

Tips From Colleagues

In most Minnesota clinics, doctors and nurses routinely ask patients if they feel safe at home. This basic screen is a start, but more often than not it won't elicit a history of abuse, say experts. Here are a few tips from fellow physicians that may help you probe further.

Build trust

As a physician, you open a door for patients by asking about their experiences, but most won't go through it until they get to know you, says David McCollum, M.D., an emergency physician at Ridgeview Medical Center in Waconia and chair of the Academy on Violence and Abuse. "You have to create the opportunity for them to talk about it and make it acceptable for them to talk about it." McCollum says he might tell patients that everyone has stress in their lives and ask them where their stress comes from or explain that stress affects the body and how we feel, then ask them what kind of stresses are going on in their lives.

Look patients in the eye and give them your undivided attention, says Stuart Hanson, M.D., a pulmonologist at Park Nicollet. "Share something about yourself so patients can connect with you as a fellow human being. Admit if you don't know what's causing their problem and assure them you will help them find out."

Gently raise the issue

If a patient is not aware of how abuse and neglect are affecting his or her

health, the physician should gently raise the issue, says Therese Zink, M.D., M.P.H., a professor of family medicine at the University of Minnesota. Doing more may alienate the patient. "Some patients deny that anything is wrong, but then maybe a year or two later they share what is happening," she says. Patients who are more aware might respond to a question such as, "Has anyone in your life hurt you or done things that make you afraid?" Zink says it also helps to assure patients that screening for abuse and neglect is common practice, so they don't feel singled out.

Ask in different ways

Marie Christensen, M.D., a plastic surgeon at Park Nicollet Clinic, says simply asking patients whether they feel safe at home may not be the right question. Instead, she suggests asking about the most stressful thing in a patient's life at the moment, whether they feel respected at home, or whether they're comfortable in their relationships might make them more likely to open up.

Acknowledge abuse or neglect

Simply acknowledging the patient's experience cuts the frequency of doctor office visits and often improves patients' symptoms, according to McCollum. "When a patient reveals a history of abuse or neglect, I might say, 'No wonder you feel the way you do, We've all had bad experiences.' Or, 'You're not imagining this.' Or 'Your pain is real

and your feelings are real.'" After such a conversation, patients often tell him they feel better and ask why other doctors haven't broached the subject.

Offer hope and support

McCollum empathizes with his patients. "I tell patients, 'I'm sorry this happened to you. I've heard similar stories from others. You're not alone. You have the power to change your life, and I'm going to help you.'" Discussing with patients how stress changes the brain and the neurobiochemical consequences of abuse can help them understand that their symptoms make sense, that they are not crazy, and that there is a reason why they feel the way they do.

Also, connect them with resources that can help them deal with the pain and emotions. "Call an abuse consultant if you need to. There are more of us out there all the time. And there are special trauma-related therapies that can help these patients," says Rich Kaplan, M.D., a pediatrician and associate medical director for the Midwest Children's Resource Center at Children's Hospitals and Clinics.

Take time

Although physicians are often pressed to do more in less time, "identifying and finding help for these patients is still plain old medicine," says Kaplan, who also serves as medical director at the University of Minnesota's Center for Safe and Healthy Children. "You're still getting the patient's history. You're still getting them the help they need."—H.B.