

The Northwest Network
of Bisexual, Trans and Lesbian Survivors of Abuse

ASSESSMENT TOOL

I n s t r u c t i o n s

Intimate partner abuse relies on a pattern of power, control and exploitation established by one person over another. To identify if a person is establishing such a pattern, it is important to go beyond a simple checklist of “abusive behaviors”. Because we find that virtually any behavior can either be used by a person to **survive abuse** or be used by a person **to establish power over another**, we must look further than a cursory survey of “who has done what to whom”. When assessing who is establishing systematic power and control in a relationship, it is crucial to look at the context, intent and effect of a pattern of behaviors.

CONTEXT—What is/was happening in the relationship over time, as well as immediately before and after a specific behavior occurred? What meaning or history does a certain behavior have, given the context? What impact does the context have on the agency/self-determination of each person in the relationship?

INTENT— What are the real, imagined, perceived, expressed, or intuited reasons for the behavior? What is the goal of the behavior? Was the behavior used to establish control over someone else, or was it used to regain control over oneself?

EFFECT—Whose life is smaller as a result of the behavior? Who is being controlled, manipulated, coerced, exploited or hurt as a consequence of the behavior? For example, “When I lost it like that, she finally realized how much she’d been hurting me, and allowed me to move back in,” vs., “When I lost it like that, I felt so ashamed of how I’d acted that I gave up on the changes I’d been asking for.”

The behavior itself is not the point—determining if the behavior is part of a pattern of systematic power and control over a partner is.

This tool consists of the **Instructions** and the **Worksheets**. The instructions broaden the discussion of context, intent and effect into a wide range of behaviors. The instructions frame questions for critical thinking before beginning an assessment conversation, as well as list a few sample questions that can be used when talking to a person about their specific experience. The instructions contain helpful prompts but cannot replace training, dialogue with other advocates, and on-going critical thinking.

The worksheets lay out these and additional questions into a number of grids on specific themes. They are not listed in a specific order except to correlate with the instructions. The worksheets are designed to prompt and assist—the real work comes in the active listening of the advocate. This tool requires a significant commitment of time and advocate support.

There is no simple formula to determine who is battering a partner or who is surviving abuse, and this tool does not pretend to offer one. It does offer, however, a framework and strategy for discerning patterns of power, control and exploitation in abusive relationships.

We recommend that advocates receive training about this tool and that agencies planfully incorporate its use into their processes before the tool is used in an organization. We recommend that advocates

who utilize this tool participate in significant, on-going anti-oppression training and analysis building. **We do not recommend placing worksheets in a program participant's file.**

During the entire conversation, an advocate should consider the following two issues and the ways in which these issues are interacting with the behaviors, situations, and experiences discussed:

Using Privilege

Look for: One partner using her own privilege (ex: white privilege, class privilege, etc) to endanger or intimidate.

Who has access to systems of privilege? How is this privilege being used? Are institutional racism, classism, sexism, ableism, anti-Jewish oppression, homophobia, etc. leveraged within the relationship? Does one person cause her partner to come in contact with systems that might harm her, when she herself would be unlikely to be harmed by them? For example, a person who is a US citizen may use Homeland Security as a threat against a partner who is undocumented, or a person may call the police knowing that she can use race or class privilege to appear like a "good victim," while her partner is more likely to be read as "dangerous." However, do not assume that any person who accesses institutions for support is necessarily using power and control over her partner; survivors may attempt to access many institutions and people as they try to increase their safety and self-determination.

Using the Batterer's Own Vulnerabilities

Look for: One person using her own weaknesses and vulnerabilities to manipulate.

Often people who batter use their vulnerabilities as well as their strengths to manipulate and establish power and control. A person who batters may allow only her own pain, anger, fear or frustration to be seen as valid. She may expect the survivor to insulate her from the impact of homophobia, bankruptcy, or other challenges, and may expect the survivor to contort herself in order to protect the person who batters from all triggers, difficulties, or dangers. For example, "I have a disability, so she has to take care of all the problems, remove all the barriers, and meet all our material needs." Or, "I am a survivor of child sexual assault, so she cannot get up to go to the bathroom at night because it will trigger me." Or, "My last partner cheated on me and I'm afraid that she is going to cheat on me too, so I need her not to spend time with friends." Important note: The person's vulnerabilities and challenges are likely to be very real and very difficult. The fact that a person who abuses may use a vulnerability to help establish and maintain power and control in the relationship does not mean that the vulnerability was invented in order to do so. And, obviously, having vulnerabilities or challenges is very different from attempting to use them to control or exploit. Many people, including many survivors, live with real and daunting disabilities, oppressions, and challenges without using these experiences to manipulate and control. What we are looking for here is an expectation that the other person is responsible for managing these challenges, and for positioning herself between the person with the vulnerability and the consequence of the vulnerability.

