

Supplemental Questions about Sexual Violence

The Returning and Healing (RAH) training curriculum includes examples of questions to ask clients about their experiences with sexual violence. This supplement offers a few more examples of those types of questions for reentry agencies to use.

The purpose of these questions is to find out whether a client wants to get connected to a partnering rape crisis center or other agency that can help them address their sexual trauma. This tip sheet is designed to give agencies some sample language to start using, until they develop more naturalistic language that fits their specific practice better.

This set of handouts is divided into three sections, each one describing a different style of question. In order, they are:

1. **Direct, Impersonal Questions:** direct questions to ask all clients about sexual violence, preferably at the end of a session, but that aren't specific to the individual client.
2. **Non-clinical Trauma Questions:** specific, personal questions about clients' experiences, based on what they have shared with the agency so far, but without using clinical language or language that is too loaded for a client to feel comfortable responding to them.
3. **Symptomatic Questions:** questions about the feelings and behaviors that a client has discussed experiencing, that might be red flags that someone has experienced sexual trauma.

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Each of the next few pages focuses on one of these types of questions. For each type of questions, there are some common sections to help guide agencies on how to use them.

How to read each section:

Context Icons



These icons represent sections where agencies can get a little more context about the type of questions, and what additional information might be useful to know about to ask them effectively.

Sample Questions Icon



This icon indicates sample language for each of the types of questions. For each type, there are a few sample questions to provide a sense of *how* to ask them.

Bridge to Resources Icon



This icon provides some sample language to use to transition from these questions to providing a referral or resource to a client. Agencies will need to have partners to refer clients to, but this language is intended to help transition the conversation from question to solution.

Section 1: Direct, Impersonal Questions

These questions are designed to allow reentry agencies to ask about sexual violence directly, but without making clients feel like they are being singled out. They are most effective when they are asked of every client, at a time during an intake or session that doesn't feel like they are based on what the client said during that session. The Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC) recommends:

- asking them towards the end of session.
- “couching” sexual violence as a specific question in a list of *other* challenges they also know that re-entering clients might be facing.



Other Common Challenges

- Generalized anxiety about coming home
- Family challenges/conflicts
- Substance use concerns
- Former trauma from other types of violence
- Fear of stigma or shame from being incarcerated
- Not understanding current technology or culture
- Other mental health concerns - depression, confusion, attention/focus issues, anger issues
- Fear of stigma or shame from being incarcerated



Sample Questions:

- “We ask everyone at the end of these meetings if there’s anything else they want to talk about. We know a lot of folks who come in here are handling some things that can be hard to talk about like addiction, sexual assault, or mental health. We work with organizations that focus on all those things, if you ever want to talk about them.”
- “We know a lot of people coming home have a lot on their mind. Coming back can be scary, and that’s OK. It can bring up some older stuff - addiction issues,

past trauma, sexual assault - do you think you'd want to talk to someone about anything like that?"

- "Is there anything else on your mind that you wanted to talk about? I just want to let you know that we can help you connect with some places that deal with some pretty common, and tough stuff. A lot of folks coming out are dealing with family issues, or feeling like they don't know what to do on a day-to-day basis, or trying to handle some kind of sexual violence that happened on the inside. If you ever want to talk about that stuff, or get connected to a place that can help, let us know."



Bridge to Resources

- "Do you want some ways to deal with any of the feelings or thoughts you have about that experience? I can refer you to (insert agency) that we work with. This is what they do for folks."
- "I can refer you to (insert agency), if you want me to. They really specialize in that issue, and we've worked with them for a while."

Section 2: Non-Clinical Trauma Questions

Non-clinical trauma questions are designed to give reentry agencies the chance to ask about specific experiences that clients mention once they've developed a strong relationship. These questions *are* specific to the client, and the point is to ask about things a client mentioned. Based on the information BARCC heard during this project, most clients seem unlikely to disclose sexual violence directly, but they may talk about things that are “red flags” - indicators that they might be dealing with sexual violence.



Potential Red Flags

- Client mentions having to go to another prisoner for protection, or to keep them safe
- Client says they had a particular problem with a staff member or another prisoner.
- Client says they had to put a PREA complaint on someone, or had a PREA problem with someone. *PREA is the prison rape elimination act.*
- They've mentioned dealing with searches or strip searches or being touched. Repeatedly bringing up the experience is the red flag.
- Client talks about having been abused or attacked by family prior to going into the system.

If a client mentions something in line with these experiences, the following sample questions can give them more space to talk if they want to. It's important to validate that these experiences can leave marks and that they may need to process them for a while afterwards.



Sample Questions:

These questions can create space for a client to discuss an experience that's bothering them.

- “You mentioned (experience) a couple times now. Has it been weighing on you?”

- “I heard you say that you had (experienced). Are you thinking about it a lot when you don’t want to be?”
- “A lot of folks who’ve dealt with (insert experience) take some time to figure out how they feel about it. Think that would be helpful for you?”

Finally, if a client wants to talk about an experience that sounds like it *might* be sexual violence related, we workshopped the following sample questions. Once a relationship is formed, there is less concern about “singling out” the client, especially if the question is about something they said.



Sample Questions:

- “Have you ever had to have sex with someone you didn’t want to have sex with?”
- “Did you have any sexual experiences in prison/jail that you don’t think were ok?”
- “Did any of the experiences like searches, stick in your mind with you when you left?”



Bridge to Resources

- “Do you think about that experience now, and think that it impacted your life? Do you have negative feelings about it? Is it getting in the way of doing other things? We have some places that we can connect you to that deal with this kind of stuff specifically.”
- “Do you want to talk to someone about that experience more? We’ve got a relationship with (insert agency) that does this with lots of folks.”

Section 3: Symptomatic Questions

For some clients, sexual violence feels intensely personal. They may be dealing with unresolved trauma, but be unwilling to discuss it directly, even after a long relationship with a reentry agency. These questions are designed to let clients talk about how they are feeling, without putting them on the spot to disclose their experiences. Responses to sexual trauma can manifest in many ways. Below are a set of common issues that many survivors face, but this is absolutely not an exhaustive list.



Symptomatic Issues

- Hard time sleeping/experiencing nightmares
- Having flashbacks or re-living the traumatic experience
- Emotional numbness - they have a hard time feeling emotions, or feeling present
- Hard time focusing or paying attention
- Feeling overwhelmed or overstimulated
- Anxiety symptoms - heart races or palms get sweaty in some situations
- Using drugs or alcohol to keep from having to be alone with their thoughts
- Easily startled or riled up by unexpected noises or small daily provocations
- Trouble containing anger or temper



Sample Questions:

- “Now that you’ve been at this (reentry) for a little bit, how are you feeling about it? How are you sleeping? Feeling like you can rest?”
- “I know it can take a little while for folks to start feeling like being outside is normal again. How are you doing? We know a lot of folks can feel a little overwhelmed.”
- “How’s work? Do you feel like you can concentrate and focus when you need to?”

- “How’s it feel being back in the city? How are you doing in big crowds and on the train?”
- “How are things going at home? Any issues with family members or loved ones?”



Bridge to Resources

- “For a lot of folks, dealing with these kinds of challenges can sometimes mean there’s something they’ve been through that’s bugging them. Those things can be pretty deep. Do you think you’d want to talk to someone about that? (Insert agency) has worked with us for a while, and they help people dealing with a lot of these challenges.”
- “We’ve got some folks we work with that specialize in helping people deal with some of the things you’re dealing with. I can give you a list and see if you can to check-in with them?”