



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVOR COUNSELOR SCREENING TOOL

The Healing Well & Living Free Foundation developed this screening tool to help survivors of domestic violence identify counselors who possess a trauma-informed understanding of domestic violence, coercive control, trauma recovery, and survivor safety.

This tool is informed by evidence-based trauma research, domestic violence advocacy principles, trauma-informed care standards, and best practices for working with survivors of domestic violence and their children.

A counselor's answers can provide important insight into whether they understand the unique dynamics of abuse and are equipped to support survivor healing.

Counselor Name: _____

Counseling Practice: _____

Phone: _____ **Date Interviewed:** _____

Scoring Guide

For each question, rate the counselor:

Score	Meaning
5	Excellent understanding
4	Strong understanding
3	Moderate understanding
2	Limited understanding
1	Significant concerns
0	Major red flag

1. Domestic Violence Counseling Experience

Question:

"What experience do you have working specifically with survivors of domestic violence, coercive control, and trauma?"

Looking For:

- Significant experience with domestic violence survivors
- Experience in shelters, advocacy programs, or trauma recovery
- Understanding of coercive control and abuse dynamics

Score: _____ **out of 5**

Notes:

2. Domestic Violence Specialized Training

Question:

"What specialized training have you received related to domestic violence, trauma, PTSD, or trauma-informed care?"

Looking For:

- Trauma-Informed Care
- EMDR
- Trauma-Focused CBT
- Somatic therapies
- Domestic violence certifications
- Ongoing continuing education

Score: _____ **out of 5**

Notes:

3. Root Cause of Domestic Violence

Question:

"What do you believe causes domestic violence?"

Looking For:

- Power and control
- Coercive control
- Entitlement and domination

Red Flag Responses:

- Communication problems
- Anger management alone
- Both parties contribute equally

Score: _____ **out of 5**

Notes:

4. Normal Relationship Conflict vs Domestic Violence

Question:

"How do you distinguish normal relationship conflict from domestic abuse?"

Looking For:

- Recognition of power imbalance
- Fear, intimidation, coercion, manipulation
- Pattern of control rather than isolated conflict

Score: _____ **out of 5**

Notes:

5. Safety Planning

Question:

"How do you evaluate custody evaluators, therapists, reunification therapists, and other experts involved in a case?"

Looking For:

- Survivor safety prioritized
- Understanding of stalking
- Post-separation abuse awareness
- Respect for survivor autonomy

Score: _____ out of 5

Notes:

6. Processing Trauma

Question:

What is your approach to helping survivors process trauma safely?

Looking For:

- Stabilization before trauma processing
- Emotional regulation skills
- Gradual trauma work
- Avoiding retraumatization

Score: _____ out of 5

Notes:

7. Trauma Bonding, Self-Blame, and Emotional Attachment

Question:

How do you understand and address trauma bonding, self-blame, and emotional attachment to an abusive partner?

Looking For:

- Understanding trauma bonding
- No judgment toward survivor
- Recognition of complex attachment dynamics
- Focus on empowerment

Score: _____ **out of 5**

Notes:

8. Couples Counseling in Domestic Violence Situations

Question:

What is your position regarding couples counseling when domestic violence is present?

Looking For:

- Recognition that couples counseling is generally contraindicated when abuse exists
- Understanding that abuse is not mutual conflict
- Prioritization of survivor safety

Red Flag Response:

- Recommending couples counseling without a thorough safety assessment

Score: _____ out of 5

Notes:

9. Rebuilding Confidence, Autonomy, Healthy Boundaries and Trust in Themselves

Question:

How do you help survivors rebuild confidence, autonomy, healthy boundaries, and trust in themselves?

Looking For:

- Survivor empowerment
- Restoring agency
- Boundary development
- Strength-based approach

Score: _____ **out of 5**

Notes:

10. Trauma Informed Counseling without Retraumatizing Survivors

Question:

How do you ensure that your counseling approach remains trauma-informed and avoids retraumatizing survivors?

Looking For:

- Pacing and client choice
- Respect for boundaries
- Emotional safety
- Ongoing assessment of trauma responses

Score: _____ **out of 5**

Notes:

Score Total: _____ out of 50

Interpretation

45–50: Excellent.

Demonstrates strong domestic violence expertise and trauma-informed practice.

40–44: Very Good.

Likely a strong fit for most survivors.

30–39: Adequate.

Some understanding present, but important follow-up questions are recommended.

20–29: Concerning.

Significant gaps in domestic violence knowledge may exist.

0–19: High Risk.

Consider seeking a counselor with more specialized domestic violence and trauma expertise.

IMPORTANT REMINDER

No screening tool can guarantee the quality of a counseling relationship. Survivors should also consider whether they feel believed, respected, emotionally safe, empowered, and understood.

Good trauma therapy increases safety, autonomy, self-trust, and healing.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

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.

Disclaimer: This screening tool is intended as an educational resource and is not a substitute for professional licensing verification, legal advice, or clinical judgment. Survivors are encouraged to independently verify a counselor's license, credentials, and disciplinary history with the appropriate state licensing board.