



Males are often overlooked as individuals who may experience human trafficking.¹ Gender-specific anti-trafficking programs, female-centric services, and awareness campaigns that use non-inclusive language and imagery can contribute to harmful stigma affecting a male's willingness to disclose the trauma they experienced. Societal expectations to not express feelings or emotions also make it difficult for males to seek and accept help, and thus they are less likely to access services.² Further, male clients may be reluctant to seek and accept services due to cultural norms where grooming can lead to traumatic bonding and subsequent exploitation.³ Service providers have a responsibility to ensure males have equitable access to gender-responsive services. By creating a gender-responsive environment that welcomes clients from all genders experiencing human trafficking, they can minimize the stigma male clients face when accessing services.



Male clients may be reluctant to seek and accept services due to cultural norms where grooming can lead to traumatic bonding and subsequent exploitation.

This resource provides behavioral health and social service providers with a way to engage and build rapport with male clients and address each client's specific risk factors related to human trafficking at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.⁴ This tool aligns each factor with suggestions on how to:

- Build rapport with male clients
- Leverage universal education and motivational interviewing techniques to engage in meaningful conversations that help male clients understand their risk factors
- Differentiate between what trauma and exploitation is and what it is not
- Commit to accessing services

¹ Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2017). *Assisting male survivors of human trafficking*. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Assisting-Male-Survivors-of-Human-Trafficking.pdf>

² Szilassy, E. (2021). Male victims of domestic abuse face barriers to accessing support services – New study. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/male-victims-of-domestic-abuse-face-barriers-to-accessing-support-services-new-study-118705>

³ Barrick, K., Lattimore, P. K., Pitts, W. J., & Zhang, S. X. (2014). Labor trafficking victimization among farmworkers in North Carolina: Role of demographic characteristics and acculturation. *International Journal of Rural Criminology*, 2(2), 225–243. <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/61593>

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *The Social-Ecological model: A framework for prevention*. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/about/social-ecologicalmodel.html>

Risk Factors of Human Trafficking for Males

Several risk factors contribute to why males are reluctant to seek and accept services. Likewise, many factors limit the availability, type, and quality of services that are gender-responsive to male clients. The chart below examines both.

Why Males May be Reluctant to Seek and Accept Services	Why Males May Not Be Provided Services or Unable to Find Services
1) Cultural norms may minimize the sexual exploitation and abuse of teen and pre-teen boys and adult men.	1) Disclosure is often required to access services, and providers may not consider that men could be victims of human trafficking. This bias puts the responsibility on male clients to self-identify to receive services that can help in their healing.
2) There are societal beliefs that a man must be strong and that a victim is weak.	2) Outreach and marketing cater to a female victim narrative. This reinforces the bias across providers that men cannot be victims of human trafficking.
3) There is the perception of shame in asking for help.	3) Human trafficking services are not gender-responsive to males.
4) Female-centric language in outreach and awareness-raising materials may limit males from recognizing what they experience as human trafficking.	4) Most services available to clients experiencing trafficking are female-focused. The lack of male-specific services may lead some to tolerate abusive behavior and not seek help.
5) There is a lack of awareness about workers' rights, especially in industries that hire males primarily.	5) Masculinity and gender role expectations devalue mental health services for males. Toxic ideas of masculinity stigmatize and limit male clients' engagement in services.
6) There are cultural norms by which males are not seen or accepted as victims of sexual abuse, assault, or rape.	
7) There is a perception and normalization that low-wage jobs usually include dangerous work conditions in industries that hire males primarily.	

It should be acknowledged that protective factors are integral to a comprehensive public health approach to trafficking; these factors provide a buffer against the risk factors listed above that make individuals more vulnerable to negative outcomes. Ensuring service providers help male clients to build healthy relationships can serve as a strong protective factor in reducing exposure to trauma and opportunities for exploitation while increasing social capital and available resources.



An Approach to Building Rapport and Healing: Universal Education and Motivational Interviewing

Building rapport and trust with male clients requires providers to recognize and understand the unique risk factors and exploitation that male clients experience. This tool moves away from an emphasis on disclosure to one using empowerment models that engage clients. Universal education and motivational interviewing are two tools that can transform providers' rapport with at-risk males and increase equitable access to services for male survivors.

- [Universal education](#) is an empowerment-based approach that provides clients with information about exploitation to normalize support-seeking and allows clients to consider whether it applies to their circumstances.
- [Motivational interviewing](#) is a person-centered approach to service provision that helps people commit to the process of change. As opposed to simply stating a need or desire to change, hearing themselves express a commitment out loud has been shown to help improve clients' ability to make actual changes. The role of the provider is more about listening than interviewing.

