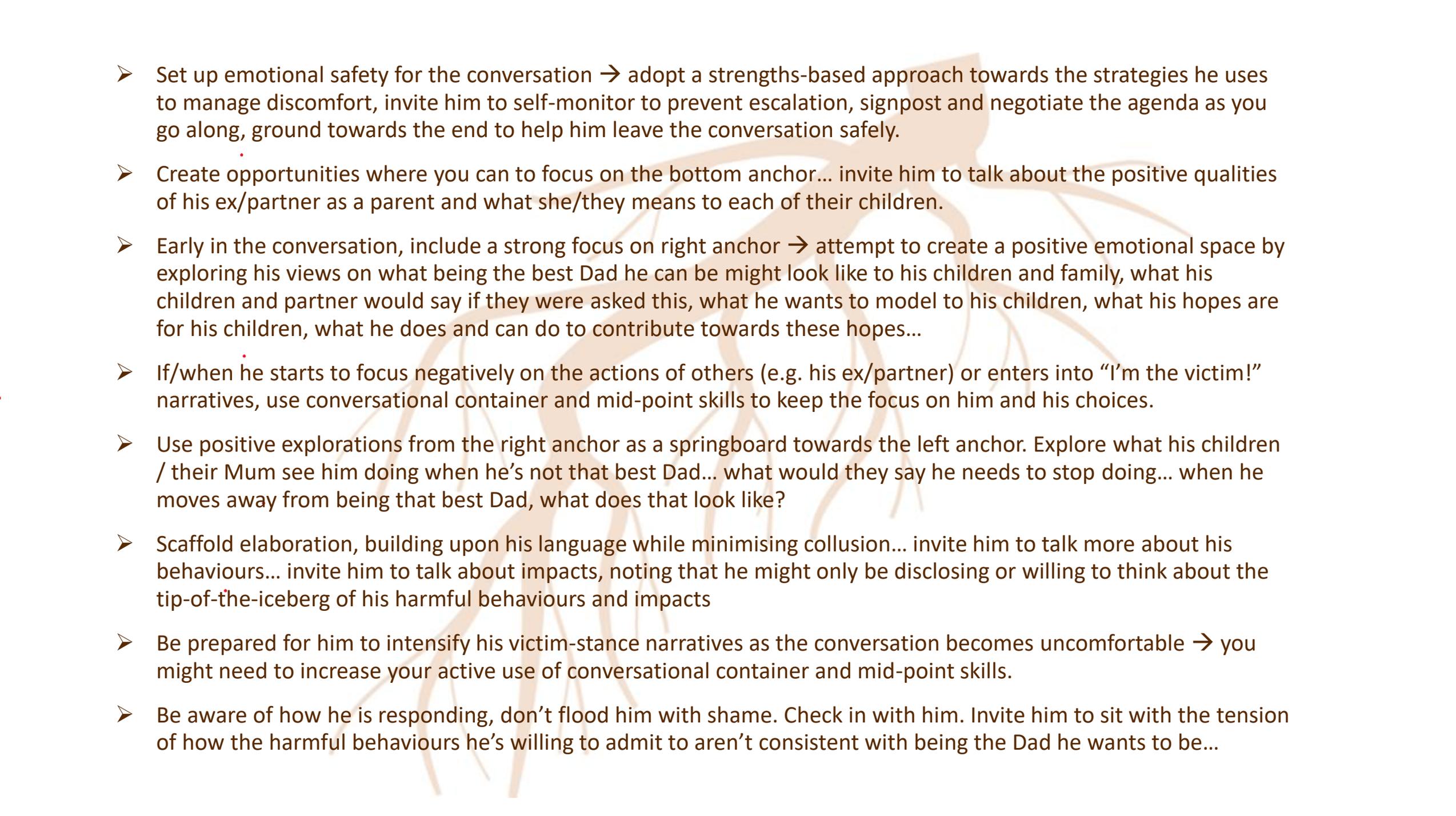
## **We need three anchor points when engaging fathers who cause DFV harm**

**Bottom lines regarding the father's harmful behaviour – being transparent with him, when it's safe to do so, about what he needs to stop doing, or to start doing / do more of, to cease harming child & family functioning**



**Creating a positive emotional space for him to see what he can gain through the support you and other services are offering him – engaging him like one would with any father about being the best they can be for their kids**

**Helping him recognise, and be motivated by this recognition, that how he treats the mother of their children, and how he supports her relationship with them, is one of the most important things he can do as a parent**

- 
- Set up emotional safety for the conversation → adopt a strengths-based approach towards the strategies he uses to manage discomfort, invite him to self-monitor to prevent escalation, signpost and negotiate the agenda as you go along, ground towards the end to help him leave the conversation safely.
  - Create opportunities where you can to focus on the bottom anchor... invite him to talk about the positive qualities of his ex/partner as a parent and what she/they means to each of their children.
  - Early in the conversation, include a strong focus on right anchor → attempt to create a positive emotional space by exploring his views on what being the best Dad he can be might look like to his children and family, what his children and partner would say if they were asked this, what he wants to model to his children, what his hopes are for his children, what he does and can do to contribute towards these hopes...
  - If/when he starts to focus negatively on the actions of others (e.g. his ex/partner) or enters into “I’m the victim!” narratives, use conversational container and mid-point skills to keep the focus on him and his choices.
  - Use positive explorations from the right anchor as a springboard towards the left anchor. Explore what his children / their Mum see him doing when he’s not that best Dad... what would they say he needs to stop doing... when he moves away from being that best Dad, what does that look like?
  - Scaffold elaboration, building upon his language while minimising collusion... invite him to talk more about his behaviours... invite him to talk about impacts, noting that he might only be disclosing or willing to think about the tip-of-the-iceberg of his harmful behaviours and impacts
  - Be prepared for him to intensify his victim-stance narratives as the conversation becomes uncomfortable → you might need to increase your active use of conversational container and mid-point skills.
  - Be aware of how he is responding, don’t flood him with shame. Check in with him. Invite him to sit with the tension of how the harmful behaviours he’s willing to admit to aren’t consistent with being the Dad he wants to be...

## Examples of questions that work across the three anchor points

Could you tell me a bit about each of your children? What do they like doing? What makes them happy? What surprises you about them? What makes you proud about them? ...

What do you want for your children? What are your hopes for them?

What do they find difficult? What things do each of them struggle with, more than other kids their age?

What do you think your children might be worried about?

How would you know if they are worried about or struggling with something?

Tell me three qualities about your partner as a mother?

What things do the children love to do with their mum?

What do you hope for as a parent?... How did you hope being a parent would be?... What are the best times for you as a parent? ... What are the hardest times?

How do you invest in your children?... invest in being the best dad you can be?

What do you do to try to keep your children emotionally and physically safe?... What do you do to foster a stable and nurturing home environment for them?

No parent is perfect – what are some of the things that you could change to improve your children's wellbeing and safety?

What do your children need from you?

What are some of the things your children would like you to change? What would they say if we asked them?

# Further examples of questions that span across the three anchor points

How would your kids like you to show up for them?

How do you manage your big feelings? What do the children see?... What do the children see when you are really worried / angry / stressed...?

What is your son learning about how to treat girls and women from you?

What is your daughter learning from you about how women should be treated in a relationship, about what's acceptable?

What will happen if they take these learnings into their first relationships?

How do you support your children's relationship with their mother?... How do you support her parenting?... How can you try to make her role as a parent easier?

How is your behaviour towards the children's mum affecting your relationship with them?

How might your children see you in ten years' time, if some things don't change about your behaviour at home?

How do you think relating to their mother with respect rather than abuse might benefit your kids?

How would your children like you to treat [insert name of their mother]?

How important is it for you to be the best father you can be?

Are you ready to start looking at how your behaviour is getting in the way of that?

If safe to do so,  
sometimes exploring  
with the father his  
own experiences of  
being fathered can  
create little light bulbs  
into what his children  
need from him

adapted from a Caring Dads activity

Commence by inviting the father to brainstorm the things that a child needs to feel happy and to have 'a good childhood' (e.g. 'love', 'safety', 'security', 'predictability'...). This sets important foundations for the activity and helps to divert attention away from "my father gave me a flogging and it did me no harm"

Then invite him to consider the following in order, and whiteboard or use big sheets of paper across four columns, one column at a time:

1. "Tell me about your father – how were you fathered /parented by him?" **and** "How did your father treat your mother... what did you see and hear... what didn't you see directly but suspected about how he treated her?"
2. "How did you feel around him... what were the range of feelings, the good and the bad...?" "What was the impact of the ways in which you were fathered?" "What did you want your father to do more of around you or with you... what do you wish he did less of?" **and** "How did you feel about how he treated your Mum... what impact did this have on you?"
3. "How do your children want to be fathered?... How do they want to feel around you?" **and** "How do your children feel about how you treat their mother?"
4. "What do your children need from you as Dad?" **and** "What do your children need from you in how you treat their mother?"

Then, consolidate his explorations of what makes a good Dad / the best Dad he can be to his children... and consolidate his insights into where he does and doesn't feel equipped or supported to be this Dad.

# Assessing along the way, does he...

- Show little capacity to talk knowledgeably about the children's personalities and current interests
- Have limited insight into the children's needs and what is happening in their lives
- Use a negative or complaining tone when talking about the children
- Have expectations of the children's behaviour that are not developmentally appropriate
- Have a strongly preferred child and/or a strongly least preferred one
- Talk about his children having deliberate negative intent towards him
- Appear to regard children as his property
- Believe his children need to show respect and to be 'taught lessons'
- Blame his (ex)partner if limits have been imposed on his access to the children
- Criticise her parenting style or capacity (for example, says that she is too lenient with the children or that the children are 'out of control' under her parenting)
- Say that one or more of the children do not want to be parented by her
- Focus exclusively or mostly on his 'rights' to see his children.

*Every question is an assessment question!*

Emotional regulation skills – what is the father modelling to his children about how to handle big feelings? How is the father responding in family situations when he feels anger, irritability, frustration or distress? Does he have the skills to self-manage these feelings safely, but chooses not to use them because of his violence-supporting beliefs? Or does he genuinely lack these skills?