Finally, when considering any agreement (about money, sex, housecleaning, etc), remember that the issue is not what the agreement is or whether you would ever make such an agreement! The questions are: How was the agreement made? Are the consequences reasonable if the agreement is broken? How can the agreement be changed if it no longer serves someone involved? What are the consequences for renegotiating?

We've outlined below a number of the central issues we look for in order to understand if a pattern of power, control and exploitation is being established in an intimate relationship and, if it is, who is establishing it.

Anger

Look for: Anger (or its prohibition) used as a tool to coerce and intimidate.

Anger is validly expressed in a wide variety of ways that are often connected to our culture, our family's practices and our own style. The presence of anger does not mean that abuse is necessarily happening. Anger (like most things) can be used as a tool to coerce and intimidate. Is anger a

constant? Is it forbidden? Does it get used against one of the partners? How is it expressed? Is it an excuse for violence? Be careful to interrupt yourself if you are making assumptions that confuse being direct or angry with controlling through anger or intimidation. Also look for survivors who are loud, direct or angry being set up to look like “an abuser”.

Sample questions: When was the last time you were very angry? What happened? When was the last time your partner was very angry? What happened? How does anger work in the relationship? What happens when you are angry? What happens when your partner is angry?

Using Physical Violence

Some words about physical violence: *Sometimes advocates find it difficult to get into the frame of mind of thinking about physical violence in terms of context, intent and effect. Too often people have used “context” to mean excuses for abusive behaviors, such as: “I was too high to be responsible for my actions.” or “I hit you because you are a slut and have to be kept in line.”*

*It is important that we do not allow these misuses of the concept of “context” to prevent us from using our critical thinking skills as we support survivors. Why? Because the reality that we miss when we avoid “context”, “intent” and “effect” is that many survivors use physical violence as a survival strategy, out of anger and out of general desperation. When we silence this piece of experience, we erase or minimize the impact this use of violence has in the life of the **survivor** who has used it. And we leave the fact of this violence as a tool for batterers to manipulate. “You shut up about how you want to be treated...remember, you’re the one who hit me.” Whenever we support silence about any aspect of survivors’ experience, we create space for people who batter to manipulate.*

Supporting a person who batter’s tactics of control and exploitation are not the only consequence. We find that the survivors want and need to think critically about the choices they have made in the past, about how they want to act in their relationships and about what support they need to be able to act with integrity in a relationship. When advocates silence survivors’ experiences of using physical force, this opportunity is denied. So, advocates must push through discomfort, challenge internalized isms, and listen with compassion and the best critical thinking skills.

Look for: The context, intent and effect of the physical violence.

When does the violence occur? What leads up to it? What are its consequences? How does the person who has used violence deal with what they have done? Does the person gain power and control over their partner or their partner’s resources through the use of physical force? How is the fact of the violence used in subsequent interactions? Who gets leverage from it? (“You’re scared, so do what I say.” Or “You scared me so do what I say, go where I want, wear what I say, speak to whom I allow...”) How is blame, guilt, and entitlement working in relationship to the violence? (see Blame, Guilt & Entitlement, below). If the couple is still in a relationship, is it possible for the person who used violence to be accountable for their behavior and reconcile with the other partner? If not, why are they still in relationship? Is either person afraid the violence will happen again? Does the person fear violence being used against them? Has violence escalated? Is it reaching lethal levels?

Sample questions: Tell me about the first/last/worst time your partner was violent. What led up to it? How was it resolved? Tell me about the first/last/worst time you were violent. What led up to it? How was it resolved?

Money and Resources

Look for: Resources that are controlled by or exploited to benefit one partner over the other. Who has resources? How are resources shared or not shared? How are agreements about money negotiated? In the mainstream DV model, it is commonly assumed that batterers will forbid survivors to work as a means of control. While this certainly happens, people who batter are just as likely *not* to work and to expect the survivor to support them and the family, and to be responsible for any debt or

expenses. Notice if this connects with the a person who batters use of her own vulnerabilities, discussed below.