By combining these approaches, providers can engage with their clients in a conversation about risk factors that contribute to exploitation and trafficking, empower clients to partner with their providers in creating a strengths-based service plan together, and motivate clients to commit and succeed in their service plan.

Before You Get Started

This tool assumes that organizations and providers already have a baseline understanding of human trafficking and deliver services to male clients. Providers should be familiar with what human trafficking is and how to respond using a person-centered, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and trauma-informed approach with male clients. When working with male clients, it is critical that your response protocol and referral network are gender-responsive, and that you update and diversify your network to ensure the best services and care are available to each client based on their specific needs.



Recommended Trainings and Resources on Human Trafficking:

[SOAR Online](#) training modules:

- [Behavioral Health](#)
- [Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services](#)
- [Social Services](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Care](#)
- [Universal Education and Screening](#)

Toolkits and guides:

- [Adult Human Trafficking Screening Toolkit and Guide](#)
- [Core Competencies for Human Trafficking Response in Health Care and Behavioral Health Systems](#)
- [Motivational Techniques and Skills Guide](#)
- [SOAR eGuide](#)



Opening the Conversation

When using this tool, it is important that you and your client are set up for success. Make sure to consider the following before implementing these practices with a client:

- ✓ **Explain the purpose** of the conversation. The goal is not disclosure. The goal is to empower your client with information and knowledge and to support them in their journey to make lasting change.
- ✓ **Emphasize** that the client is invited to share when comfortable but that it is also okay just to listen, process, and learn. Clients are welcome to decline to share information that makes them feel uncomfortable, but the opportunity to share is always open.
- ✓ **Personalize and tailor** the information shared to the personal context of each client.
- ✓ **Explain confidentiality and respect** for privacy (including when the person does not want to participate in the discussion). Be transparent about any reason the law would require you to break confidentiality so that your client can make an informed decision about what they want to share with you.
- ✓ **Reiterate** that the services available are not contingent on the client disclosing details about the trauma they experienced. Rather, just that they are at risk of or have had trafficking trauma occur.
- ✓ **Have** printed resources and links to online videos in the client's preferred language and discuss these risk factors among men and boys in a developmentally or age-appropriate way.

Socioecological Framework for Universal Education and Motivational Interviewing With Males at Risk of or Experiencing Trafficking

Note: The language in this chart is intended as a framework only; the examples are only suggestions to introduce conversation and are not intended to be used all at once.

Risk Factors	Universal Education Questions	Motivational Interviewing Techniques
INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL		
1) Feelings of discomfort with help-seeking or emasculation when reaching out for services or help	Research shows that men are less likely than women to seek help from health professionals for a range of problems, including anything from depression to substance use to health needs related to stressful life events. It takes a lot of courage to reach out for help. Was it hard for you to come here today and talk about what's been going on with you?	<i>Affirm:</i> I can hear how many barriers there were for you to get here today, to talk about these difficult things in your life, and to try to get some support. So I appreciate all the effort you're making to try to overcome those barriers to reaching out.
2) Fear of victim-blaming because the client is male	Sometimes men think other people won't believe they were abused because they are physically big and strong, like you. But there are many forms of coercion, and most of them do not involve physical force. It sounds like the person who took advantage of you is a smaller person than you but used powerful threats. Did you worry about people believing you when you were considering coming forward?	<i>Develop discrepancy:</i> On the one hand, you're afraid of sharing what's happened to you because other people might judge you. But on the other hand, it's important to you to raise awareness of trafficking and confront misperceptions.



<p>3) Lack of awareness (e.g., that men are trafficked, of rights, of available services for males)</p>	<p>Because the media often covers cases of violence against women and girls, males who are being exploited might not recognize their own situation as trafficking. It sounds like you didn't think of your own situation as trafficking until recently; is that accurate?</p>	<p><i>Ask an open-ended question:</i> What was it like for you when you began to realize that your situation involved these patterns of manipulation and exploitation?</p>
<p>4) Gender-based differences in coping</p>	<p>Some people cope with overwhelming stress or trauma by drinking alcohol, smoking, or using drugs. Although anyone can use substances for coping, males are more likely than females to use illicit drugs and develop substance use disorders. In addition to immediate and long-term health consequences, substance use can also increase the likelihood of re-victimization. Would you be open to talking about this with me?</p>	<p><i>Elicit change talk (disadvantages of status quo):</i> What worries you about your drinking?</p>
<p>5) Shame and self-blame</p>	<p>Shame is one of the most significant barriers that can prevent people from seeking help after experiencing trafficking. The stigma associated with mental health concerns is a particularly big challenge for males and foreign-born individuals, preventing them from engagement in treatment. Does this sound like something you've struggled with?</p>	<p><i>Reflect:</i> It sounds like you've been really stuck in those feelings of shame, and the shame has kept you pretty isolated from other people.</p> <p><i>Elicit change talk (advantages of change):</i> Could you imagine how things might be different if those feelings of shame evaporated? What might you do differently? How might that affect your life?</p>