**Many fathers who use DFV adopt harsh discipline, use fear and induce shame to attempt to force compliance... this can be a very important intervention target**



Some fathers use insults and shaming because they have not thought about the impacts from the child's perspectives – if they can be helped to see how *they* are not likely to become motivated by someone insulting or shaming them, they might realise that this won't work for their children either.

Other fathers however use these tactics because they have deeply enculturated beliefs that children are inherently 'bad', lazy or 'sinful', and that if they are 'given an inch they will take a mile'.

Beware too for the father who is mining for new, improved ways to manipulate their children in order to further coercively control them.



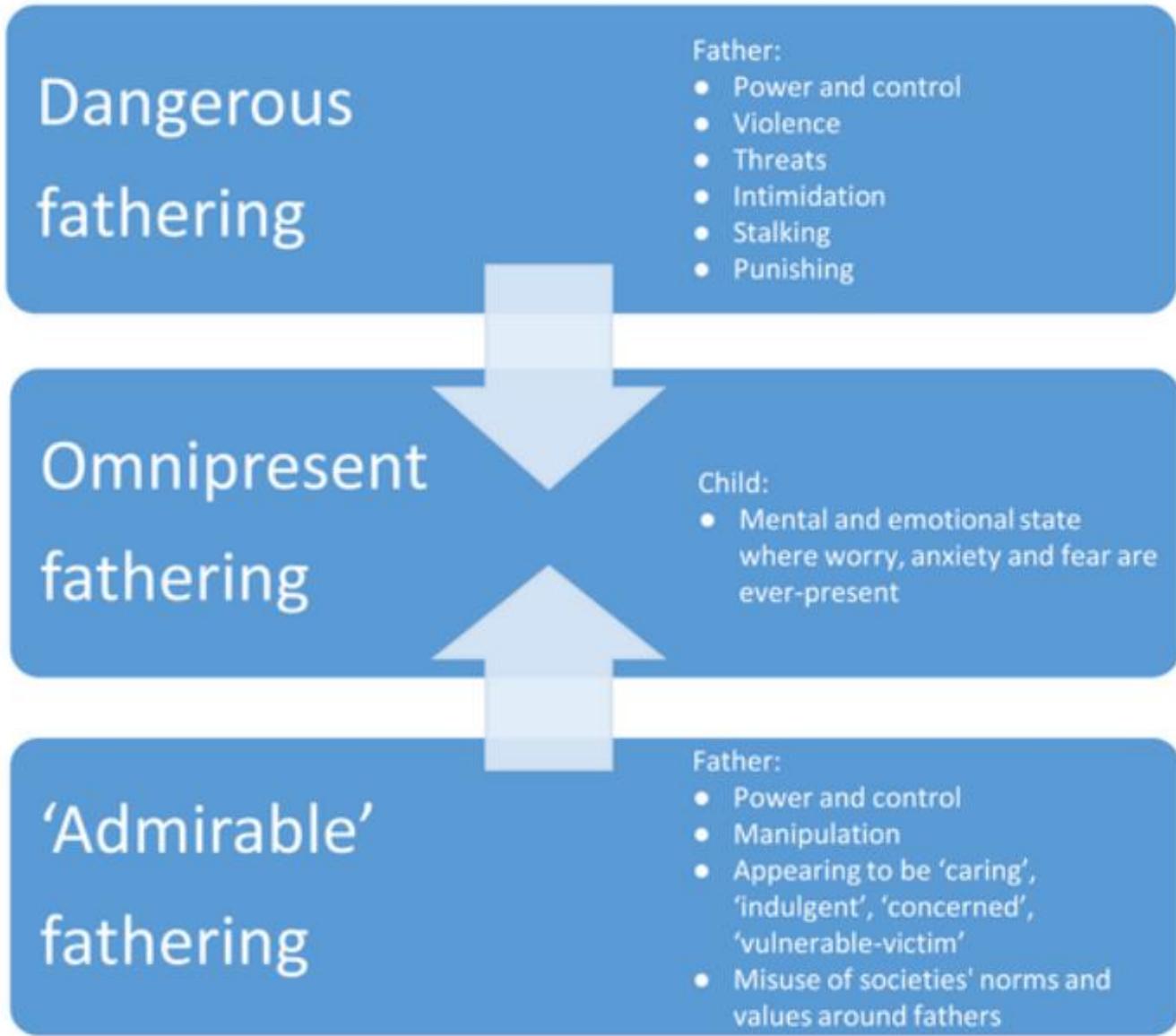
“She’s too soft on the kids... no wonder they run riot!”

Help him to make different (and less hostile) meaning out of her parenting choices.

For example, that she might be needing to *compensate* for him being too strict, using fear, not listening enough to the children... leaving her to do all of the heavy emotional lifting.

Her space for action as a parent is reduced due to the impacts of his harshness.





Many fathers using DFV adopt a combination of dangerous and 'admirable' fathering patterns to coercively control their children.

Direct coercive controlling behaviours towards children can include:

- Restricting their spaces to say and do things (e.g., not being able to play, having to be quiet).
- Controlling their time, movement and activities, including having limited opportunities to be with their mother and the stability and nurturance she could provide
- Isolating them from extended family, friends, extra-curricular activities and other supports
- Making the child monitor the mother
- Manipulating them to treat the mother badly
- Using intermittent reward, contrition, promises, love-bombing to manipulate
- Micro-managing their money, transport, communications, use of technology, etc. (e.g., of safe access to their phone or social media)

Adapted in part from Katz, E., Nikipeteri, A., & Laitinen. M. (2020) based on research with families post-separation – but is also highly applicable to situations where the family is living together

# Tips for Fathers on How to Always Be There for Family

Fathers who use DFV often provide affection very inconsistently, and alternate between occasional shows of affection in the context of mostly being distant and/or using fear

Celebrate Achievements, Big and Small

Apologize and Forgive

Provide Emotional Support

Show Affection

Be Consistent



Be wary not to promote the father's more consistent involvement in ways that reinforces his sense of entitlement over his children... if it is not safe for him to have much contact with his children, emphasise that what matters is how consistent he is during the times he is with them, even if he has only limited access

# Build motivation towards him treating the children's mother with respect through, in part, focusing on what he models to his children

- “What kind of example do you set in your relationship with your children’s mother?”
- “On a scale of 0 to 10, how important is it for your children to learn respectful communication from you?” ...“Wow, an 8 out of 10, can you tell me why you didn’t rate it say a 3 or a 4?”
- “Given how important that is for your children, let’s spend some time talking about what you can model to them.”
- “What does modelling respect in how you communicate with their mother look like?”
- “Why would it be important for your children to feel that you value their mother’s views and opinions?”
- “How would you model listening to your children’s mother?... What would that look like?”
- “What else is important to model to your children in how you treat her?”
- “What is important not to model?”
- “What have you modelled to your children that you are not proud of?”... “Could you be more specific about what you said or did?”... “What is the impact on your children of them seeing you say that to their Mum?”... “What would you prefer them to learn in that type of situation?”... “Why would that be an important learning for them?”... “How committed are you to model that to them?”... “So it sounds important that we spend some time on how you can make sure that you model...”
- “What impact does it have on your child when you bad mouth their mother to them – even if their mother is genuinely in the wrong or has done something harmful?”
- “Whose needs does it serve to bad mouth her?”
- “What would be a child-centred thing that you can do in that situation?”
- “Let’s talk about what you can do when you feel tempted to cross the line into modelling something you don’t want your children to learn...”
- “What’s a goal that you can set over the coming week towards modelling... to your children?”
- “How confident, on a scale of 0-10, do you feel you can do that, even when Sally says or does something you feel upset about?”
- “Let’s talk about how we can turn that confidence from a 6 to an 8...”

# Continuum of father-centred vs child-centred *behaviours*

Father-centred behaviours

- doing what I want most of the time
- letting my frustrations rip
- telling them off because that will make me feel better
- imposing harsh rules
- not thinking how they might be feeling
- exposing them to experiences beyond their understanding and developmental stage

Child-centred behaviours

- listening
- playing
- spending undistracted time with them
- focusing on their choice of activities and discussion
- praising them
- showing acceptance
- fair limits
- treating their mother with respect

What might be a child-centred behaviour in one situation, or with a child at a certain age, might not be in/at another.  
Ask: Whose needs are being met most by my actions? Will my actions help the child to feel loved, understood, appreciated, accepted and respected?

8. If your child could travel anywhere in the world, where would he or she go?		
9. What is your child's favorite holiday?		
10. What is your child's least favorite chore?		
11. If your child could be any animal what would he/she be?		
12. What is your child's favorite book?		
13. What does your child feel is his or her greatest accomplishment?		
14. What is your child's favorite school subject?		
15. If your child could meet anyone in the world, who would it be?		

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Explore with the father what he can do to know and understand his children and their experiences better... without him being intrusive, invading their space or privacy, or being insensitive to their needs and feelings due to his need to learn more about them.

What are their needs?

What are their wishes?

What are their interests?

What and who do they want to be accepted for?

How do *they* want you to be involved?

What do they like doing with their mother?

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Target any beliefs that his children are intentionally trying to make things difficult for him, and/or that children have more power than they have... abusive parents can tend to attribute adult-like motives and intentions to children's behaviour, and treat them as if they have the power of adults

Help him understand where his children's behaviours are coming from, in terms of developmental stage and the needs that the child is expressing



Fathering plan: Work with him to elicit broad goals *and* specific commitments that stem from the goals

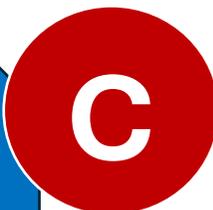
- Achievable commitments that build self-efficacy and confidence, that can be monitored (e.g., through obtaining feedback from the mother), and which build over time.
- Goals informed by:
  - the needs and voices of adults and children experiencing his violence,
  - the intervention targets (see slide “It’s not just about, or even mostly about...”), and
  - where the father is at and is motivated to work on.
- Share the plan and goals that you create with him with the other parent. Not in a way that makes her responsible for his changes. But so that she can offer feedback and let you know if she sees him working towards the goals in practice, and what might be arising from this.
- There are likely to be intervention goals that you can’t yet include in the fathering plan with the father, because he is not ready to work towards them, or if being upfront with him about these goals might jeopardise the safety of family members.

