Engaging adult users of Coercive Control: Mid-point skills

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There is so much information that Rodney wished to share with us today that we have decided to focus on “what practitioners would find the most helpful to improve and reaffirm that they are working using best practice with people who choose to use violence, in particular Coercive Control in intimate partner relationships”.

Along with this PowerPoint, Rodney has generously provided other resources that are available by making contact through LinkedIn.

A note to Practitioners:

It is important for practitioners to acknowledge when working with people who choose to use violence against their intimate partner that:

:

- Safety of the practitioner and victims are paramount.
- Appropriate settings should be considered when using the techniques presented.
- Supervision is sought to reflect on practice.

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collusive | mid-point | persecutory

- Become ‘matey’
- Empathise with victim stance or criticism
- Signal agreement with sexist comments
- Blame violence on his upbringing, mental health issues, substance use or stress
- See him as the more ‘stable’/‘capable’ parent
- Avoid tension/anxiety about raising difficult issues
- Prioritise your working/personal relationship with him above everything else

He feels validated about his behaviour. There is nothing in the conversation that invites him to think differently and take responsibility for at least a bit of his harmful behaviour.

- Are respectful
- Empathise selectively (not with violence supporting narratives)
- Adopt an invitational approach
- Tone is based on curiosity, not moralising
- You are sympathetic to and sensitively find out about the oppression and traumatic experiences he might have faced / be facing, but not see these as an excuse / reason for his behaviour
- Focus, to the extent possible, on the safety of those affected by his violence, his responsibility for his behaviour, that violence is a choice, and that he is accountable for the impacts of his behaviour
- Invite him to focus on what it would look like for him to be his best self in the situation

- Are oppositional and confrontative
- Butt horns with him
- No empathy
- No listening
- No interest in his life or circumstances
- No interest in the oppression he has faced, or the traumatic experiences he has encountered
- Do not manage your own internal reactions
- The conversation is too tense, or he zones out

He stays in defensive mode, focusing on arguing his own ‘truth’ – he doesn’t need to think differently about his behaviour

You feel better by ‘making the perpetrator accountable’ but the highly confrontational and moralising approach does the opposite.

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What might impact on where the mid-point range is?

Rapport

His presentation - mood, agitation etc.

What you know from other sources & what he knows about what you know

Where he is at in the behaviour change process

Shame tolerance - globally & particular aspects

Goals of current conversation

Whether you need to covertly assess risk by giving him space to express what he really thinks and believes

Time & opportunity to repair working relationship and how 'comfortable' he is being 'challenged'

