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.

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