

# Choosing a Counselor:

## ***Guidelines for People Dealing with Domestic Violence and/or Sexual Assault***

It takes courage to seek help for yourself after experiencing domestic violence and/or sexual assault. We hope that these guidelines will help you find the right counselor or therapist for you. You deserve to have your goals met.

Remember that your safety is the first and most essential priority. If you are in immediate danger, always call 911 first. You may also wish to contact a local shelter, hotline, or emergency room for support and safety planning, as well as seeking the help of a counselor or therapist.

### **Here are some numbers and website addresses to help you get started.**

“SafeLink”—MA’s Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-877-785-2020 / [www.casamyrna.org/programs/safelink.html](http://www.casamyrna.org/programs/safelink.html)

National Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-800-799-SAFE / [www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)

Rape Abuse Incest National Network’s Hotline  
1-800-656-HOPE / [www.voicesofstrength.org/rainn.htm](http://www.voicesofstrength.org/rainn.htm)

Boston Area Rape Crisis Center’s Hotline  
1-617-492-RAPE or 1-800-841-8371 / [www.barcc.org](http://www.barcc.org)

Llamanos Y Hablemos—Statewide Spanish Sexual Assault Hotline  
1-800-223-5001 or (TTY/TTD) 1-508-852-7600

*All hotlines are free and confidential. Some are multilingual. The staff will assist you with immediate safety needs, provide support, answer questions, and offer needed referrals.*

## Checklist of Positive Indicators\*

### ***Did the counselor:***

- Listen to your concerns, value your opinion, support you?
- Ask you about your current situation and help you assess your safety?
- Ask relevant questions about sexual abuse, substance abuse, changes in sleeping and eating, major life events, and other fears or concerns?
- Help you plan for safety, inform you of your right to protection by police and courts if needed, encourage you to use local resources for support and safety?
- Understand and express interest in your cultural background, social conditions, sexual orientation?
- Place responsibility for the violence on the abusive/assaultive person?
- Recognize your strengths?
- Understand that you may have mixed feelings about the person hurting you?
- Seem non-judgmental and non-blaming?
- Have appropriate emotional responses to your story?

\* Some items adapted from Jones, A. & Schechter, S. (1992). *When Love Goes Wrong*. New York: Harper Collins.

Prepared by the National Association of Social Workers, Massachusetts Chapter, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Committee and the CONNECT Committee of Greater Boston Jewish Women International

### What to expect in the first few meetings?

#### ***You should know:***

- What the counselor can offer you
- What the terms of the agreement are (*when you will meet, what it will cost, how often and how long you can meet, what your shared goals are for the counseling*)
- What the terms of agreement for and limits of confidentiality are
- What your options are if you need help between sessions

These meetings should also give you a sense of the counselor’s style and experience. Ask the counselor any questions that seem important to you. No question is inappropriate and all topics are valid.

In some cases, you may first meet with a person for an intake interview. This person may not be your counselor, but is responsible for matching you with an available counselor. It is important to convey what you want and need to the intake person. The first meetings with your assigned counselor will be your opportunity to assess if that person and agency can provide you with what you need.

After the first few meetings, you should consider your satisfaction with this counselor before you commit to more sessions. On the back of this brochure is a **checklist of positive** indicators to help you make that assessment.

### What if it isn’t helping?

If over time you do not find the counseling helpful, it is important to discuss that with your counselor to determine what to do to improve the situation. Although difficult, having this conversation can lead to helpful changes in the relationship. Other times you may need to re-assess whether this counselor is a good match for you.

Some people see a few counselors before finding a good match. Remember, your counselor works for you. *You need to feel comfortable and safe with your counselor.*

## Where do you start looking?

Get references from friends, a trusted physician, attorney or clergy member, a local woman's program, a domestic violence or sexual assault program, or another professional organization.

While these may be good places to start, you cannot assume that a therapist referred by someone you like or trust is automatically the right therapist or counselor for you. As with other relationships, finding the right match is a very individual experience. The information included below is designed to help you with this process.

## What do you want?

Focus first on what you are seeking—what YOU want to get from counseling. Consider the following questions:

- ♦ Is it your own desire to see a counselor? Or is this someone else's idea of what you need?
- ♦ What are your preferences in terms of a counselor's characteristics? For instance, do you care about language abilities, race, gender, age, sexual orientation?
- ♦ Have you thought about your goals for counseling? What are they?

## What kinds of counselors are there?

There are many different types of counselors that work in a variety of settings, including community mental health centers, hospitals, private practice, and domestic violence and/or sexual assault programs. Ask whoever you see if they are familiar with helping survivors. It is entirely reasonable to ask counselors about their experience in this area.

Most professional counselors and therapists are licensed social workers, psychologists, or mental health counselors. If you are in need of medication, you may be referred to a psychiatrist, clinical nurse specialist or your primary care provider.

Some counselors with an expertise in working with victims of violence have no professional degrees. They do, however, have considerable experience and training with safety planning, crisis intervention, and advocacy and are knowledgeable about your rights and options.

## Individual or couple's counseling?

If the abusive person is your spouse/partner, we recommend you seek individual counseling. You may feel that couples counseling is your only hope for getting your partner to change. Unfortunately, this is not within your control. Furthermore, the openness that is encouraged in couples counseling may actually lead to an increase in violence.

If the abusive person is your spouse/partner and you do decide to try couples counseling, it is very important that the therapist meet with you and your spouse/partner separately during the intake process to safely hear both your perspectives. Because of the potential risks of harm to you, safety measures should be in place prior to meeting together with a couples counselor.

If the abusive person is NOT your spouse/partner, and you feel SAFE with your spouse/partner, getting counseling together may be helpful for both of you. Alternatively, you and/or your spouse/partner may find support from individual counseling helpful. Deciding which to pursue depends upon what your goals are and which situation feels most comfortable for you at the time.

## What about payment and fees?

*Counseling services may appear on your insurance claim statement, depending upon your insurance plan. If this raises safety concerns, address them with the counselor PRIOR to your first visit.*

If you do not have insurance, fees for counseling can vary widely. Sliding scale fees (*fees that are adjusted based on income*) are often available. It is appropriate to ask about sliding scale fees.

Whether you have insurance or not, you can look for a counselor through the local domestic violence or sexual assault program. These programs offer FREE individual and group counseling, along with a 24 hour hotline, legal advocacy, and shelter. They usually do not require you to access your insurance.

## What information can you gather by phone?

Before you call a potential therapist, think about what is most important for you to know. It may be useful to take notes so that you can compare responses of possible counselors later. Also, note your comfort level talking with each counselor.

If you need to leave a message, it is helpful to let the counselor know when or if it is safe to return your call. This "telephone research" can take some time, but it will usually be worth it in the end.

## Helpful Things to Ask About

- ♦ Fees and billing practices
- ♦ Location of office
- ♦ Available appointment times
- ♦ Flexibility in appointment scheduling
- ♦ Policy about missed appointments
- ♦ The counselor's training generally, as well as specific training and experience with domestic violence and/or sexual assault.
- ♦ The protocol for emergency situations and phone calls between sessions
- ♦ Whether the counselor has worked with people who are like you in important ways (*e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation*)
- ♦ The counselor's familiarity with your community and available resources within it

**Be sure that the practices of the counselor fit what you need to maintain your safety.**