Risks of pushing too hard

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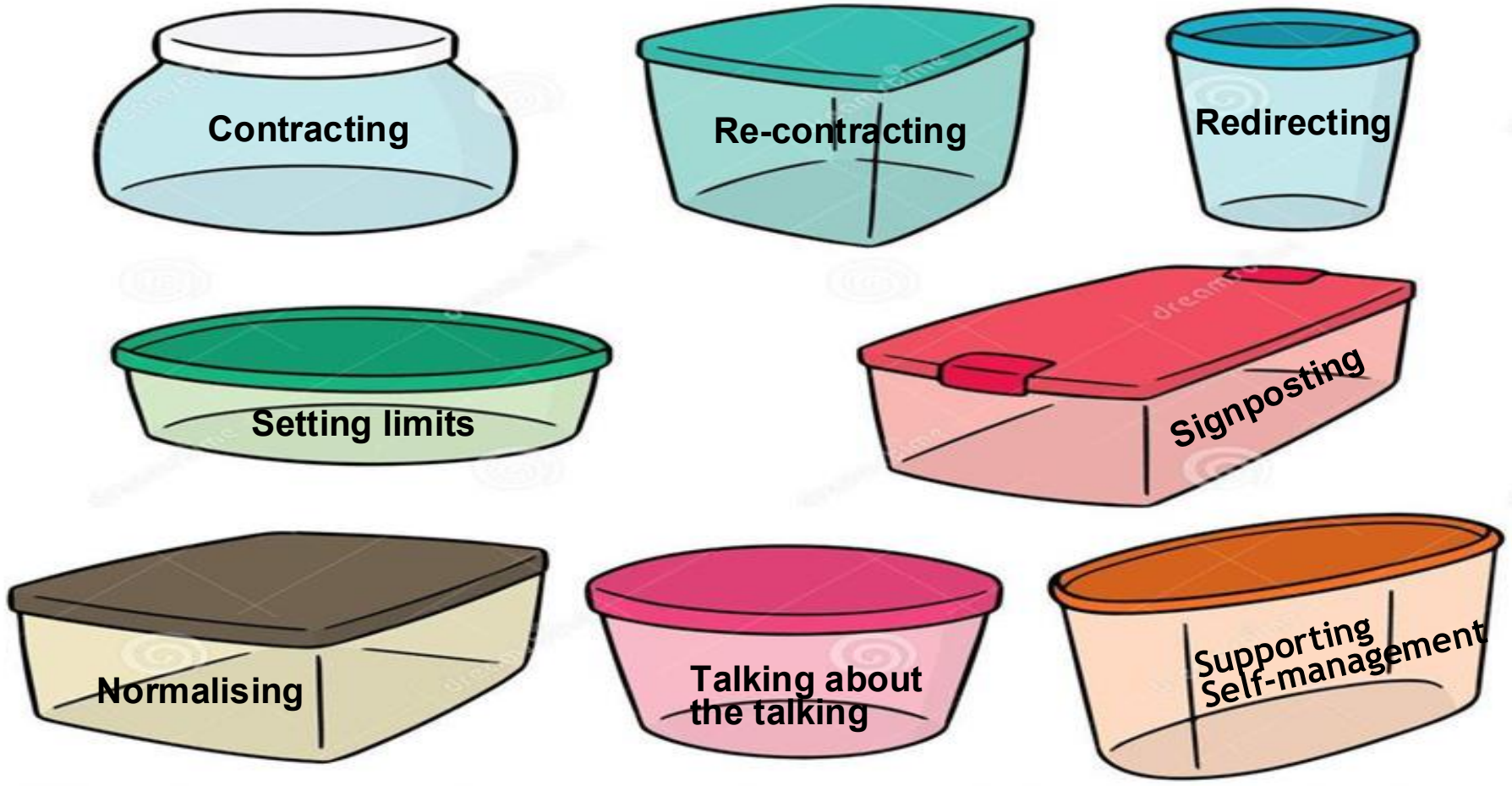
Conversational Container Micro-Skills



Can help you stay in the mid-point

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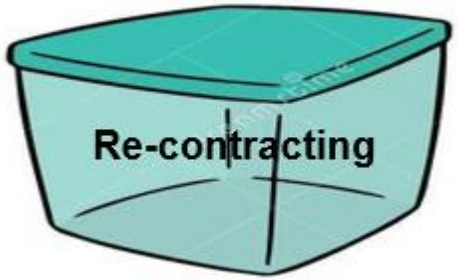
Set an initial ‘container’ for the conversation - Explain conversation focus, why, and how he would benefit.



Remind him of the focus & respectfully bring him back.

Consider if your expectation is too ambitious.

“Because Sally isn’t here to talk about her perspectives, we can only focus on you. Is it OK if we talk about what you can do to make things better – is that ok John?”

“John, do you remember the conversation we had earlier about your urge to talk about Sally – this looks like one of those moments where the urge to talk about her is very strong. Is it OK if we go back to focusing on…”

“Is there a way to put aside that urge to talk about Sally, so that we can focus on what you can do to make things better? Can we work on that together?”

“If the urge to talk about Sally starts to win out again, is it OK if I interrupt you so that we can come back to talking about…”

When the user of violence is being critical of / blames the victim-survivor - redirect discourse to focus back on him in positive, non-shaming and invitational ways.

Interrupt or wait for a pause - do not shame. Remind of the benefits of staying respectful. You are not scolding him from a 'politically correct' position.