# TRAUMA-INFORMED ENQUIRY INTO HARM AND FUTURE SAFETY

*Moving from Disconnection toward Connection*

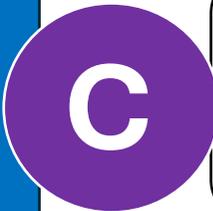
## TRAUMA INFORMED ENQUIRY INTO HARM AND FUTURE SAFETY

**The 5Cs plus Empathy**



### CONSCIOUS CONTAINER

Consciously build a container of respect, safety, dignity and focus, to hold the difficult conversation and to prioritise external and internal safety throughout the conversation. Offer choice, recognise strengths, validate feelings, use verbal and non-verbal cues that communicate safety.



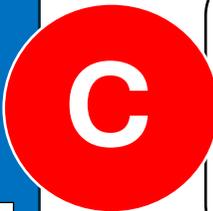
### CURIOSITY

Invite their perspective: "*Can you tell me what happened, in your own words?*" Listen for and validate feelings, non-harmful beliefs and values (what matters). Reframe victim-blaming by bringing focus back to harmful behaviour and impacts. Navigate denial without collusion or confrontation (avoid further shame), but by acknowledging exceptions and shifting to future focus (what matters to them).



### CREATE HOPE

Explore hopes for their child/others, family and self. Listen for and validate what matters and explore their preferred future. Explore exceptions to harmful behaviour, what it looks like when they are being safe and at their best.



### COURAGE TO TALK ABOUT HARM

Transition from hopes for the future and being their best self, to harm (past and present). Normalise: *Everyone has times when we are not at our best and behave in ways we are not proud of.* Unpack details of harmful behaviour (patterns of behaviour, context, impact). Explore dissonance - how does harmful behaviour get in the way of what matters? Use verbal and non-verbal cues of safety, and validate strengths and what matters to support them staying in the conversation.



### CO-CREATE SAFETY

Move focus to safety and invite partnering for immediate and future safety. If danger is present, explain non-negotiables (connect to what matters and hopes for future) and build agreement on action steps needed for immediate safety. When appropriate, explore goals for long term safety and action steps toward this.

Empathy plus other key micro-skills, to be used throughout the conversation, to assist the person to participate to the greatest possible extent while not going outside their window of tolerance.

## Purpose

This trauma-informed enquiry model is designed to scaffold difficult conversations with clients, particularly when the client's nervous system may be stuck in a state of DISCONNECTION (which might show up as anger, shutdown, compliance, denial, minimising disclosures of harm, blaming others, or an unwillingness to engage). This trauma-informed enquiry process can support clients to feel safe enough in the conversation to be able to stay regulated and be present to the conversation (and begin to experience a sense of safe connection).

## Practice Considerations

- Establish a conversational container and use verbal and non-verbal cues of safety and core micro-skills to support the person in managing discomfort and maximising internal safety, so that they can stay inside their window of tolerance and engage in the conversation.
- Move back and forth between the 5Cs as needed: Covering each element is important but it does not need to be a linear process. Whenever someone is becoming dysregulated, connect back to what they shared with you about what matters, to strengths and to future hopes.
- **Use non-collusive EMPATHY at every available opportunity.** If there is denial or victim/survivor blaming, find the mid-point between collusion and confrontation so that you are validating the feeling without colluding in the denial/blaming eg. *It sounds like you were feeling really angry at that moment. What would the kids (or partner – preferably use names) have seen you doing at that time, when you were feeling really angry?*
- **Be mindful of immediate safety at all times.** Do not introduce any information shared by others that may increase risk for victim/survivors. Be clear on what is, and isn't, safe to disclose to the PCH concerning what you know about their behaviours and impacts.
- Every question is an intervention: Use curious questions throughout the conversation to explore the person's perspectives and views, to identify strengths and actions of protection (exceptions), to explore preferred futures and to move toward collaborative planning.
- When working with the PCH, find what matters to him. Every question and response is an opportunity to learn about the PCH's values, his understanding about his behaviour and impacts, and thinking/beliefs he uses to give himself permission to use violent and controlling behaviours.
- **Do not fight against denial.** Use it as an opportunity to explore why the PCH thinks that the harmful behaviour is not desirable/acceptable, and his values and ethical strivings that underpin these views.
- Recognise that there will be barriers to people talking openly about what happened and provide opportunities for the person to say more in future sessions without losing face, or without thinking there will be harsh consequences. Remember that shame overwhelm is not a safe place to leave a user of violence in (for the family or for the person causing harm).
- It is very common for people who use violence (and particularly men) to experience deep shame, which will make it more likely for them to isolate and disengage. Proactively work to maintain the connection and repair after any ruptures in non-collusive ways. Don't give up; remind him that you are there to help them keep everyone safe – even in the midst of difficult times; and be mindful not to leave him feeling that he is a 'bad parent' or 'failing his family'. Focus on his capabilities and opportunities to be the safest and best father/parent he can be, and the supports to help him do so.

ELEMENT	HELPFUL QUESTIONS/STATEMENTS	MICRO-SKILLS
<b>Conscious Container</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I imagine it's not easy to be meeting with us (or have us here) (<b>Empathising</b>) and I really appreciate you talking with me, and particularly talking with me about things that would be hard for most people to talk about (<b>Normalising</b>).</li> <li>• I would really like to hear your views on what happened tonight (eg. that led to the police being called) and then be able to support you and your family to make sure that everyone is safe; both tonight and in the future.</li> <li>• Everyone has difficult times in their lives (<b>Normalising</b>) and I'm not here to judge you about that. My hope is that we can talk honestly about the difficult things you and your family are facing, so that I can help you and your family get things back to a good place.</li> <li>• Most people I work with find these conversations very difficult (<b>Normalising</b>), so please let me know if you need a break at any time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use verbal and non-verbal cues of safety (even if someone is not presenting as dysregulated).</li> <li>• Empathising, non-collusively.</li> </ul>
<b>Curiosity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could you tell me about what happened, in your own words? (<b>Active Listening</b>)</li> <li>• So what I'm hearing is that ... Have I got that right? (<b>Summarising and Clarifying</b>)</li> <li>• It sounds like you were feeling ... [name emotion] and I imagine those feelings weren't easy for you to manage. What have you done before to safely manage those feelings? (<b>Reflecting feelings and empathising, while not colluding; Redirecting from other-blaming</b>).</li> <li>• This might be a hard question, but when you say you lost it and got physical (<b>Reframing</b> from his language of "She made me lose it at her, I couldn't take it anymore, and got a bit physical"), can you tell me what that was like for your family? (<b>Clarifying; Redirecting to impact</b>).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active listening.</li> <li>• Acknowledging strengths.</li> <li>• Reflecting feelings.</li> <li>• Signposting.</li> </ul>
<b>Create Hope</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When you talk about .... it sounds to me that you really care about your children. When you think about their future, what do you hope for them in the future? What do you want them to remember about you as a dad? (<b>Directed open-ended questions; focusing on hopes, aspirations, values and aspects of his identity that are important to him</b>)</li> <li>• You said something earlier about how important it is for you to be a good dad for your children. Is it okay if I ask you a little more about that? (<b>Signposting</b>) So when you think about being the best dad for your children, what does that look like? What would you be doing? What else? What about when things get hard and you are feeling really ... (use emotion named earlier), what would you as a best dad be doing at those times? What do you hope your children would see you doing? (<b>Directed open-ended questions</b>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normalising.</li> <li>• Summarising.</li> <li>• Clarifying.</li> </ul>
<b>Courage to talk about Harm</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We've talked a little about what you hope for your children and your family in the future, and I'd like to now move our conversation to the more difficult topic of what tonight (or other timeframe) was like for your children (<b>Signposting</b>). I know that this isn't an easy conversation to have (<b>Empathising</b>) and it's also an important conversation for us to have. Is it okay if we now talk about that?</li> <li>• Everyone has times when we behave in ways that we don't feel proud of, and I really appreciate your courage in being willing to talk about some of this (<b>Normalising</b>). Could you help me to understand what your children (use names) would have seen and heard you (or the PCH) saying and doing tonight? What do you think the worst of that was for them?</li> <li>• I know that this isn't easy to talk about (<b>Empathising</b>), but could you tell me a little more about ... ? (<b>Clarifying</b> details, particularly about behaviour, context and impact).</li> <li>• This is the first time you've met me, it's understandable if there are some things you don't yet feel comfortable talking about (<b>Normalising</b>). There will be opportunities later to say more once you feel more comfortable talking with me.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reframing sexist or otherwise problematic language.</li> <li>• Directed open-ended questions.</li> <li>• Redirecting.</li> <li>• Exploring incongruence.</li> </ul>
<b>Co-create Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My guess (and from what you said earlier) is that this isn't what you want for your family, that the dad (and/or partner) you were tonight (or other timeframe) isn't the dad you want to be. And I also know from what you said earlier that there are times when you are the dad (and/or partner) you want to be (<b>Acknowledging strengths</b>). Is it okay if we now talk about how I can support you and your family to make sure that everyone is safe going forward; both tonight and in the future? (<b>Signposting</b>)</li> <li>• When you think about what happened tonight and how it was for your children (and/or your partner), and also for you, how would you like things to be different in the future? How would you like to have handled things instead? (<b>Directed open-ended questions</b>)</li> <li>• What do you think needs to happen tonight, so that we can all be confident that no-one will be hurt? (<b>Directed open-ended questions</b>)</li> </ul>	

# 20 things we can learn about risk through engaging the adult user of domestic, family and sexual violence

## ... but first, 8 fundamentals



Understanding and assessing the risk posed by a user of violence takes into account as much of the following as possible:

- the victim-survivor's own views about the level and nature of risk (if she is worried for her safety, that usually reflects significant risk)
- the presence of evidence-based risk factors, including those associated with higher lethality risk
- any available observations of the perpetrator's language and articulated thinking, attitudes and beliefs, emotional states and behaviour
- information from partner agencies and other sources
- your and other workers' professional judgements about the risk.



Risk assessment is an ongoing, dynamic process of analysis that continuously informs both safety planning and risk management.

Consider both the seriousness of risk, and the degree of imminence. Risk can be serious even if the threat that the user of violence poses to the victim-survivor does not appear to be imminent.