Sample questions: How does money work in the relationship? How are decisions about money made in your relationship? What happened the last time you made a big purchase?

Fear and Dread

Look for: Who feels fear and who feels dread.

Is this person afraid? Why? Is their partner afraid of them? Why? However, be careful about fear: When a survivor fights back, a person who batters can feel real fear and can express that fear to an advocate compellingly. Fear is not definitive; dread is more important. Who dreads coming home, delivering bad news, their partner's moods, and so on? Dread tends to reflect the 24-7 nature of domestic violence while fear can be linked to an isolated or particular incident.

Sample questions: How do you feel about coming home at night, or getting together with your partner? Why? How do you feel when you have to give bad news to your partner? What happens?

Lying

Look for: How and why lies are used.

A person surviving battering may lie or withhold information to protect herself, to make plans for safety or escape, and to buy herself time or space. A survivor may lie constantly—becoming vigilant about constructing stories about her day or activities that she believes will be the most acceptable to her partner. A person who batters often lies to control her partner, to further isolate, to trick her partner into revealing information and to keep her partner confused.

Sample questions: When was the first time you lied to your partner? What happened? Do you feel you lie to your partner a lot? Why? Do you feel your partner lies a lot? Why? Do you trust your partner? What happened the first/last time your partner lied to you?

Identities

Look for: How identities are supported or undermined in the relationship.

Is one person expected to conform their identities to support or validate the other's? How has "passing" or "outing" worked? How is this person supported or undermined in their identities (queer identities, such as: bisexual, trans, lesbian, gay, queer, straight, femme, butch AND identities such as cultural, racial or ethnic identity, religious identity, etc.)? How is this person's partner supported or undermined in their identities? For example, is one person told that she is "less real" because she identifies as bisexual rather than lesbian? Is someone denied access to aspects of their culture that are important to them? Look for ways in which attempts to control or influence dress, appearance, behavior or hairstyle may be connected with attempts to control the survivors' expression of gender or cultural identities. How are stereotypes and prejudices about either person's identities used to control, exploit or intimidate?

Sample questions: Are you out in your community? Is your partner out? Is there tension in your relationship about being "out" or "passing"? Do you feel that your partner supports you around your class, racial, or religious identities? Why or why not? Do you have to prove that your identities are valid? Are there identities that your partner holds that are hard for you to deal with or accept? If so, what? What do you do about it?

Making choices

Look for: Who has control over their own choices.

What happens when one person tries to spend time alone, pursue individual interests, or make choices and plans? Whose interests are considered important? Does one person make choices independently, while the other person is required to check with their partner first? Do not assume that if each person is expected to consider their partner when making choices, or because one person is

more flexible than another, that abuse is happening; but it is worthwhile to look at patterns that occur, and how plans are negotiated. For example, is there never a good time for one person to do an independent activity? Is there a “double-standard” about how plans should be made? How was that “double standard” created? Can it be renegotiated? In addition, look out for whether one person’s confidence in her ability to make choices is being undermined.

***Sample questions:** What is it like when you try to take a class, pursue your interests, etc. independently from your partner? What is it like when your partner tries to take a class, pursue her interests, etc.? Do you feel that you are able to make decisions on your own?*

Isolation

Look for: What happens to social, community, and family connections.

Whose connections are supported, and whose are undermined? Does one person have strict guidelines about what is “too private” to discuss with friends and family? Is there room for negotiation? Is there never a “good time” to make plans with friends, or to share information about the relationship? What happens when one person tries to visit family, see friends, join a group, etc. alone? What about as a couple? While a person who abuses may use threats, jealousy, and intimidation to isolate, they may be just as likely to become sad, suicidal, sick, disoriented, emotional, distant or aloof when their partner tries to arrange for an evening out together with friends. They may report flashbacks, or say that being alone triggers their abandonment issues. An abusive partner may never directly forbid or prevent these connections – they may simply become needy or upset whenever these connections are attempted. A person who batters may isolate by expecting a partner to stay at home while they are active and out connecting in community. We find that a person surviving abuse often loses connections with friends, family, faith community, activities etc. as a result of abuse. If it seems one person in a relationship has “dropped out”, find out why.