RELATIONSHIP LEVEL

<p>1) Familial rejection of sexual orientation or gender identity</p>	<p>Our early childhood experiences have a large impact on us as we get older. This is particularly true when we have challenging relationships with family members or loved ones. It's common for [gay, trans] males to experience rejection or abuse related to their [sexual orientation or gender] identity. This often increases the risk for depression, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse, and unprotected sex. This is information I share with all males that I work with. Do you feel comfortable talking about your experiences with your family?</p>	<p><i>Ask an open-ended question:</i> What effect do you think your parents kicking you out had on your substance use?</p> <p><i>Summarize:</i> If it's okay with you, let me see if I understand what we've been discussing so far. So you're saying that you think about leaving your partner because of the abuse, but whenever you think about leaving, you get your parents' voices stuck in your head about how you deserve bad things to happen to you because you are [gay, trans, questioning]?</p>
<p>2) Exposure to childhood adversity and trauma without acknowledgment or support</p>	<p>Many boys don't talk about their difficult experiences because they don't recognize them as traumatic or fear that they won't receive support. Does that ring true for you?</p>	<p><i>Affirm:</i> It takes a lot of courage to look back at the painful things that happened in the past and think about how your past created vulnerabilities that [trafficker's name] took advantage of.</p>
<p>3) Expectations in the role as "head of household" to provide for family members (including when boys are expected to step in to fill this role when the father is absent)</p>	<p>When a man has a family that depends on him financially, it can be very difficult to leave a bad work situation when there seems to be no other option. Many men I speak to talk about struggling with shame. Often, concern for their family's well-being meant they stayed in a bad situation long after realizing that it was bad. Did that happen to you?</p>	<p><i>Elicit change talk (advantages of change):</i> How do you think your situation could improve for you and your family if you were able to speak about what's happened and accept help?</p>



<p>4) Intimate partner violence leading to exploitation</p>	<p>Many people don't realize that about one-third of men have experienced stalking by an intimate partner, sexual violence, or physical violence during their lifetime. What do you think about that?</p> <p>There is an overlap between domestic violence and human trafficking, with abusers and traffickers using similar behaviors to exert power and control. Intimate partner trafficking is when a person coerces their partner to engage in commercial sex, forced labor, or involuntary servitude. What are your thoughts?</p>	<p><i>Elicit change talk (optimism for change):</i> What strengths do you have that you think will help you to get out of this situation?</p>
<p>5) Social network involved in trafficking industry (normalizes exploitation)</p>	<p>When people experience exploitation within a group, they may worry if they report what's going on, their friends and coworkers who remain might suffer repercussions. This risk is exacerbated when the people being exploited don't have legal U.S. immigration status and fear deportation or other consequences. Do you have other friends or coworkers that you were worried about when you were thinking about trying to get out? [Share information about confidentiality and mandated reporting before asking this question.]</p>	<p><i>Summarize:</i> So, you're worried about what will happen to the others who are undocumented, including whether they might be deported. But you're also worried about them if they remain in that situation and continue to be abused.</p>
<p>6) Absence of friends, biological family, or support system that understands what the survivor has been through</p>	<p>Support networks are so important in getting through difficult, stressful, or overwhelming situations. When we don't have supportive people in our lives to help us gain perspective and provide concrete or emotional support, it is so much more difficult. So many people who have been through what you've been through have struggled with feeling alienated and alone. What do you feel your support network was like in the past? How about now? What types of support do you feel like you need?</p>	<p><i>Affirm:</i> It must be difficult to be cut off from your family and to feel like no one understands what you're going through. It is so resourceful of you to reach out to other sources of support as you think about changing your situation. We are here to try to help.</p>

