

HEALING TOGETHER

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Engaging a Person Who Has Used Violence Against a Partner and Wants Help to Stop

This guide is intended to help community members have an initial conversation with someone who has subjected their intimate partner to violence and is seeking help to stop. Along with other Healing Together tools, this guide aims to support organizations in shifting away from relying on criminal legal system interventions and towards healing-centered, restorative, non-punitive approaches to building safety and working with men to end cycles of violence.

As you engage with someone who has used violence, it is critical to prioritize listening and building trust with the person you are supporting, while at the same time avoid collusion with any justifications for violence. This is the first step of intervention in a long journey towards healing and behavioral change. Assure them that violence is a learned behavior that they can unlearn, and there is no acceptable justification for intimate partner violence.

In initial conversations, it is important to validate their own personal realities—including traumatic life experiences such as abuse, poverty, and racism. As a person supporting someone who has caused harm, the safety of all involved is always the top priority and you must hold authentic hope for their capacity to change and their humanity. The safety of all involved is always the top priority.



KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- **Authentic connection is fundamental.** Please use this as a guide, not a script.
- **You have positional power** in this conversation as the person holding space. This means you have the most responsibility to make sure it is a safe space for the person to share. This can be a complex space to hold, as they may have positional power in other ways.
- **Make it clear that you do not think they are a bad person.** If appropriate, share that we all experience harm as victims, perpetrators, bystanders, or witnesses.
- **Remind them that you are there to address their harmful behavior,** its impact, and what needs they may have to address the root of the behavior—with the goal of creating new healthier ways to be in relationships.
- **Avoid making judgmental comments** or asking questions that may lead to closed answers.
- **Do not validate any attempts to blame** others for the harm they caused.
- **Show compassion for them and concern for the safety** of all involved and exposed. Educate them on the real risk of partner violence.
- **Let them know that you believe in their capacity to change** and to have peaceful, healthy, safe relationships; but it will require long-term intentional work and vulnerability.
- **Refrain from pathologizing the harm as cultural.** If they share it is part of their culture, do not collude with such justification. You can share that partner violence occurs across all cultures and communities.
- **Trust is built.** It's important to build a relationship. See this as an opportunity to learn about who they are, what happened, and what support they need to stop using violence.
- **Healing takes time** and they may not know right away what support they need.
- **Remember they are not proud of their behavior.** There is often deep shame rooted in their own trauma and experiences with violence.
- **Always use the name of the person who was harmed.**

Start by asking general questions about their concerns related to violence or harm, what occurred in the most recent acts of violence (emotional, physical, sexual), and the help or change they are seeking.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- How are you today? What is on your mind, your heart?
- What incident, or series of incidents led you to decide to seek out help?
- How long has violence been a part of your relationship? Have you had similar problems before this relationship?
- What do you hope for by seeking help?
- What is your current situation in terms of housing, employment, family, and other responsibilities?
- Do you have someone you can talk to when you are experiencing the feelings that could lead to violence or abuse?
- Who in your life can hold you accountable to your goal of a healthy and safe relationship? A family member? Friend? Faith leader?
- How have you experienced love, support, and communication with others? Especially in challenging times?
- Do you have someone you can talk to about harms you have experienced?
- What would a healthy relationship look like?
- If they have children: what kind of relationship would you want ___ (use the name of their child/children) to see between you and ___ (name of their partner).
- Have you already looked into other resources or programs that can help you develop healthier relationship skills?



When I first talk with someone about the harm they caused, I want them to feel welcomed in our space. I want them to feel heard, I want them to feel like they are valued and that I am invested in deeply listening to them, their well-being, and in their healing. While both leading and holding them respectfully accountable—calling them in—for the harm they caused, we also ask them to explore their own deeply rooted trauma, beliefs, and patterns.

I tell them it takes a lot of courage to come and share with us what brought them to the program. To share with me; to trust me and themselves. Our expectation is that they are willing to be open about the harm they caused, their impact to self, others, and to commit to a journey toward their own learning, accountability, and healing.

I don't expect them to come in taking full accountability for the harm they've caused or knowing all the ways of doing the work required.

-Reina Sandoval-Beverly, Non-Violence Program Facilitator

Tips for Naming and Neutralizing Language in Conversations about Violence

Listen actively to the person and avoid collusion by recognizing when they are using harmful language and neutralize it while still validating their personal reality and need for help.

1. Recognize & Name Minimizing Language. Minimizing, such as “I only hit her once” or using words like “never,” “barely,” or “hardly” try to draw comparison to other brutal acts of violence in society and deflect accountability.