Risk can be serious in terms of high risk of lethality or severe injury, and / or in terms of degree of social entrapment and impacts on victim-survivor human rights and freedom/space for action, and impacts on family functioning, child development and wellbeing.



Risk assessment assists us to consider:

- How likely is the perpetrator to continue to use DFSV despite the presence of service system responses that attempt to place constraints on his ability, inclination or choices to do so?
- What behaviours is he at risk of using or escalating?
- Are we doing enough to assist the victim-survivor in managing risk and in attempting to build safety for her and her family?
- Are we doing things that might be making the risk worse?
- Who do we need to share information with to understand more, and/or to inform others, about the risk?



Ensure you are familiar with the risk assessment and risk management framework in your region or jurisdiction.

Is there a common risk framework that the specialist DFSV sector encourages appropriate services to use?

Does this spell out different responsibilities and tools for different types of services? In identifying, assessing and managing risk?



Be familiar with resources focusing on users of DFSV who pose a serious risk of causing severe harm.

See, for example:

- the Homicide Timeline <https://homicidetimeline.co.uk/>
- ANROWS pathways to intimate partner homicide <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/pathways-to-intimate-partner-homicide/>
- Practice suggestions for identifying and responding to male perpetrators of DFSV who pose a risk of severe harm (available if accessing through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



Practitioner self-reflection is central to learning about risk when engaging an adult user of violence. Ask yourself – am I:

- open to the likelihood that the adult is using violent and controlling behaviours (far) worse than what he is disclosing?
- so focused on trying to change his behaviour that I am missing opportunities to learn about and respond to risk and harm?
- missing something about risk because of my attitudes, approach, sympathy for him, or his skill in impression management?
- balanced between optimism and pessimism in my engagement?



Users of violence often under-report their violent and controlling behaviours. They often aim to present themselves in a positive light, justify their harmful behaviours through “I’m the victim here!” thinking, find it hard to face up to their behaviours due to shame, and/or deliberately lie about their behaviour. We often therefore can’t conduct a complete risk assessment solely through engaging the user of violence... but direct assessment with him can contribute towards a multi-pronged risk assessment.



Every year, thousands of women who are the victim-survivor to a male partner’s use of coercive controlling DFSV are misidentified as the perpetrator by first responders and other services.

Become familiar with predominant aggressor assessment guides and tools. When we determine that misidentification has occurred, informing other services of this can be crucial. The misidentification of women as perpetrators is a common occurrence in domestic homicides against them.

## ... and now, 20 things we can learn about risk



Reliable information about evidence-based risk factors (EBRFs) for heightened lethality risk is most likely to arise through victim-survivor disclosures, to your or to other services.

However, highly valuable information relating to some EBRFs can be obtained through engaging the user of violence, to augment information obtained elsewhere.

At the very least, you might be able to identify factors such as depression, substance misuse, unemployment, status of his intimate relationship, partner pregnancy or presence of a young infant(s) in the household, recent separation, etc. through engaging him.

He might be likely to deny other EBRFs, however, relating to his recent or historical serious harm-causing behaviours, coercive control and threats.

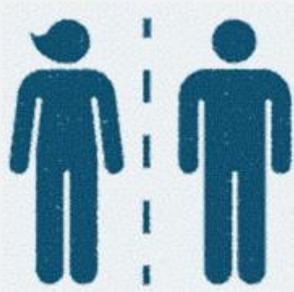


Seek to identify any escalation and changes in EBRFs that he is willing to talk about or provide indirect indications of.

Has his use of substances been increasing recently? If he is depressed or experiences a mental health condition, is this getting worse?

Does he seem to be putting more energy and effort into monitoring the victim-survivor, or in other controlling tactics (as far as you can tell)?

There might or might not be an escalation in his use of physical violence (or he might never have used physical violence), but escalating coercive controlling tactics, and/or worsening mental health, increased substance use or changes in other EBRFs, might indicate significantly increased risk.



Listen out for information about evidence-based risk factors focusing on the victim-survivor’s circumstances or other situational variables.

Through the normal course of holistic assessment, you might find that his partner has separated from him, or that she is pregnant or they have an infant in the family.

You might also be able to determine other situational variables that indicate his partner’s isolation or lack of power, through asking incidental questions about their relationship and family circumstances – for example, if she is a recent migrant, is her family here or overseas? If she is a First Nations woman, where is her country and does she have kin living locally?



Engage in **double listening** – learning (or making informed guesses) about the victim-survivor’s situation and resistance to the violence by extrapolating from the perpetrator’s accounts of her responses (filtered through his “I’m the victim here!” lens).

For example, if the user of violence says “She stood between me and the door, I tried to take a time out, but she wouldn’t let me go...” we can generate ideas about what she is currently prepared to do to resist his controlling tactics, and what her resistance might mean for acute risk (that is, his suppression of her resistance).

If he says “She needs a psychiatrist, she’s having panic attacks all the time now!” it could indicate that she is becoming increasingly frightened of him.



Listen out for indicators that might suggest that the victim-survivor is facing vulnerability circumstances. Identical perpetrator behaviours can pose a different degree of risk depending on the circumstances of the survivor.

For example, a pattern of emotional violence can cause greater harm to a victim-survivor experiencing depression than one who is feeling more robust. A physical assault can pose a higher risk to a victim-survivor with an ABI. A perpetrator’s systems abuse tactics are likely to have a greater impact if the victim-survivor has a criminal record.

Tactics to undermine the mother-child relationship might have an even worse impact on a child who is experiencing a developmental delay or where the user of violence has isolated them from extended family supports.



Ask him questions about aspects of day-to-day life in his relationships and family, and stretch a general psychosocial assessment, to attempt to reveal possible signposts to his use of coercive controlling behaviours.

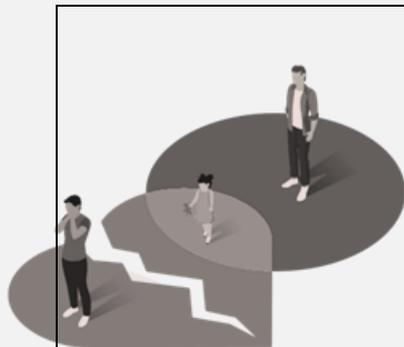
For example, exploring his financial situation can reveal if he owns the family home and how decisions around money are made.

Exploring his partner’s psychosocial context can reveal his attitudes towards her extended family or friends, and the possibility of his use of social control. A focus on his children might reveal any tactics being used to control how his partner parents or to control particular aspects of his children’s daily life.



Listen out for other power advantages that the user of violence might have in relation to the victim-survivor, in addition to gender, that he can either deliberately make use of or otherwise benefit from to control and entrap.

For example, dating adults much younger than him; using his extended family network to arrange a forced marriage or to inflict honour-based violence; if his partner is a First Nations woman and he has white privilege, taking advantage of systemic racism to manipulate the service system to view her as an ‘incapable mother’; taking advantage of a partner’s disability to use sexualised violence as she is financially and practically dependent on him; using image-based abuse to humiliate a recently separated partner who did not want aspects of their gender identity or sexual orientation to be known in particular contexts.



Listen out for indicators that the user of violence is attempting to manipulate service systems – child welfare, family law, mental health, police, etc. – to portray himself as the victim and his ex/partner as the aggressor or as unreliable, mentally ill or an unfit parent.

You might be able to discern this through the tone of his narratives about his ex/partner, how he presents her/him/them to you.

Is he trying to strongly convince you of something negative about them?

Does it appear that he is trying to convince other services of the same?

Try to open up a space to hear his narratives about her, her actions, and about the situation he is in – while at the same time, attempting to minimise collusion so that he doesn't come away thinking that you agree with his pathologising and hostile narratives.



If the user of violence has children, and/or has a co-parenting role, create space for him to talk about his co-parenting arrangements – while trying to minimise collusion with his violence-supporting narratives and beliefs.

How does he see his access to his children? If his access has been restricted, who does he blame? How strong is the blame?

Does he seem to have a sense of entitlement or ownership of his children?

What are his views of his ex/partner as a parent? Is he mostly critical of her parenting? Can he genuinely name positive qualities about her as a parent?

Does he appear to understand how vital the quality of the relationship is between her and their children? Does it appear that he might be doing things to undermine these relationships?



Related, it might be appropriate to explore the degree to which he understands his children, and how he sees his role as a parent. Try to do so in relation to each individual child, rather than to his children as a whole.

Much can be learnt about his attitudes towards his children, knowledge of appropriate child development, his preferred parenting strategies, how he manages his own difficult feelings as a parent, and what he models to his children, through the use of father-affirming, positive questioning.

By starting with a focus on healthy fathering, you can then move towards a focus on what it looks like when he isn't being his 'best Dad'.

You can also obtain important assessment information just by how he responds to your positive questions about healthy fathering, and the attitudes and beliefs that are implicit between the lines of what he says.

For guidance, see **Three anchors model for engaging abusive fathers**, and **Engaging fathers who perpetrate violence and control** (available through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



There are certain 'characteristics' of some perpetrators that suggest serious risk to victim-survivors. You might be able to discern the presence of any one or more of these through the adult's narratives or from other sources:

- heightened "she has done me over!" thinking, blames her excessively, clear or thinly veiled hostility towards her
- substantial dependency, "I can't live without her"
- heightened possessive jealousy
- desperation, nothing more to lose, major identity loss, hopeless about his future, his life deteriorating
- revengeful, "I won't let her win!"; "I won't let some other fella parent *my* children!" – fixated on his rights in a way that makes her invisible
- views intimate relationships mainly as a means to obtain/coerce/force domestic and emotional labour, status, financial and sexual benefits
- very disparaging about her parenting, says the kids are better off with her
- highly narcissistic and attacks others to avoid experiencing shame
- clear misogynistic / male supremacist beliefs and practices
- sadist sense of enjoyment in inflicting suffering



Related, we can listen out for warning signs in what the user of violence says that suggests he might be stepping into posing a serious risk.

For example, anything that he says about understanding how men can be 'driven' (according to his violence-supporting worldview) towards engaging in particular severe acts. Or indications that he is giving up on his efforts to try to control his ex/partner and is increasingly focused on 'making her pay'. Or that he is feeling increasingly hopeless about his life and his future, and that the victim-survivor has 'stripped' his life away from him. Etc.