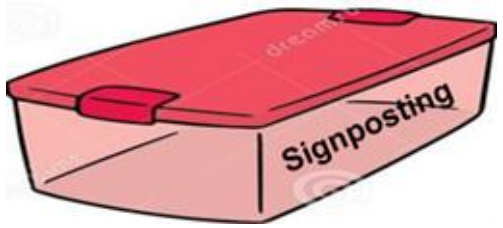
"You're telling me, from your perspective, that Sally doesn't manage stress well. Sally isn't here to say how she sees this. But can I ask, what do you do to manage the stress you feel, the best you can?"

"I'm going to need to stop you there, John. I want this conversation to produce things that you can do to help the situation. Talking about Sally in that way won't help."

"If I can stop you there, I know there's some things you want me to understand. Talking about Sally in such a disrespectful way will make it very hard for me to listen."

"What would it take to be able to stay focused on you for a moment?"

"I hear you want to talk about your partner but its going to be much more helpful for you if we can talk about the things you can control."



Signal where you are hoping to take the conversation next – prepare that bits might be hard.

Frame the focus as routine. Reduce him feeling targeted. Help him become less suspicious.

"John, I think it might be really helpful now for us to focus on… to spend 10-15 mins talking about… is that OK?"

"Some of this stuff is really hard to talk about, it's going to create some discomfort. Are you OK hanging in there for this conversation?"

"Taking about being the best Dad you can be will be both a positive conversation, but also, there'll be some hard bits, perhaps talking about some things you've said or done that you aren't proud of. Are you OK with that?"

"We have lots of conversations with Dads about…"

"How we like to start off these conversations is by… Would that be an OK place to start?"

"I won't beat around the bush, in our experience, having had hundreds of these conversations over the years, you might find it hard to begin with…"

A fall-back when other things aren't working – take a time out and talk about what might make it possible to get the conversation back on track. Manage your own frustrations!

"Hey, could we take a time out here John. I'm really hoping that we can talk about what you can do to improve the situation, but the urge to talk about Sally seems to keep winning out. Is there a way we can come back to focusing on you?"

Parallels between stepping away from responsibility - using blame / minimisation / denial / justification stepping away from responsibility for the conversation

"What strategies have you used in the past to hang in there with conversations that are important, but also really hard?" [strengths-based approach – do not assume that he does not have existing strategies/skills]

"It feels like you don't really want to be here? As much as I want to help you and your family, at the end of the day it is your life – how much does it matter to you to be the best dad you can be?... It sounds like you want to be your best for your kids? I'm hearing that they matter a lot to you. What will help you to stay with this conversation about how you can benefit your kids?"

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Selective empathy

- If he experiences you as listening to him, you will have more sway to influence the conversation.
- Find something you can strategically paraphrase or reframe to set up a focus on ethical aspirations, responsibility and/or safety.
- Strip out the responsibility-minimising and sexist aspects of his narrative in your paraphrase or reframe.
- A degree of care and concern in your voice does not mean you are colluding.

"She knows how to hurt me by removing the kids!"	"Being the best Dad you can be means a lot to you…"
"She was hysterical, she was right up in my face!"	"Sally was really upset, and she wanted you to know it."
"She wastes all my money buying stuff we don't need."	"Sounds like money is tight, and you worry about what to buy."
"She's always going behind my back, I'm sure she's cheating on me!"	"You're anxious about keeping the relationship. How do you manage that anxiety?

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Selective validation

- You can selectively validate good intentions of the adult user of violence without colluding.
- Remember, in many cases, the adult deliberately intends to cause fear, terror, humiliation and degradation.
- Selective validation helps to build a working rapport. It doesn't mean you are taking his side.

"I just don't know what to do anymore, I can't do anything right in her eyes, she never gives me a break."	"You're trying to work out how to make things better, but you're not sure what to do."
"I don't trust her, I'm sure she's cheating on me."	"The relationship matters to you, and you're feeling anxious about it." [preparing to turn the conversation towards how he manages this anxiety]
"It's her fault that I'm here, and the cops didn't help, they immediately took her side and treated me like a piece of…"	"I can hear that respect is important for you, and that you want to be listened to. Everyone has that need." [highlighting values/practices of respect, listening, & preparing to invite him to consider that his partner needs this too]

