

# Outspoken

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SPHERE'S FORUM FOR HIV EDUCATION

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### HIV Risk Assessments in Substance Abuse Treatment

**F**act: Behaviors associated with substance use are the main routes of HIV transmission both in Massachusetts and in the country as a whole. Most people who use substances place themselves at risk for HIV infection through

one or more of the following behaviors:

- ▶ Sharing needles to inject drugs
- ▶ Having unsafe sex with someone who shares needles
- ▶ Having unsafe sex in exchange for drugs or alcohol
- ▶ Having unsafe sex as a result of impaired judgment or impulse control related to substance use.

So what's the point of using HIV risk assessments for people in substance abuse treatment programs? Won't everyone's risk assessment yield essentially the same result—a moderate to high risk of HIV infection? If we already know that substance use places a person at risk for HIV infection, then why bother doing the assessment?

#### The Value of HIV Risk Assessments

In fact, HIV risk assessments can be excellent tools for substance abuse counselors and clients alike. But to reap the benefits of risk assessments, you have to know how to use these tools well.

Some counselors use HIV risk assessments primarily as data collection tools rather than counseling tools. Such assessments are often based on a checklist or questionnaire that asks whether clients engage in specific risky behaviors. The goal is to *take* demographic or other information from clients rather than to talk with clients about their risks. Once the questionnaires are completed, they are sent to the appropriate government agency for analysis or end up in a filing cabinet, never to be used or seen again.

This bare-bones approach to risk assessment has limited value. Counselors may offer their clients some basic directives, such as "You need to do X..." or "You should avoid Y..." But they often miss an important opportunity to begin meaningful, give-and-take discussions about risk reduction with their clients.

When used well, an HIV risk

assessment can provide essential support for behavior change and for a client's recovery process. Ideally, an HIV risk assessment is an ongoing conversation, not a one-time survey. Through open discussion, clients learn which behaviors increase their risks of becoming infected with or transmitting HIV, as well as the steps they can take to reduce these risks.

For their part, counselors can use risk assessment sessions to offer information about potentially risky behaviors, create a safe environment for their clients to reflect on this information, support their clients' interest in reducing their HIV risks, and facilitate behavior changes that reduce risk.

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#### Here's how SPHERE can help.

##### TRAININGS

On-site, free and CEUs available. Several topics available related to conducting HIV risk assessments.

##### TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

We can help you assess staff needs and design a protocol that integrates HIV risk assessment into your setting.

##### RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

HIV risk assessment tools are available. SPHERE staff can provide you with access to materials to support on-site risk assessment programming. Ongoing collaboration with PACs alerts SPHERE to emerging needs for resources.

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## IN FOCUS

### Three Steps for Effective Risk Assessment

Counselors need specific information and skills to effectively support their clients' efforts to reduce HIV risk. First, counselors need to know about the different modes of HIV transmission and the different ways to prevent transmission. A solid understanding of the relative risks of different sexual behaviors is essential. Knowledge about the proper use of condoms, bleach kits, and other devices and behaviors that reduce risk is also important.

Counselors should also be able to discuss sex and substance use in plain language. They should cultivate an open, non-judgmental attitude that invites

clients to ask questions and speak honestly about their behaviors, attitudes, and feelings. Such open discussion can be an important step toward personal change, since it provides an opportunity for clients to look at their HIV risks and consider specific actions to reduce these risks. For example, a risk assessment conversation might focus on a client's concerns about getting an HIV antibody test or on ways the client could talk with a sexual partner about using condoms.

Discussing HIV can raise questions that go beyond a counselor's expertise. For example, a client may want detailed information or support on issues such as sexual assault, family planning, mental health, or HIV treat-

ment. To meet these client needs, counselors should also be prepared to make appropriate referrals to community resources. By being knowledgeable about different agencies and service providers, counselors can help ensure that their referrals will meet their clients' needs.

Supporting people's efforts to change is the basis of substance abuse treatment. Effective counselors help clients identify their strengths and provide the setting clients need to share their fears and concerns. When used skillfully, HIV risk assessments can be a powerful tool in substance abuse treatment. ■

## Tips & Tools

*Hands-on strategies and materials are a great way to get started.*

- **USE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS.** Ask clients questions that prompt responses other than "yes" or "no." This promotes client-centered counseling and gives clients a greater opportunity to respond.
- **CLARIFY LANGUAGE.** Ask people what words they prefer to use to talk about sex and ensure mutual understanding.
- **BEHAVIOR CHANGE IS SLOW, GRADUAL AND INCREMENTAL. DISCUSS COSTS/BENEFITS OF CHANGE.** Review the advantages and disadvantages of making a change and give people a chance to talk about their concerns about making the change. Discussing anticipated gains and losses can help identify supports needed to make the change.
- **DISCOVER YOUR LOCAL HIV CASE MANAGER—**the *best* referral needed for people living with HIV. To find your local HIV Case Manager, contact SPHERE at 1-800-530-2770, ext. 261.

## Resources

**SPHERE RISK ASSESSMENT TOOL**—A practical and engaging instrument that focuses on the conversation and offers strategies for staff to participate in this process.

**SPHERE RISK ASSESSMENT INSTRUCTION MANUAL**—A comprehensive manual that describes the context of risk assessment and counseling strategies, and offers a topic-by-topic guide on how to use the SPHERE RISK ASSESSMENT TOOL.

**SPHERE POSTERS**—Set of six designed to help raise HIV issues, these posters help to create an environment of communication supporting the risk assessment conversation.

**COMMUNITY LISTINGS & RESOURCE REFERRAL CHECKLIST**—available from SPHERE.

**YOUR LOCAL PREVENTION CENTER RESOURCE LIBRARY**—Collections of videos, curricula, and other educational materials available for loan for you to use with clients to help increase their awareness of HIV risk.

**SAMPLE CONFIDENTIALITY POLICIES**—SPHERE's templates of HIV confidentiality policies for agencies to use, helping to create a climate of respect and privacy.