See the resource **Practice suggestions for identifying and responding to male perpetrators of DFSV who pose a risk of severe harm** (available through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



**Threats and inferences of suicide by users of violence are significant evidence-based risk factors for serious outcomes of DFSV. A threat or inference of suicide can reflect a genuine intent to suicide. It can also be used by adults perpetrating violence as a deliberate tactic of coercive control. Sometimes both intents occur simultaneously. Regardless of the underlying intent, threats or inferences of suicide should always be taken seriously.**

**Periodically screen for whether an assessment of suicide risk is required, especially if there are significant changes in the individual's circumstances, presentation, and/or factors common to both DFSV and suicide risk** (see <https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-professionals-working-adults-using-family-violence/responsibility-3> - scroll down to the link to the resource **Recognising suicide risk in the context of adult people using violence**)

**Internet search for WWP AC 23: Workshop 6 "Suicide Prevention in high-risk, high-harm domestic abuse perpetrators" for an excellent and highly practical webinar on identifying and responding to suicide risk amongst adult users of DFSV.**



Explore aspects of the person's identity that are important to him/them. What meaning does he have in his life independent of the victim-survivor, or that is not reliant on her?

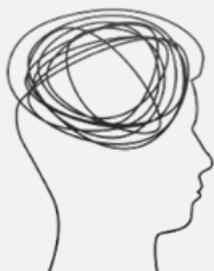
Has he experienced identity loss, or now has a big vacuum in his life, because of responses to his violent and controlling behaviour by the victim-survivor (e.g., separating from him to try to become safe) or by authorities (e.g., police and courts placing restrictions on his access to his children), or due to other consequences (e.g., loss of a job, or of reputation or status)?

See the resource **Case planning for adults who perpetrate DFV** for details on how to respond to identity loss (available if accessing through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



**New or changed circumstances can represent acute spikes in risk. Examples are numerous, the following just a sample:**

- the perpetrator's substance misuse or mental health worsening
- the victim-survivor separates from him, or in other ways increases her resistance to his violence & control and attempts to regain some freedom
- the perpetrator incensed about facing court
- losing a family law case that he expected to win
- losing a job or other benefits as a consequence of his use of violence



In addition to monitoring for new or changed circumstances, explore the meaning that the user of violence makes out of them. The meaning he makes out of the new or changed circumstance mediates the significance for risk.

The influence of a new or changed circumstance can also depend on perpetrator 'characteristics' as outlined previously. For example, for a user of violence who struggles with possessive jealousy, his ex-partner re-partnering or dating for the first time since separation can represent a big spike in risk.

Given what you know about the user of violence, and about other users of violence who share broadly similar circumstances, characteristics and behaviours, anticipate upcoming events that might 'trigger' escalating risk.



Protection orders, corrections orders, bail conditions and other orders have mixed success in enhancing safety for victim-survivors. To assess how much an order might or might not help to build safety, and to motivate compliance with the conditions of the order, explore the following when you are engaging with a user of violence who has a current order:

- The perpetrator's knowledge of the conditions of the order, and his attitude towards the conditions
- His understanding of the consequences of breaching conditions, and whether he believes these consequences would actually be administered
- Degree to which perceived consequences would actually act as a deterrent
- Any other motivations that matter to him for not contravening the order
- The likelihood that these reasons and motivations would exert an influence on his decision-making during times when he might be tempted to contravene the order.



If the adult user of violence is participating in a DFSV behaviour change program or an alternative safe and appropriate intervention, his mere participation and even completion of the program is not in itself an indicator of change. Outcomes vary substantially. Some men attempt to weaponise their participation in a program to the disadvantage of their ex/partner.

See the resource **Perpetrator intervention program completion certificates are dangerous** <https://www.respect.org.uk/resources/79-perpetrator-intervention-program-completion-certificates-are-dangerous> for a highly useful focus on intermediate indicators you should be looking for from participation in a program, to determine if the user of violence is possibly on track to become safer for current and/or future intimate partners and family members.

Obtain the adult's consent to share information about where he is at in terms of these indicators with other services (depending on your jurisdiction's information sharing laws, his consent might not be required if risk is serious).



**Unmet complex needs can significantly contribute towards risk. Substance misuse, mental health struggles, gambling harm and housing insecurity might not only increase the risk of injury-causing violence, but also become further 'reasons' for the adult's choices to use coercive controlling tactics.**

**A significant (minority) proportion of adult users of DFSV have a cognitive disability or impairment, which adds to the complexity.**

See the resource **Case planning for adults who perpetrate DFV referred to previously** for details on understanding and responding to complex needs, particularly in relation to substance misuse and mental health problems.



Many, but not all (or even most) adult users of DFSV have a complex trauma background. Some also face constant precarity due to the ongoing experience of structural and systemic violence directed to their minoritised community.

Most adult users of DFSV have skills in emotional regulation, at least to a degree. They choose not to draw upon their existing skills in some contexts, however. Instead they decide to use violent and controlling behaviours to achieve particular outcomes based on their violence-supporting narratives and underlying gendered beliefs.

Some adult users of violence with a complex trauma background, however, genuinely lack emotional regulation skills, or at least these skills are not very strong. In addition to a gendered component where they use violence in intimate relationships and family contexts, they might have a history of more generalised violence in other settings.

Understanding a client's trauma background can be an important part of assessing risk, and in responding to him in a humanising way. See the resource **Working with adult users of DFV with a trauma background for details** (available if accessing through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



Safety planning with  
adults who cause  
domestic and family  
violence harm,  
to attempt to prevent  
and interrupt choices  
to use violent and  
controlling behaviour



We can combine our direct safety planning with an adult user of DFV, with two types of very important behind-the-scenes actions.

The first is to consider indicators that he might be posing an escalating risk to those who experience his violence.

Are there new or changed circumstances that's up ahead, that he might make hostile meaning of or respond to with escalated violence and control?

For example, the victim-survivor separating from him, or starting a new relationship after separation...  
the victim-survivor increasing her resistance to his violent and controlling behaviours...  
or something else changing where he feels that his control is slipping, or that something he believes he is 'entitled to' is being 'threatened'?

Are there other signs of escalating risk or harm?

In most situations, in most localities, we can share this information with other services and responders who are supporting the victim-survivor and their family, without the person causing harm knowing that we are doing so.



A second area of our behind-the-scenes work can be seeing if there's anything we can do to limit the harms he's causing. It's not 'only' the risk of the violence escalating and of the threat to physical safety. What is the adult doing now that's causing harm to the victim-survivor, their children, and to their family?

What is he doing that's reducing her and the children's space for action? How is he limiting their options to go about various aspects of their lives freely, and without fear? How is he impacting their social connections and supports? The children's schooling? The adult survivor's finances and ability to meet her children's needs?

Are we able to do anything that can help to limit any of these harms? Do we know what the user of violence is using or manipulating to perpetuate these harms? Is he trying to manipulate systems? Using friends or levers of influence?

Trying to do things that limit harms when we don't know the victim-survivor's situation, when we aren't guided by her, can sometimes be risky. For example, if the person has persuaded the school that the victim-survivor is an 'inept' or 'troubled' mother, us barging in there to try to correct their misunderstandings of the situation might make things worse.

We should always, where possible, be guided by what the victim-survivor would like us to do, what she feels would be safe, what might help rather than make things worse. She is already resisting the violence, trying to prise open some space for action for herself and her children. We want to add to her efforts in sensitive ways, not cut across them.

Of course, there are legal options to try to limit the perpetrator's space for action to continue to cause harm → domestic and family violence protection orders, criminal justice system responses, etc. But sometimes these responses aren't enough to limit his harmful actions. Sometimes the victim-survivor might be part of a community that has faced structural and systemic oppression from state authorities, making it genuinely difficult to trust them.

So, these two forms of behind-the-scenes actions are vital. But in addition, sometimes we can engage the person causing harm in direct upstream, midstream and downstream safety planning towards being safer with others.

# Three levels of safety planning strategies



## Midstream

Strategies the person can use to interrupt common pathways towards choosing to use violence, when they notice early warning signs. Supports to interrupt build-up towards choices to use violence, or safe distractions.

## Upstream

Changes to the person's lifestyle, habits, related behaviours or complex needs that might make it (somewhat) less likely that they will continue to choose to use certain forms of violent behaviour.

## Downstream

Strategies to use when the choice to use violent or controlling behaviour is close, or when this behaviour has begun.

# Safety planning strategies

## Midstream

Avoiding risky situations

Arrangements to bypass discussion of sensitive matters

Social supports that have ears and eyes open

Strategies to nip winding-himself-up in the bud

Daily reminders about what he's got to lose by continuing to use violence

All three tiers are important – but for users of DFV who are less willing or able to talk 'downstream' about their harmful behaviour, upstream and midstream strategies have a bigger role in the mix (at least to start off with).

## Upstream

Addressing contributing factors (these aren't causal):

- Alcohol and other drugs
- Mental health (depression, hopelessness, suicide risk, agitated anxiety)
- Lifestyle habits and stability

Protective factors

Routines and daily structure

Distractions / interests or goals that draw him away from fixations with the victim-survivor

Enhancing accessibility / reducing barriers to service use

Supports to contact 24/7

## Downstream

'Heat of the moment' strategies

Planning how to behave safely in higher-risk situations

Taking a breather (not mis-applied 'time out')

Circuit breakers

Immediate CBT/DBT strategies

# Initial safety planning with the person causing harm

... safety in terms of what he can do to stay safe around those who have experienced his violence

Groundwork is required to make safety planning meaningful for the person causing harm. His commitment to a safety plan is likely to wax and wane, it's not static... the plan also needs to evolve across your work with him to remain meaningful and responsive

Establish first some safety-focused *steps* that the person has some (internal and/or external) motivation to work towards

- *Steps* as part of a much longer and broader behaviour change journey towards *goals* that are influenced by *values and ethical strivings* (and by victim-survivor needs and preferences)
- These steps might represent only a tip of the iceberg of his harmful behaviours, but you can build upon this over time, extending into other behaviours using a wider array of (deeper) strategies
- Often, we need to start with one or two 'simpler' steps, from which he can build motivation and confidence to work on 'more ambitious' ones
- Steps, even if 'simple', should focus on changes that would be meaningful for those experiencing his violence
- If he has little confidence or motivation to work on downstream safety-focused steps, focus on midstream strategies and upstream contributing factors.

