

Considerations before Screening for Brain Injury

There are many considerations to keep in mind before screening for a possible brain injury (BI). This fact sheet will cover a few important things to keep in mind prior to starting the conversation about brain injury with your client.

Before You Screen

- Ensure the client gives informed consent: the client should be aware that a positive screening is not sufficient for a brain injury diagnosis.
- Interviewing BI survivors may be difficult due to cognitive challenges that affect insight, memory, fatigue levels, or ability to concentrate. Some individuals may be unable to accurately report details surrounding their injury because of this as well. Provide any accommodations necessary for a survivor's success. These can include:
 - o Larger text
 - o Increased time to answer questions
 - o Appointment reminders
- Know the risks of brain injury screening. Screening a survivor for brain injury may have unintended consequences or create potential risks. Being aware of these possible outcomes can allow you to discuss these with your client and make plans to minimize impact.
 - o **Abuser manipulation:** Abusive partners may look for signs of perceived weakness or vulnerability in order to gain power and control over that person. An abuser may use a client's brain injury against them by questioning their ability to parent, live independently, or perform basic life skills.
 - o **Legal manipulation:** Survivors of domestic violence can often experience difficulties within the legal and justice systems. Information about or knowledge of a brain injury can be misinterpreted and used against a survivor during custody or divorce cases, as abusers are commonly looking for ways to discredit the survivor. Therefore, it is especially important for survivors dealing with custody issues or working with child protective services to be aware of this risk.

How to Minimize Risks

Because of these risks, a survivor's wish to opt out of a brain injury screening should always be respected. If they wish to proceed, you can manage these risks by asking questions like:

- Are you currently in a custody/other legal dispute with your abuser? Would the abuser be able to find details of medical history or results of this screening?
- Are you currently utilizing any child protective services?
- How involved is the abuser in your daily life? Are there others in your life who may try to use a brain injury diagnosis against you in a court of law or other system?
- What can we do to minimize the risk that this information can be used against you and ensure that you are in control this information?
 - o They are in charge of who this information is shared with. The result of the screening does not have to leave the room if your client does not want it to.
 - o They can also minimize risk by not seeking a diagnosis or services if now is not the right time; sometimes just knowing that BI is a possible cause of their struggles is enough to be empowering.
 - o If needed, reassure them that although the result of the screening is being shared with a state agency, it is in no way associated with their name or identifiable as them.

Additional actions to support a survivor:

- Ensure a follow up care plan for further referral if the brain injury screening is positive
- Educate the client about brain injury, and offer support for educating those around them
- Collaborate with the client to make a list of people they feel are safe to discuss a brain injury with, versus those who are not
- Help them find advocacy services who may accompany them to court proceedings and speak up if a brain injury is used against them
- Collaborate on accommodations to apply both in your office and in their everyday life; such as providing information in writing, large print, or offering more time to respond to questions

- Ensure that any doctors or other professionals involved in their care understand the complexity of domestic violence situations

Mental Health Coercion

- According to the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, almost all survivors who are accessing services experienced some kind of mental health coercion. Examples of mental health coercion include individuals using mental health struggles against them, discouraging or preventing survivors from getting mental health services, and other ways in which abusers deliberately cause a survivor to feel crazy or like they are losing their mind. The additional complications of a brain injury can severely impact a survivor's emotional well-being.
- Oftentimes, survivors are unaware of a possible brain injury and do not realize that some of their emotional or cognitive struggles could be connected to it. The realization that they are not "crazy" or "losing their mind" can be very empowering.

Managing Stigma

- It is important to be sensitive to your client's emotions during the discussion. Believing that others see them as "dumb" is common for survivors of brain injury, especially if this is a tactic used by their abuser. Recognize and affirm your client's strengths and abilities throughout the screening.
- Reinforce that having difficulties with memory, attention, and other cognitive functions does not mean they are not capable. Giving them the ability to understand their difficulties and know how to compensate for them can enable survivors to make the best decisions for themselves and be better understood by others around them.

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