

WHAT IT IS

Working with domestic violence and college students requires a trauma-informed, student-centered approach that prioritizes safety, autonomy, and access to support. Students may experience abuse in dating relationships, family contexts, or shared housing, and the impact often shows up academically through missed classes, concentration difficulties, isolation, or sudden changes in behavior. Effective responses focus on listening without judgment, assessing immediate safety, offering options rather than directives, and coordinating supportive measures such as academic flexibility, housing adjustments, counseling, and safety planning. Because fear, shame, and dependence can make disclosure difficult, consistent, calm, and non-pressuring support is critical to helping students stay engaged in school while navigating complex and often dangerous circumstances.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

Students from marginalized or higher-risk populations, including LGBTQ+ students, international students, and students with limited local support, may face additional barriers to seeking help. First-year and transfer students, who may be navigating new relationships, boundaries, and independence for the first time. Students in dating-heavy or high-contact environments, such as residence halls, Greek life, athletics, or performing arts.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. How are things going in your relationship right now?
2. Have there been moments when you felt afraid, controlled, or pressured by someone?
3. What happens when there's conflict or disagreement?
4. Does your partner check your phone, limit who you see, or make it hard to focus on school?
5. What have you already tried to cope or stay safe?
6. What would support look like for you right now?

TEACHING INSIGHT

Start by listening without judgment. Believe them, thank them for telling you, and avoid criticizing their partner or asking "why don't you just leave?" which can increase shame and isolation. Simple statements like "I'm really glad you told me," or "What you're describing sounds scary and you don't deserve that" help counter the self-doubt that abuse creates.

Focus on safety and choice, not decisions. Ask gently about immediate safety and help them think through small protective steps rather than big moves. This might include identifying safe places, trusted people, emergency contacts, or ways to reduce risk around communication, housing, or technology. A safety plan can be quiet and flexible; it does not require leaving the relationship to be helpful.

Consider training on domestic violence for resident assistants, orientation leaders, and peer mentors, who are often the first people students confide in, need to know how to respond safely and appropriately and student leaders and organization officers (including athletes, team captains, and student government), who influence culture and may notice warning signs among peers.