A risk management approach should *not depend solely* on safety planning with the person causing harm:

- If the person causing harm takes genuine and multiple steps towards self-responsibility for his behaviour, then over time safety planning with him can become a major part of the overall risk management approach.
- To begin with, however, safety planning steps are often modest... and are not as important as behind-the-scenes information sharing and risk management actions that the adult user of DFV might not be aware of.

A focus on contributing factors (AOD, mental health) is of course not sufficient in the longer-term... and a sole focus on these factors can provide the wrong messages as to what causes the person's violent and controlling behaviour... but it might be an important starting point.

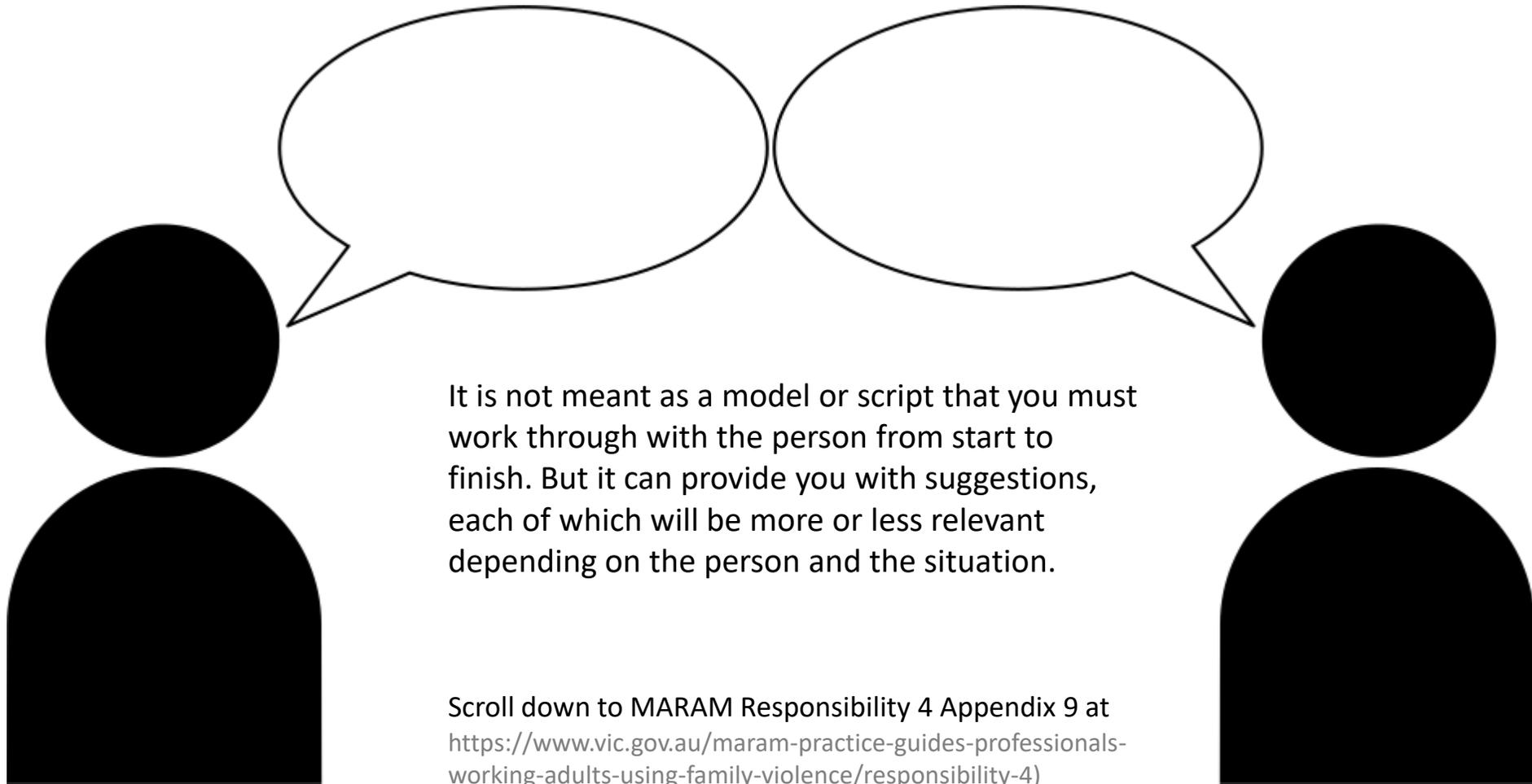
Establish a conversational container for the safety planning conversation:

"What is your plan to not cross the line into becoming abusive?... How are you planning to stay safe with your partner... safe around your kids? Can we spend some time talking about this?"

Safety planning focuses on:

- Addressing short-term safety – what he can do over the coming days and weeks to be and stay non-violent
- Contributing factors and complex needs
- Motivating compliance with any court orders and other external requirements
- Managing himself and his behaviour in *specific* situations
- Building self-responsibility

The **Safety Planning Conversation Model** from Victoria, Australia is an excellent resource on how to approach a safety planning conversation with an adult who is causing harm.



It is not meant as a model or script that you must work through with the person from start to finish. But it can provide you with suggestions, each of which will be more or less relevant depending on the person and the situation.

Scroll down to MARAM Responsibility 4 Appendix 9 at <https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-professionals-working-adults-using-family-violence/responsibility-4>)

# My safety plan: How I will keep myself and others safe

## Services I can contact

- Men's Referral Service (MRS): **1300 766 491**
- MensLine: **1300 789 978**
- Beyond Blue: **1300 224 636**
- Lifeline: **13 11 14**
- MBCP service provider office:

## Emergency and crisis contacts

- Call **Triple Zero (000)** in an emergency'
- Other emergency contacts (who I will contact if I cannot keep myself and others safe)


My warning signs (thoughts, feelings, body sensations, behaviours) that let me know I am becoming an unsafe person to be around	
The 'risky' situations where I may become an unsafe person (violent, controlling, abusive, self-harming)	
When I notice the warning signs or situations where I am becoming unsafe, or they are pointed out to me, what are the things I will do to manage my behaviour? What strategies have worked in the past to manage my behaviour?	
What have I been told I have to do for the safety of my family members? Are there any orders I need to follow? What actions can I take to make sure I don't breach my orders?	
What might get in the way of carrying out my safety plan?	
Who will support me to be safe? <i>Note: This does not include your partner. Only list the people or services who will support you to be safe. You might like to share your safety plan with them. List at least three people or services and their phone numbers.</i>	1. <input type="text"/> 2. <input type="text"/> 3. <input type="text"/>
The safe place that I can go to if I need to leave the situation is (it's important that I tell my partner that I am going and how long I will be gone for):	
Things I will take with me when I go to my safe place:	
I will get to my safe place by (driving, walking, calling a friend to pick me up, etc.):	
When I get to my safe place I will:	
I will know that I am safe to go home or be around my family when:	

**DFV safety plan tool  
for users of violence from the  
Risk Safety and Support Framework  
New South Wales (Australia),  
focusing specifically on some  
downstream strategies**



## CHOOSE TO CHANGE: YOUR BEHAVIOR, YOUR CHOICE



### THE 'CHOOSE TO CHANGE' NETWORK: A GUIDE FOR MEN

A process to help men who choose violence to develop a support network to interrupt their violence and increase safety for other family members

The [Choose to Change](https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/tools-for-systems-change/practice-toolkits/choose-to-change/) Network Toolkit describes a four-step process to help men develop strong, safe support networks to help them interrupt their violence and increase safety for other family members. It includes a Professionals Booklet, Information for Partners and Information for Network Contacts. The Toolkit scaffolds processes for men to identify upstream (check-in), midstream (worry) and downstream (crisis) contacts.

<https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/tools-for-systems-change/practice-toolkits/choose-to-change/>



**A check-in contact** - you are in a good space and want to stay in touch and check in with your network. A check-in contact might be a quick chat on the telephone or a text.



**A worry contact** - you are worried about your mood and thinking, are concerned it may escalate into negative behavior. When you or someone else is worried you may be abusive. A worry contact could include a long phone call or to arrange to meet face-to-face.



**A crisis contact** - you are being abusive or controlling and other people are scared of you. A crisis contact could mean you need the person to speak to you or see you straight away.

# Tension scale tool focusing on strategies to prevent build-up towards a violent or controlling behaviour

This scale is designed to help you begin to notice how tense you are on the way to choosing a harmful behaviour. It is your individual alarm system to warn you when you are getting closer to making that choice. As you get better at noticing what is happening inside you, you will start to recognise patterns of build-up towards choosing harmful behaviour – patterns that you can interrupt and divert towards behaviour you and your family will feel better about.

