Addressing Sexual Violence & Intimate Partner Violence in Practice

Intimate Partner violence (IPV), and Sexual violence have a profound impact on women’s health overall, and mental health in particular. Healthcare providers are an important point of contact in helping women to recognize and break away from cycles of violence. But what can health care professionals do?

Assessing potential risk of Homicide
If a patient discloses IPV or sexual violence to you, explore the following topics in relationship to the identified perpetrator:

- A history of violent behaviour toward family members;
- A history of abusive behaviour toward intimate partners;
- Escalation of violence;
- Previous criminality;
- General antisocial attitudes;
- Substance abuse problems;
- Mental health problems;
- Relationship problems;
- Attitudes that support violence towards women?

If the presence of some of these factors have lead you to feel concerned, inquire about/ note the following:

- The patient’s concerns about future violence by the accused;
- Access the identified perpetrator might have to weapons;
- Patients who have a biological child with a different partner;
- Patients who have been assaulted by the accused while pregnant; and
- Barriers for the victim in accessing support.

Safety Planning
If assessment has indicated that there is a pronounced risk to the patient should they return to their residence, a discussion should be had about the risks and possible alternatives. See resources section for more information about safety planning and VAW sector shelters if staying with friends or family is not an option.

Even where risk of homicide does not seem elevated, safety planning can help patients to feel supported and safe. In this way resiliency and self-determination can grow, better facilitating trust and safety for the future.

*sources are accessible through embedded hyperlinks*
**Victim blaming**

Myths surrounding sexual assault and IPV can negatively affect patients, care providers, and their interactions.

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<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Fact</th>
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<tr>
<td>Women provoke sexual assault by how they act or dress.</td>
<td>No behaviour or attire justifies sexual assault</td>
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<td>Sexual assault is perpetrated by strangers.</td>
<td>Survivors most often know the perpetrator</td>
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<td>Women who drink alcohol or use drugs are asked to be sexually assaulted.</td>
<td>Substances are involved in many sexual assaults, but are not the cause. The survivor is never responsible for the assault.</td>
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<td>People lie about being the victim of sexual assault.</td>
<td>The false allegation rate of this severely under-reported crime is no higher than in many other crimes.</td>
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<td>Only young women are sexually assaulted.</td>
<td>People of any age or gender can be sexually assaulted.</td>
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**Trauma Informed Care & Language**

"Unfortunately, the behaviours and responses of those with trauma experiences are often misunderstood and labelled in stigmatizing and deficit-based ways.... Practitioners play a very important role in offering another way of understanding trauma responses" (BCCEWH 2013: 23)

**What are some things clinicians can do in practice?**

1) Respond to disclosures by acknowledging a) that what happened was not the survivor’s fault, and b) highlight the strength and resilience of the survivor.

2) Emphasise collaboration and choice; give power back to the survivor wherever you can.

3) Use supportive language, and avoid making assumptions.

4) Keep information and pamphlets about IPV and sexual violence available in treatment areas.

**Ottawa Resources**

The Ottawa Hospital Sexual Assault and Partner Abuse Care Program offers 24 hour service to people of 16 years or older. Please fax referral to 613-761-4985 or call 613-798-5555 x 13770 to book an appointment.

Amethyst Women’s Addiction Centre offers “outpatient” style community based treatment for women. (613) 563-0363 info@amethyst-ottawa.org

The Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre (ORCC) offers counselling and support to survivors of sexual violence as well as public education. The crisis line number is 613-562-2333 or 613-562-2334 for an intake appointment and information.

The Sexual Assault Support Centre of Ottawa (SASC) supports all women through individual and group supports, as well as their phone line: (613) 234-2266. For other services they can be reached at info@sascottawa.com or 613-725-2160.

**Accessing VAW Shelters**

There are six Violence Against Women (VAW) sector shelters in Ottawa (a complete list can be found here). For the safety of women and children, the locations of these shelters are confidential. Women may access a shelter by calling directly, through VAW transition support workers, or through the City of Ottawa at 311. Should all the shelters be full, then a call to 311 becomes necessary, as they will assess whether the woman can be temporarily housed with friends or family, or if the city must her and her children in a motel.