

# CONVERSATION GUIDE *for Delivering a* TRAUMA-INFORMED BRIEF INTERVENTION

The link between childhood trauma and substance use disorders is well-documented in the literature. This resource acknowledges that link and is intended to help healthcare providers deliver a brief intervention for substance use using a trauma-informed care approach. Whether you are well-versed in the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) process, or just looking for an effective way to address substance use concerns with your patients, this guide provides practical examples to facilitate that conversation. The left column provides scripts and concrete strategies to move through the brief intervention process, while the right column provides considerations to ensure trauma-informed care principles are integrated into the delivery.

## BRIEF INTERVENTION COMPONENT

## TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE CONSIDERATIONS

### 1. RAISE THE SUBJECT & ENGAGE

- **Ask** permission to review screening results:  
“Would you be willing to review these results?”
- **Express** appreciation for answering sensitive screening questions.
- **Request** permission to proceed with next steps including:
  - Educating about the connection between substance use, health, and behaviors.
  - Sharing how these connections are applicable in their life.
  - Discussing meeting with a behavioral health specialist, if applicable.

- **Be mindful** of the impact our behaviors can have on people with a history of trauma:
  - Utilize universal precautions for creating a calm environment (e.g., minimizing noise, decreasing clutter, maintaining a comfortable temperature).
  - Be aware of internal emotions and thoughts and focus on those that bolster support for the patient.
- **Be aware** of tone, volume, energy level and physical space as you introduce yourself, your role and explain what you will be doing.
- **Set realistic expectations** and goals for your time together to create a predictable and structured environment.
- **Respond** and communicate respectfully (e.g., ask what name they would like to be called, be validating and affirming).

### 2. CONFIRM SCREENING RESULTS & EXPLORE/ASK FOR MORE DETAILS ABOUT USE

- **Explore** perceived benefits versus downsides:  
“How does \_\_\_\_\_ fit into your life?”  
“What, if any concerns do you have about...?”
- **Express** empathy:  
“I am so sorry that you went through that.”  
“I can’t imagine what that was like.”
- **Validate** the experience/event:  
“Going through something like that must be so difficult.”
- **Educate** about the connections between substance use, trauma, physical health, and behaviors.

- **Listen** intently to understand results and their context.
- **Commit** to setting aside your own judgements and thoughts about screening results to strengthen your ability to be patient and persistent.
- **Maintain** awareness of the language, tone and volume used when responding. Use person-first language and avoid a judgmental tone and generalizations.

#### For Example:

#### Say This

Alcohol or drug poisoning  
Person with substance use disorder  
Unhealthy substance use

#### Not That

Overdose  
Addict  
Substance misuse

- **Focus** on competence and internal capacity for change versus knowledge or skills deficits. Strengths-based approaches increase the effectiveness of interventions.

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#### 3. PERSONALIZE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & CORRECT MISINFORMATION

- **Elicit** information on thoughts and beliefs:  
*“What would you most like to know about...?”*  
*“What is your understanding of...?”*
- **Advise** on the facts:  
*“Yes, and...”*  
*“What we also know is...”*
- **Elicit** reactions to facts shared: *“What are your thoughts on this?”*  
*“Where does this leave you?”*

- **Maintain** the motivational interviewing spirit by providing information in the context of compassion, partnership, evocation and acceptance.
- **Invest** time and energy in building and reinforcing protective factors and advising on potential risks.
- **Honor** patient voice and choice, especially when it is in contradiction to your own by consistently requesting feedback and ensuring comfort.

#### 4. ASSESS READINESS & NEGOTIATE CHANGE

- **Explore** the ways substance use and/or trauma is impacting the patient’s life. Ask questions that build on the information learned:  
*“You mentioned that \_\_\_\_\_ affects your ability to \_\_\_\_\_. What has helped you succeed at \_\_\_\_\_ in the past?”*
- **Ask** about motivation to change. Use the **Readiness Ruler** to help guide the conversation.
- **Establish** a concrete idea of what change means for the patient:  
*“What would a shift in use look like for you?”*  
*“What would be a first step?”*  
*“Would you be willing to...?”*

- **Client-driven** readiness assessment and change negotiation is most effective.
- **Identify** positive health assets and strengths that can contribute to a healthier, longer life.
- **Utilize** strengths-oriented open-ended questions:  
*“How have you been successful in the past?”*  
*“What coping skills have you learned from your life experiences?”*
- **Promote** resilience through language choices (I have, I am, I can); model and practice with your patient.
- **Focus Readiness Ruler** discussion on why the patient did not choose a lesser number. Identifying strengths rather than deficits will enhance change talk; use this approach when discussing how to achieve a higher number if that’s their goal.

#### 5. FOLLOW UP

- **Inform** of next steps, which include:
  - Referral to internal or external behavioral health services.
  - Permission to follow up to see how treatment went.
- **Understand** if the patient rejects the referral and let them know that sometimes a person needs to feel ready to take this step. Provide them with information on who to contact if at any point they would like to seek treatment or discuss their options more thoroughly.
- **Frame** as an ongoing conversation:  
*“I’d like to follow up with you to see how you’re doing. Would it be okay with you if we revisit this at your next appointment?”*

- **Recognize** that anything the patient is willing to do to address the issue is a step in the right direction.
- **Connect** the patient to others who may be able to meet any needs that are outside your scope of practice.
- **Reinforce** that you are here to help and that this is an ongoing discussion. Ideally, you want patients to always feel comfortable to discuss these issues with you during visits.
- **Make** warm handoffs/referrals when possible.
- **Document** the agreed upon plan so you can engage in informed follow-up during the next appointment.