**I DON'T WANT TO...** text [partner's name] repeatedly when she's out with a friend, grilling her about when she will be coming home

**I DON'T WANT TO BECAUSE ...** I want to be the type of man who can deal with my own jealousy, and I will drive her away if I show no trust

**INSTEAD I WOULD LIKE TO ...** get to the point where I can genuinely wish that she has a good time, or at least resist the urge to repeatedly text her

BODY OR OTHER SIGNS	10	STRATEGIES TO INTERRUPT / STOP BUILD-UP
Picking up the phone, shaking		Phone my crisis contact support person instead of texting [partner's name]
Becoming sweaty, clenching my jaw		Remind myself "I can handle this urge" Put the phone somewhere hard to get to for 30 minutes
Thoughts starting to race		Practice my square breathing Remind myself that I'll feel so much better if I don't blow up at [partner's name]
Pacing more quickly		Sit down. Have a bath. Don't drink, that makes my worry worse. Apply my mindfulness strategies. Acknowledge my catastrophising thoughts, the worrying images in my mind → just watch the thoughts, apply the mindfulness strategy, no need to stew on the thoughts, wait till they start to subside.
Can't concentrate on much else		
Knot in my stomach, feel a bit sick		Phone my worry contact support person Remind myself what I want to model to our son about how to handle worries and big feelings – I don't want him to end up getting into trouble like I did at his age
Get up to pace		
Forehead feels tight		Read my goal about trust – <i>I want to be a man who stands with my family, not someone who always fears the worst about them and stands over them</i> Put on some music I like
Start to feel a bit "vague"		
Enjoying whatever I'm doing, not thinking much about [partner's name]	Safe	Make sure I've got something to preoccupy me while [partner's name] is out

## Safety planning is enhanced by engaging the adult on values, strivings and commitments that mean something to him and to those who experience his harm



## Practice demonstration video of preliminary safety planning skills with an adult user of DFV

<https://nurturing-nonviolence-rccf.sydney.edu.au/safer-children-safer-communities-action-research-project/>

Scroll down to **Demonstration Videos** and **Demonstration Video Scripts** (the scripts include skill explanations/commentary)

See *Safety Planning* and other practice demonstration videos... these are far from perfect → consider what you might do differently and better



Factors to consider in assessing the extent to which a protection order, corrections or other court order will act as a deterrent for the person causing harm

- The person's knowledge of the conditions of the order
- His attitude towards each of the main conditions of the order
- His understanding of the consequences of breaching the order
- The degree to which he believes that these consequences would arise if he does something that breaches the order
- The degree to which these consequences would matter to him or act as a deterrent
- Any other reasons and motivations that matter to him for not breaching the order
- The likelihood that these reasons and motivations would exert an influence on his decision-making during times when he might be tempted to do something that breaches the order

**Talk with him about the order and its conditions... look for holes and gaps in his understanding of the order... see if you can focus on any of the above to motivate a greater likelihood of compliance**





If we can't take a direct approach, we can safety plan like the multi-headed Hydra → focus on something he is willing to safety plan or work on, that involves skills or strategies that can be stretched towards DFV-interruption... it might not achieve much, but it's a start.

## Covert and indirect safety planning that can be stretched towards a focus on violent and controlling behaviour

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If the person is not willing to enter into a conversation about any aspects of his DFV behaviours, or if the time isn't right to open this conversation up, you can still commence safety planning 'covertly'... consider ways of building in some alcohol and other drug or mental health treatment work or other strategies that, if put into practice, might indirectly help to reduce the DFV risk he poses to family members... strategies that can be stretched and built upon over time to get closer to some of his violent and controlling behaviour... 'life skills' he can use to stay calm or resist urges to be preoccupied by things...

For example, focus on CBT strategies he can use to manage difficult feelings when withdrawing from a substance (as this is often a time when DFV behaviours escalate).

Safety plan on mental health issues, positive (non-misogynist) social connections, daily habits of self-care, or other upstream safety planning strategies.

Maybe he will be motivated to focus on how he can model calmness to his children when experiencing big feelings.

These covert and indirect safety planning strategies won't make him a safe man and won't interrupt most of his use of violent and controlling behaviours but might make a start.

Help him to then stretch these skills closer to his use of violent and controlling behaviours... e.g., towards how he can use them when he finds himself 'getting heated' with his partner... or when he is feeling agitated and has an urge to repeatedly text his partner to check up on her...



See from minute 18 onwards for twenty highly useful minutes on developing a suicide prevention plan with someone at risk

To the best of our knowledge this is the first study in the UK to estimate the rate of suicide in perpetrators of domestic violence.

In this population of high-risk high-harm perpetrators of violence who are in touch with services, we estimate an annual rate of suicide of **461 per 100,000**.

In 2021 the rate of suicide in males in England and Wales was **16 per 100,000**, and the highest rate of suicide was observed in males ages 45-64 at **20 per 100,000** (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Research from Victoria, Australia shows that DFV perpetrators are **11 times more likely than the general population to seek emergency mental health services**. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38195457/>

The rate in high-risk high-harm perpetrators of violence is **23 times greater** than the highest age specific suicide rate in the general population (Knipe et al., 2023).



11:25 / 39:32



# I AM MONITORING

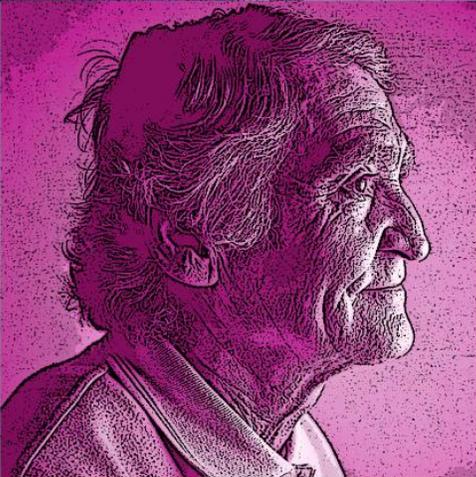
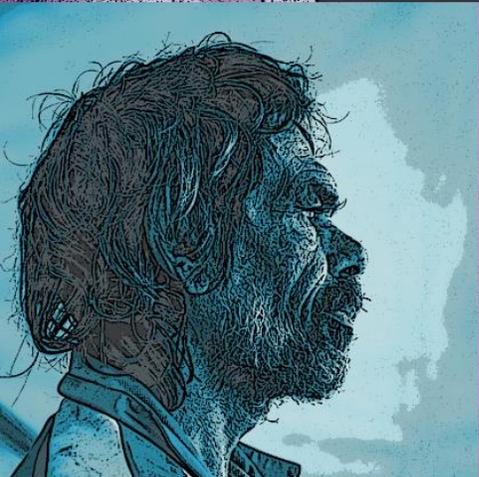


# THE SITUATION

**Risk levels can change quickly and at any time, reviewing risk and risk management strategies should be part of your normal practice of engagement**

What to monitor as you engage with the person using violence over time

- Narratives or behaviours related to the DFV event or pattern, intensity of his victim-stance orientation, changes in the nature or degree of his violence-supporting narratives
- How he engages with your service
- Stability or instability related to presenting needs and circumstances, such as change in use of alcohol or drugs, mental health, housing, financial stability, pending court hearings etc.
- Narratives/behaviours indicating shame or remorse in relation to (some aspects of) his behaviour, and/or narratives of denial, blame, minimisation, justification, etc.
- Repeat incidents or patterns of violent and controlling behaviours (where identified in risk assessment and information sharing)
- Readiness to engage with specialist supports and services
- Internal and external changes in motivations and motivators, such as related to pending court hearings, court orders, parenting arrangements, relationship status, etc.



Over time across multiple contacts with the client:

ask about any changes to their circumstances, new significant events, etc.

explore any changes in their mood or feelings about things, changes in irritability or anxiety, etc.

explore any changes in their coping strategies

build on previous conversations and disclosures, e.g. *“Last time we met you said things at home were really difficult, and that you were needing to go for walks to get away for a bit. How is that going now?”*

**Share information with other relevant professionals and services as the risk changes or escalates.**

**Do not hold the risk alone.**

**Talk to a specialist domestic and family violence service about what you should do.**

**Remember: sometimes the most important action you can take is to share information with other services, so that you can collaboratively work out how to support the victim-survivor and her efforts to be safe.**



# refer to a specialist DFV behaviour change program

- Anger management programs are different from men's behaviour change programs and are not an appropriate referral option. They do not focus on coercive controlling behaviour, are not as focused on identifying and responding to risk, generally do not offer parallel safety support and advocacy for affected family members and are not part of integrated DFV service systems.
- Most private psychologists / psychotherapists / counselling practitioners do not have specialist skills in engaging men who use DFV. Without specific training and experience in this, are likely to engage with perpetrators in ways that compromise the safety of victim-survivors.
- Relationship counselling or family therapy mutualise responsibility for the violence (even if they do not directly focus on his violent and controlling behaviour), and places the victim-survivor in the highly difficult position of either risking retaliation by disclosing his use of violence in front of him and the practitioner, or censoring herself due to this fear (and having yet another experience of being disempowered).
- **Premature** relationship counselling or family therapy work (that is, conducted while he is still using violent and/or controlling behaviour) will end up benefitting him and his power structures at the expense of his family – again, even if the focus is not directly on his behaviour.
- Referring him to a generic parenting program – one that is not DFV-informed – can result in him learning more 'behaviour management strategies' to control his children and in him having more ammunition to criticise his partner's parenting.
  - Refer him to Caring Dads or another DFV-informed program that is based on an understanding of DFV as coercive control, and that will work with him to become more child-focused and to support rather than sabotage family functioning.
  - These programs will also help him with parenting skills – however, his belief system and self-focus on his rights rather than on his responsibilities needs to be addressed first.