You can try to neutralize it by naming it and saying:

Please don’t minimize the harm by comparing it to more severe violence. One act of violence can still cause irreparable damage and severe trauma to a person. Just stick to the core facts for now. I’m listening and I want to learn more about your experience.

How harm is experienced can only be defined and known by the person who experienced it. Acknowledge the acts of violence in society and draw the conversation back to the type of harm that was used. “You said, you only hit her once. Tell me about that?” Then name the violence (physical) and share about the impact of that violence. Ask if that has happened before, if so, what was the impact?

Focus on what they could have done differently.

2. Recognize Justifying Language. Someone justifies acts of violence when they use explanations to attribute or partially attribute the violence to somewhere or someone other than themselves. Even the use of violence against someone of the same gender is not an acceptable explanation for the use of violence, because all of us have a fundamental right to feel safe and free of harm. Statements such as “I was trying to defend myself,” “I just drank too much that day,” and “I couldn’t take anymore of it” are examples of justifying language.

You can try to neutralize it by saying:

Can you try not to give a reason or justification for your reaction? I want to make sure we both agree that there is never a justifiable reason to be violent with a partner. Many things can happen at the same time, but you are responsible for your actions even if you were drunk, mad, hurt, disappointed, etc. What is also true is that you deserve to get support as you seek to not cause harm.

You may want to dig deeper into any of the statements:

Tell me about that—you drank too much. Do you use violence when you drink? Do you think because you “drank too much” or because you “couldn’t take it anymore” that makes it okay or less abusive or painful?

3. Listen for Re-educating Language. The person who caused harm often reinterprets their violence as a means of “re-educating” partners into conforming to their understanding of the world, including what they feel they are entitled to from the person they have harmed. Examples of re-educating statements include “I had to show her the consequences of her actions” and “They needed to learn for once.”

You can try to neutralize it by saying:

It is important for you to remember and accept that your partner is their own person, no matter how close you two may be, and they have the right to disagree with you or see the world differently than you. It is not fair for you to try to impose your worldview or values on them or harm or threaten them emotionally, sexually, or physically.

4. Listen for Appropriating and Generalized

Pronouns. When those who've caused harm use pronouns other than "I," they can assume authority over another person's experience, or detach responsibility for the action from themselves. "We don't need any more money problems," or "We don't know what happened to us, we used to be so happy" are examples of appropriating pronouns. "One has to draw the line somewhere" and "a person has the right to get upset" are examples of generalized pronouns.

You can try to neutralize it by saying:

Try to just tell me things from your experience and perspective, not the both of you. Since your partner is not here to speak for themselves, I want to just hear from you and focus on your thinking and actions, so I can better understand how to help you.

5. Recognize the Perception of Only Extreme Options.

Those who cause harm can sometimes see violence as one of only a few extreme options. This can happen when the person who has caused harm is so confident in their own worldview that listening and understanding other perspectives is deemed useless, and thus options of dealing with conflict such as negotiation, compromise, or talking it out are not considered. Statements such as "I couldn't let my kids see me get disrespected anymore" or "She crossed the line and there was no going back" are examples of seeing only extreme options.

You can try to neutralize it by saying:

You saw violence as the only appropriate way of dealing with the situation, which is extreme. What would have happened if you walked away, or let it go? There are always options for how to deal with conflict—what options could you consider that are not harmful? I want to see how we can help you get to a place where violence is never again considered an option.

Language neutralization tips sourced in part from "Interventions with Men Who Are Violent to Their Partners: Strategies for Early Engagement" by Peter J. Adams



Before You Finish the Conversation:

- Provide information for someone they can reach out to when they need to step away from a situation that may lead to harm.
- If possible, help them create a safety plan that they can use to avoid situations that may lead to violence and identify who in their life they can turn to for support and accountability toward their goal of healthy and safe relationships.
- If you can, connect them to immediate services they may need, or their family may need, such as housing services, recovery services, or employment services. Move beyond providing just a referral, seek to provide a meaningful connection to a specific person in an organization or community member.
- Ask them what the best way is to remain connected on a regular basis. Let them know you hope to continue to remain connected to work together.
- Communicate concrete next steps, even it is just scheduling a follow-up meeting, so that the person feels confident that they are supported on a pathway towards nonviolence.
- Let them know they can come to you even if they have caused harm again (issues of mandated reporting may exist, discuss this with your participant ahead of time).