

# 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.

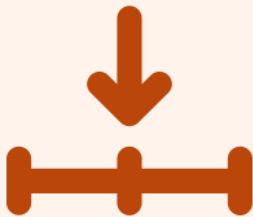
See the demonstration video [Here is a video of some skills...](#)<sup>1</sup> for how you can use their denial and minimisation – often arising in part from shame – as an opportunity to scaffold an approach that supports the user of violence to take a stand against their harmful behaviours.



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.

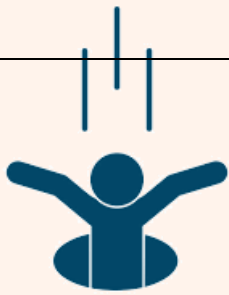
To counter the isolating impacts of shame, stay connected with him and offer hope that he can change.



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.