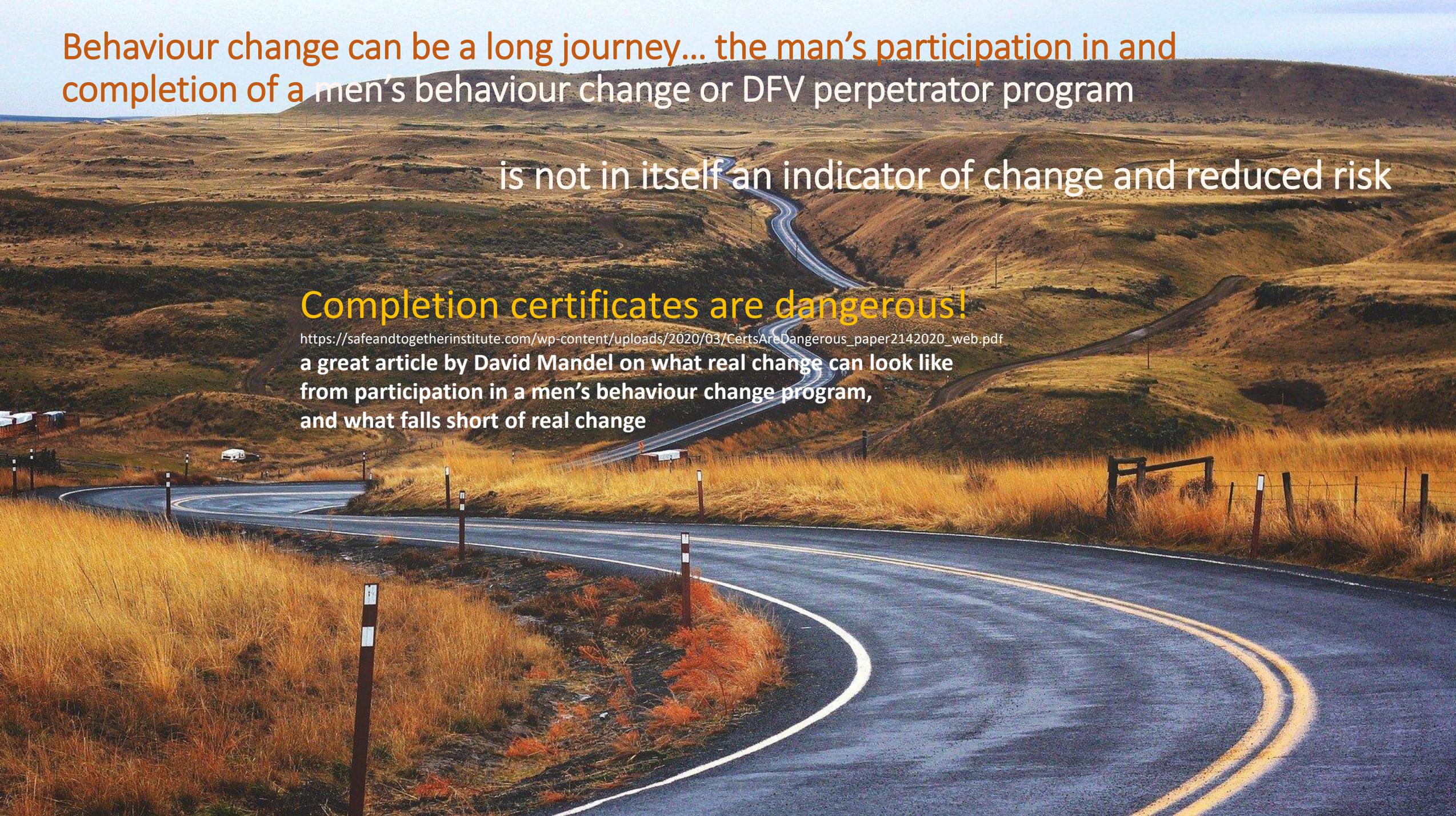
Behaviour change can be a long journey... the man's participation in and completion of a men's behaviour change or DFV perpetrator program

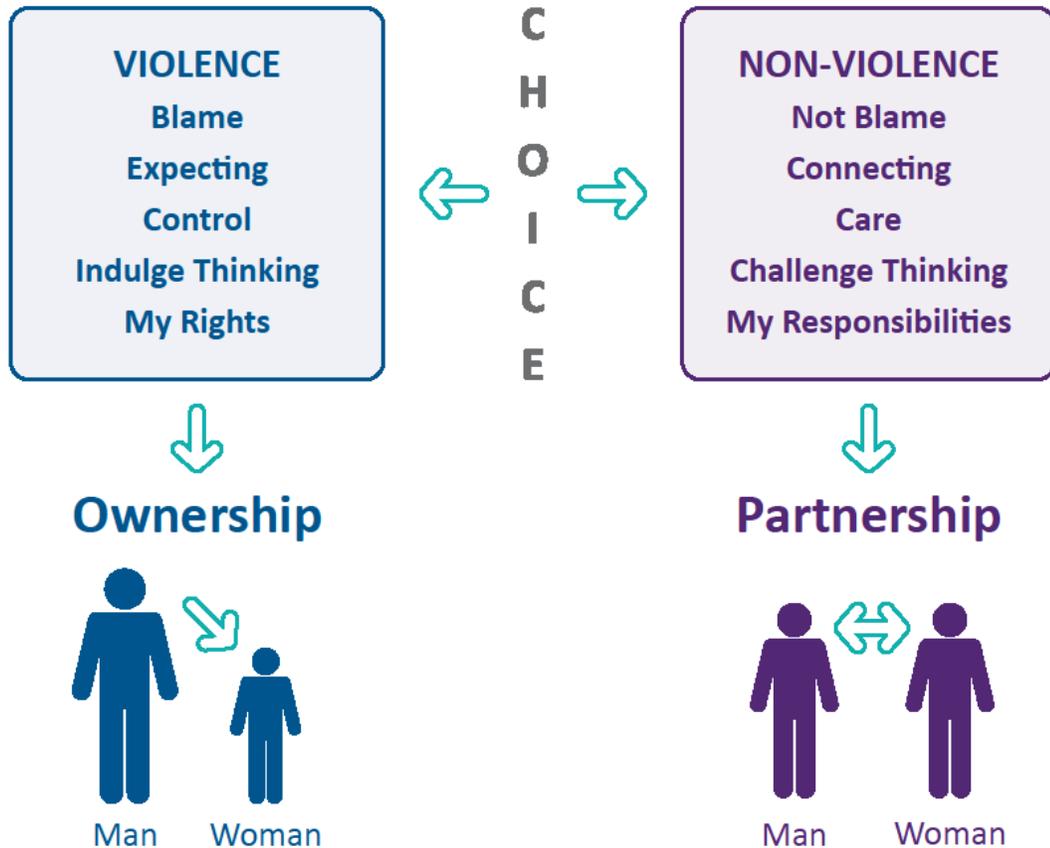
is not in itself an indicator of change and reduced risk

**Completion certificates are dangerous!**

[https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CertsAreDangerous\\_paper2142020\\_web.pdf](https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CertsAreDangerous_paper2142020_web.pdf)

a great article by David Mandel on what real change can look like from participation in a men's behaviour change program, and what falls short of real change





Some men need to make significant shifts in their underlying belief systems to make sustainable changes in their behaviour

We need to be realistic regarding what any one intervention – for example, a men’s behaviour change program – can achieve in this context

**The mere fact of a man participating in and completing a men’s behaviour change program / DFV perpetrator program is by no means a guarantee that he has made shifts in his behaviour, and that he poses less of a risk to those impacted. Outcomes from program participation and completion vary substantially from man to man.**

# Perpetrator Serious-Risk Action Plan<sup>1</sup>

This tool is designed to assist risk management planning in domestic and family violence situations when services, multi-agency teams or other responders are concerned about an adult posing a serious risk of severe outcomes.

If the perpetrator (Person Using Violence; PUV) was to enact severely violent behaviours in the short to medium-term future, what might these be?

What might be the sequence of steps and events from this point onwards that could lead to the PUV choosing to enact these severe behaviours?

Consider new or changed circumstances, changes in victim-survivor resistance or autonomy, impact of service system responses, changes in PUV mental health and/or substance use, changes or escalations in the meaning made by the PUV of events, etc. *Consider movement along stages of the Homicide Timeline* <https://homicidetimeline.co.uk/what-is-the-homicide-timeline.php>

What actions are being taken, by whom, to keep the PUV in view: that is, to monitor his movements, thinking, the meaning he is making out of new or changing circumstances, moods and/or behaviours?

Actions taken	By whom	What is being kept in view (PUV's movements, his behaviours, his thinking, the meaning he is making out of new or changing circumstances, his mood, etc.) <b>Be specific about what is actually being kept in view through the action.</b>	How might this monitoring be improved?

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<sup>1</sup> Tool developed by Rodney Vlais, August 2025. No copyright. Please improve, format and adapt to suit your local circumstances and contexts. Send any feedback about how to improve the tool to [rvlais@aapt.net.au](mailto:rvlais@aapt.net.au).

What additional actions could potentially be taken, by whom, to keep the PUV within view? *Do not limit to actions that you are 100% confident are feasible and realistic – include consideration of potential actions you are not totally sure whether the relevant organisation or service involved has capacity, willingness or capability to take.*

Actions taken	By whom	What would be kept in view (PUV's movements, his behaviours, his thinking, the meaning he is making out of new or changing circumstances, his mood, etc.) – <b>be specific about what would be kept in view</b>	How might this monitoring be made as feasible and effective as possible?

What options could be utilised that might create a barrier and reduce the PUV's access to the victim-survivor? Consider: law enforcement, legal or justice system options (DFV protection order, charges for breach of order or for other alleged criminal activity), and/or other options not based in the law enforcement or justice system (e.g., community responses) → options that might not be safe to utilise now, but could become or be made safer at a point in the short to medium term future. *Provide detail on what could be done to reduce the risk of PUV retaliation or of other negative consequences to victim-survivors and children should the option(s) be utilised.*

Law enforcement, legal/justice system or other options to create barriers or that reduces the PUV's access to the victim-survivor	Actions or a strategy that could make this potential option safer and with less 'blowback' (i.e., reduces short or longer-term risk or negative consequences to the victim-survivor and their family)

What actions could be taken, or strategies enacted, to expand the victim-survivor's options to build safety for herself and her family, and to collaborate with her to manage the serious risk that the PUV poses? *Actions to reverse the victim-survivor's reduced space for action to build safety due to the violent and controlling tactics of the PUV and due to collusive or DFV-uninformed systems.*

Option to create or expand for the victim-survivor to build safety	Actions or strategy to help make this a feasible and safer option for the victim-survivor to enact

If the PUV is not currently engaging with appropriate services, what steps can be taken to work towards him becoming more likely to start engaging? Even small steps?

Thinking about the points ahead in which the risk of severe outcomes might escalate, what actions or strategies could be targeted specifically to minimise escalation at each of these points?

Potential escalation point	Actions or strategy to minimise escalation

If the PUV is developing or has developed a fixated grievance on the victim-survivor, what actions or strategies might help to **distract** him from the grievance, and from his grievance-filled ruminations? Include actions that might address identity loss (e.g. loss of status, role or identity resulting from victim-survivor, service system and/or community responses to his use of DFV), that introduce new meaning into his life, and/or that fill any vacuum in his life in positive ways?

Does suicide risk need to be assessed and (regularly) monitored? If so, how?

Is an attempt at assessing homicidal or suicidal-homicidal ideation required by a specialist service? If so, how might this be enacted?

If substance use and/or mental health considerations contribute towards serious risk, what actions and strategies are in place, or need to be put into place, to address these? What else might be needed to help stabilise his life?

How might attempts be made to build the PUV's distress tolerance, and/or to reinforce his existing distress tolerance skills? Include the need for skills in situations in which the PUV is with the victim-survivor (e.g., as a result of confronting her) and his grievance, jealous or other ruminations or sources of distress escalate.