***Sample questions:** What would your friends say about this relationship? Is the relationship a secret? Why? Do you like your partner’s friends? Does she like yours? Why or why not? How do you feel when your partner hangs out with her friends? Do you spend more, less, or the same amount of time with your family since being in this relationship? Why? Describe a time you felt upset because your partner stayed out too long.*

Sleep

Look for: Patterns of deprived or interrupted sleep.

Who gets to sleep and when? Is one partner often kept awake or awakened in the night to process or fight? How were agreements like “We will never go to sleep angry at each other” negotiated? Is sleep deprivation through fighting or other tactics used as punishment when one person tries to go out with friends, talk to family on the phone, keep a job, go to school, etc.?

***Sample questions:** How often do you and/or your partner stay up past a time that feels okay to you? What happened the last time you stayed up past you or your partner’s regular bedtime? What happens if you try to stop an argument to go to bed? What about your partner? Do you ever wake up at night needing to process with your partner? Does your partner wake up needing to process? What happens? If your partner wanted to talk about a problem at a time when you didn’t want to, what would happen?*

Sex

Look for: Sex and sexuality being used to control and hurt.

Homophobia can make it very difficult to talk about sex in queer relationships, whether or not the advocate is identified as queer. It is very possible that a person who has experienced significant sexual abuse in their relationship will report that “everything is fine” in regard to their sexual relationship with their partner. In addition, sexual coercion can be very subtle and manipulative. For example, a person who is abusing their partner may cry, make it difficult to sleep, or say that it hurts her self-esteem when her partner does not want to have sex. Her partner may not describe these behaviors as coercive, but may have had sex many times when she did not want to in order to avoid consequences.

How was monogamy or non-monogamy decided? Additionally, look out for other ways in which sexuality can be used to hurt. Is one person ridiculed about her fantasies, her preferences, her abilities as a lover? Is one labeled “too sexual” in her interactions with friends, and that everyone is attracted to her? Notice that this may connect significantly with isolation, and with isms: are sexual stereotypes connected with race, gender or other identities being used? For example, is one person made to feel “exotic” or “asexual” through the use of racial stereotypes? Is a bisexual woman being accused of wanting to have sex with everyone? Does someone feel they must have sex in order to prove they are really queer?

Sample questions: Have you ever had sex with your partner when you did not want to? Do you think your partner has ever had sex when she did not want to? Do you think your partner is being unfaithful when you have agreed to be monogamous? Why? Does your partner accuse you of having affairs, flirting, or being attracted to your friends?

Staying and leaving

Look for: Why does she want to stay? Why does she want to leave? How could she stay or leave?

Survivors want to preserve their relationships for all the variety of reasons that anyone does. Further, a person surviving abuse is often as or more invested in maintaining the relationship as an abusive partner. What is keeping this person in the relationship? Is the person in the relationship because they want to be or another reason: they fear violence if they leave, their financial arrangements are complicated and it would be hard to separate, they do not have parental rights of their children, they fear losing friends or social status. What would happen if they left the relationship? Look for patterns of escalated control around attempts to leave. What are concerns or fears around staying/leaving? Has the person become very isolated over the course of the relationship? If the person has already left the relationship: How did they leave? What were the consequences of leaving? What happened when they left the relationship?

Sample: What do you think would happen if you left this relationship tomorrow? What do you think would happen if your partner left this relationship tomorrow? Have you ever broken up before? What happened? How did you get back together?

Blame, guilt & entitlement

Look for: Who feels entitled, and who feels at fault.

Because survivors have often internalized the message that “everything is your fault,” they often feel very responsible or self-blaming about situations, even when they have little control over them. Survivors may or may not be “accountable” people outside of the context of abuse; however, within abuse contexts, survivors are often assigned blame when something goes wrong, or when a person who batters fears something might go wrong. **Entitlement is of primary concern.** Who feels entitled to anger, support, resources, attribution of blame or use of violence? Who feels guilty and at fault, or works to be accountable for their own behavior?

Sample questions: How often do you think you are responsible for what’s happening in the relationship? How often is your partner responsible? What happens when you do something you are not proud of in your relationship? Tell me about the last time you apologized for something in your relationship. What happened? Tell me about the last time your partner did something mean. What happened when she apologized?

The advocates of the Northwest Network experience our work as a perpetual draft. We are engaged in an ongoing process of learning from our work with survivors, revising our analysis of domestic violence based on that learning, and then sharing that learning with other people surviving violence, advocates and communities. This process is on-going and, as a result, we are constantly reframing, revising and reworking all our tools and materials—including this one.

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