OPTIONS AGYW Training Package

Attachment 5: Tips for Conducting a Risk Assessment

**Begin by assuring confidentiality**

* For a risk assessment to be effective, the client must feel safe.
* Remember that your client is more likely to open up after you assure her that confidentiality will be maintained.
* You can begin your conversation by saying phrases like:
  + “Everything you say will remain between you and me.”
  + “You have a right to privacy and confidentiality that I will respect.”
  + “It is my ethical and legal obligation as a health care provider to protect your privacy.”

**Convey the routine nature of risk assessments**

* Use language that emphasises that this type of discussion happens with all clients.
* It is important that your client does not feel like she is being singled out.
* Consider phrases like:
  + “I’m going to ask you some questions that I ask all my clients, because they have a big effect on people’s health.”
  + “The following topics are standard.”
  + “These topics are discussed with all clients.”

**Acknowledge that personal and sensitive information will be assessed**

* Giving the client an introductory notice that you are about to talk about personal topics will help prepare her and may result in her being more open.
* Consider phrases like:
  + “I’m going to ask you about some personal topics. I talk to all my clients about these topics because they affect your health. Many people find it hard to discuss these issues at first.”
  + “The next set of questions cover sensitive information, but they are routinely discussed with all clients at this clinic.”
  + “It may be uncomfortable to discuss some of these topics at first. I talk to all my clients about these issues and am able to provide the best care to those who are open.”

**Use exploratory questions and open-ended questions**

* Questions that start with “what” or “how” are particularly useful.
* Phrases like “tell me about” or “it would be helpful to know about” are also useful.
* These types of questions are better for engaging clients in conversation than are questions they could answer with a simple “yes” or “no.”
* Open-ended questions allow clients to explore their risks and needs, open up, and speak freely about their experiences.
* Follow the five-second rule: Wait at least five seconds after asking a question before speaking again. Give clients time to respond.

**Go from general questions to specific ones**

* This is the most common way to arrange questions when getting to know a client.
* It is helpful to imagine a funnel (see figure below).
* Use the funnel to think about asking clients about sexual risk and behaviors.

**Use the types of words the client is using**

* This creates a stronger sense of understanding and connectedness.
* Ask for clarification if you are unsure of a term or wording used by the client.

**Reinforce healthy behaviors**

* Praise clients for positive steps they are taking to maintain or improve their health or to minimize their risk.

**Remain neutral when hearing sensitive information**

* Maintain neutral body language by:
  + Smiling or relaxing the mouth
  + Nodding
  + Relaxing the arms and legs
  + Making eye contact
* Avoid cold and judgemental body language such as:
  + Looking away
  + Rolling eyes
  + Crossing arms and legs
  + Making strong gestures or sudden movements in response to a client

**Focus on risk reduction**

* After learning about a client, the next step is to help reduce her risk and improve her health.
* Ask her if what steps she thinks she could take to reduce her risk of HIV.
* Remember that success is defined as risk reduction.
* Abstinence-only messages are not effective or appropriate.
* Goals for clients should be achievable and realistic. Ask the client to choose a goal for herself. She is more likely to work toward a goal she sets rather than one you set.

**Affirm concerns**

* Clients may express concern in response to disclosing sensitive information.
* To help ease this concern, provide the client with affirmation:
  + “I’m glad you told me this.”
  + “I know it isn’t easy to talk about this, and I appreciate your honesty.”
  + “I understand why you may be concerned, but let me see how I can help you with that.”
* Be prepared for what you might hear.
* Ask your clients to explain anything you don’t understand.

**Give clear and consistent messages**

* After getting to know clients, provide them with messages on:
  + Risk-reduction behaviors
  + Use of additional health services
* Messages can also be called goals because they:
  + Require a client to take action
  + Require the health care provider to follow-up

Adapted from: *Health4All - A health workers’ training guide for the provision of quality, stigma free HIV services for key population*s, 2018, LINKAGES Project, FHI 360 and IntraHealth International.

*This program is made possible by the generous assistance from the American people through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in partnership with PEPFAR. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.*