



COUNSELOR AUTOMATIC DISQUALIFIERS & MAJOR RED FLAGS

Domestic Violence Survivor Counselor Evaluation Guide

The following warning signs are based on widely recognized domestic violence advocacy principles, trauma-informed care standards, and evidence-based trauma treatment practices.

A counselor exhibiting one or more of these behaviors may lack the specialized knowledge necessary to safely work with survivors of domestic violence and coercive control.

IMPORTANT

A counselor who receives a high score on the screening questions may still be an inappropriate fit if significant red flags are present.

Any red flag should be carefully considered before continuing treatment.

MAJOR RED FLAGS CHECKLIST

1. Victim-Blaming Statements

Examples:

- "What did you do to trigger the abuse?"
- "You must have contributed to the problem."
- "Why didn't you just leave?"

Why It Matters:

Domestic violence is a choice made by the abuser. Victim-blaming can reinforce shame and trauma.

2. Framing Abuse as a Communication Problem

Examples:

- "You both need better communication."
- "This sounds like a relationship issue."

Why It Matters:

Domestic violence is fundamentally a power-and-control issue, not a communication problem.

3. Suggesting Couples Counseling While Abuse Is Present

Examples:

- Recommending marriage counseling without first assessing for abuse.
- Encouraging joint sessions with an abusive partner.

Why It Matters:

Many domestic violence experts consider couples counseling contraindicated when abuse is occurring because it may increase danger and provide additional opportunities for manipulation.

4. Minimizing Emotional, Psychological, or Coercive Abuse

Examples:

- "At least he didn't hit you."
- "Maybe he didn't mean it that way."
- "That doesn't sound abusive."

Why It Matters:

Emotional abuse, coercive control, intimidation, and psychological manipulation can be profoundly traumatic and harmful.

5. Lack of Understanding of Coercive Control

Examples:

- Unable to define coercive control.
- Focuses only on physical violence.
- Fails to recognize isolation, monitoring, intimidation, or financial control.

Why It Matters:

Coercive control is often the central feature of domestic violence.

6. Pressure to Forgive, Reconcile, or Reunite

Examples:

- "You need to forgive in order to heal."
- "Maybe it's time to give him another chance."

Why It Matters:

Healing and forgiveness are separate issues. Survivors should never be pressured toward reconciliation.

7. Dismissing Safety Concerns

Examples:

- Minimizes stalking.
- Dismisses threats or intimidation.
- Fails to recognize post-separation abuse.

Why It Matters:

Leaving an abusive relationship is often the most dangerous period for a survivor.

8. Moving Into Trauma Processing Too Quickly

Examples:

- Encourages reliving traumatic experiences during early sessions.
- Pushes for detailed trauma disclosure before stabilization.

Why It Matters:

Effective trauma treatment generally emphasizes safety, stabilization, and emotional regulation before intensive trauma processing.

9. Failure to Understand Trauma Bonding

Examples:

- "You should be over them by now."
- "Why do you still love someone who abused you?"

Why It Matters:

Trauma bonding is a well-recognized response to abuse and requires specialized understanding.

10. Dismissing Survivor Intuition or Perceptions

Examples:

- Repeatedly questions the survivor's reality.
- Suggests the survivor is exaggerating.
- Invalidates experiences of abuse.

Why It Matters:

Many survivors have already experienced years of gaslighting and psychological manipulation.

Therapy should strengthen self-trust, not undermine it.

11. Treating Children's Trauma Without Understanding Domestic Violence

Examples:

- Focuses solely on behavior problems.
- Ignores trauma exposure.
- Recommends reunification without a thorough safety assessment.

Why It Matters:

Children exposed to domestic violence require specialized trauma-informed treatment.

12. Lack of Familiarity with Evidence-Based Trauma Treatments

Examples:

Unable to discuss any of the following:

- Trauma-Informed Care
- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
- Somatic Therapies
- Internal Family Systems (IFS)
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

Why It Matters:

While not every therapist uses all approaches, a counselor specializing in trauma should demonstrate familiarity with evidence-based trauma treatment methods.

FINAL REFLECTION

After your consultation or first few sessions, ask yourself:

- ☐ Did I feel believed?
- ☐ Did I feel emotionally safe?
- ☐ Did I feel respected?
- ☐ Did I feel empowered?
- ☐ Did the counselor demonstrate an understanding of domestic violence dynamics?
- ☐ Did the counselor understand power and control?
- ☐ Did the counselor respect my pace and boundaries?
- ☐ Would I feel comfortable sharing difficult experiences with this counselor?

If you answered "No" to several of these questions, consider obtaining a second opinion or interviewing additional counselors.

SURVIVOR REMINDER

The right counselor should help you feel safer, stronger, more empowered, and more connected to your own wisdom and judgment.

Good trauma therapy increases:

- Safety
- Autonomy
- Self-trust
- Hope
- Healing

Not confusion, shame, pressure, or self-doubt.