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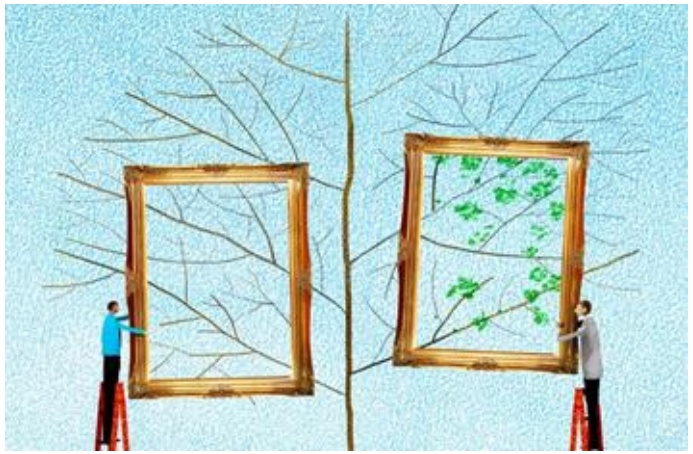
Reframing

- Attempts to shift negative evaluations of another person's actions/decisions to a more neutral one.
- Demonstrates you heard the adult.
- Often enough to strip out sexist language and meanings.



"She was in my face screaming at me."	"Sounds like Sally was really distressed."
"When she winds up like that there's nothing, I can do to stop her."	"Sally was really upset, even distraught by the sound of it. What do you think she was trying to tell you?"
"She nags and nags, it really pisses me off!"	"You find it hard when Sally wants to make sure you've understood something, and you don't want to hear it."

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Open, direct questions

- Open questions that ‘nudge’ into a particular lane in response.
- Used to infer key messages – for example, the adult has a choice in their behaviour, and that the emotion they experience (e.g., anger, jealousy, humiliation) is not the same as the behaviour they choose.
- Invite perspective-taking.
- Remember: we can’t ‘challenge’ or invite focus on everything that he says that’s sexist, blaming of his partner or of others - doing so is likely to be too confrontative.

“She made me so angry.”	“When you were feeling very angry at that time, what did Sally see you say or do?”
“She was right in my face – again! – I had enough of her dramas and just could not take it anymore.”	“How did your children see you manage those big feelings of frustration that you had at that time?”
“Look, I said a few things I shouldn’t have, but…”	“What did Sally hear you say?”

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Relate to his values and ethical aspirations

- Use his blame, denial or minimisation as an opportunity to ask about aspirations or values inconsistent with the behaviour
- Minimise collusion without him feeling you are against him.
- **Find the part that does not want to engage in the harmful behaviours**

"If she hadn't have… I wouldn't have…"; "The police got it wrong;

I didn't…"; "It was only a little shove…"

"It sounds like X is something you don't want to do. Can you tell me why?"

"You're telling me that doing X is not who you are, I'd like to hear more about that…"

"Chris isn't here to give their perspective about what they experienced, but you are saying that you don't consider yourself to have intimidated them. It sounds like you don't want Chris to feel intimidated?... Could you tell me what's important about that for you John, that Chris doesn't feel intimidated by you?...What's important about that for Chris?"

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Non-verbal communication

- Be mindful of automatic tendencies to nod, smile
- Use soft eyes if you are risk of glaring out of frustration
- Pause after he speaks
- Being expressive with a particularly warm tone at times enables you to be still when you need to without coming across as robotic
- In-person: sitting at an even height at a slight angle
- Communicate openness, interest, curiosity

Zero collusion is often impossible. Notice that you have drifted, breathe, manage your own anxiety, and find ways to return to the mid-point.

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Self-reflection

What might you need to learn or become aware of about yourself that might lead you to drift away from the mid-point?

- your attitudes and beliefs
- prior experiences
- how your performance of gender influences your responses, and how the person might respond to you
- particular adults, or particular situations, where you might either collude or be combative
- what's happening in the moment for you, what just happened before or earlier that day

- Check in with yourself before engaging – what might you be carrying that could cause you to veer towards collusion or persecution?
- Support your colleagues – staying in the mid-point is a collective endeavour.