COMMUNITY-LEVEL

<p>1) Lack of awareness of workers' rights</p>	<p>Many immigrants have told me they weren't aware that what was happening to them was illegal. Did you face this same barrier when you realized that your job situation was so bad?</p>	<p><i>Elicit change talk (intention to change):</i> Now that you are more aware of your rights as a worker and understand that what your employer is doing is illegal, it sounds like you're ready for something to change. What do you do from here?</p>
<p>2) Risk factors within the work context: threats to health and safety (e.g., hazardous working conditions, lack of PPE during COVID, working during a natural disaster); living in rural locations without access to service networks, such as in agricultural settings</p>	<p>Many males have health issues after leaving their situation, including injuries and illnesses. Failure to provide workers with protective clothing or equipment puts workers at risk of infection, poisoning, and injury. Migrant workers in the agricultural sector may be exposed to pesticides and chemicals associated with a range of health conditions. Poor safety measures place trafficking survivors at risk of injuries, and physical demands and mistreatment may also lead to injuries. Have you had health issues related to your work? Have you received medical care?</p>	<p><i>Summarize, elicit change talk (disadvantages of status quo),</i> and explore decisional balance: Let me see if I understand. So, you're saying that your health issues, like your back injury and the headaches, make you concerned about leaving the situation because you're worried that you won't be able to get other work. On the other hand, you're concerned that staying might lead to even worse health outcomes because the working conditions are so bad?</p>



<p>3) Expectations and norms within certain industries (e.g., expectation that because an industry involves hard labor, it also tolerates coercion: “They knew they were going to be working hard, working long hours, or treated unwell.”)</p>	<p>Some industries have unspoken expectations that coercion and abuse go hand-in-hand with hard physical labor. For instance, day laborers may be told that they won't be brought onto the next job if they complain about working conditions. Did you feel like mistreatment was normalized in your working environment?</p>	<p><i>Ask an open-ended question:</i> How did that expectation from the recruitment agency and your supervisors affect your perception of your situation and options?</p>
<p>4) Limited resources and lack of service networks for males (female-centric outreach and marketing of services); expectation of disclosure to receive services; lack of choice of service provider (e.g., connected to a male when a female is preferred); lack of culturally or linguistically appropriate services for males</p>	<p>Given that outreach and marketing of services are often targeted toward females, many males do not know where or how to reach out for services. Did you feel like you knew where to reach out for help?</p>	<p><i>Elicit change talk (intention to change):</i> I hear that you've been having trouble finding services that feel like a good match for you and that is getting in the way of making a change. If you could find services that felt like a better match and were more confident in making changes, how do you think life would be different for you in 5 years?</p>

SYSTEMS-LEVEL

<p>1) Rigid gender role expectations</p>	<p>Many boys and men live in an environment where males are expected to be strong and self-sufficient and not show any vulnerability. This can lead to shutting down of your own experiences. What influence do you think society's expectations about males had on you?</p>	<p><i>Summarize:</i> It sounds like you have really internalized some of these beliefs and are having trouble with the idea of showing some of your own pain and needs.</p> <p><i>Elicit change talk (advantages of change):</i> What do you think might be different in your life if you could open up more in this way?</p>
<p>2) Biases and stereotypes about gay or trans boys and men</p>	<p>There are many biases and stereotypes about trafficking and gay or trans males, such as the belief that males must be gay if they are involved in commercial sexual exploitation or that gay or trans males want to be involved in commercial sex. These stereotypes can alienate males who want to seek help. Have you encountered any of these kinds of stereotypes?</p>	<p><i>Explore values:</i> I hear how frustrating it has been for you to encounter these biases and how it has caused you to withdraw in the past. What things are most important to you in how you deal with these stereotypes in the future?</p>



<p>3) Gender-based biases and stereotypes related to victimization (false perception that males only experience labor trafficking, while sex trafficking only happens to females; gender stereotyping about victimization, with males viewed as perpetrators and females as victims; overlooking of the sexual assault, abuse, and statutory rape of males)</p>	<p>Public perception of sexual abuse and sex trafficking often focuses on the victimization of females; however, we understand the commercial sexual exploitation of boys is hugely under-reported. A 2016 U.S. Department of Justice-commissioned study, Youth Involvement in the Sex Trade, found that boys make up more than a third (about 36%) of minors who are commercially sexually exploited. How do you think this has impacted you?</p>	<p><i>Look back:</i> What were things like before you first told your friend about the abuse and exploitation? What changed after you talked about it?</p> <p><i>Look forward:</i> You've said that you are anxious about telling your mom but feel disconnected from her because of this "secret." How do you think things might be different if you shared your feelings with her?</p> <p><i>Query extremes:</i> What would be the worst thing that might happen? The best?</p>
<p>4) Racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia</p>	<p>The United Nations Human Rights Council recently highlighted how racism, xenophobia, and gender-based discrimination prevent victims of human trafficking from getting the protections they deserve. Have you found that any of these created barriers for you in accessing help?</p>	<p><i>Reflect:</i> I hear you when you talk about how painful it was when you tried to reach out for help and got such a hostile response.</p> <p><i>Affirm:</i> I am so impressed that you are still willing to take a risk and reach out again.</p>
<p>5) Risks related to the immigration system</p>	<p>Some people are afraid to leave bad work situations because their work visa is attached to the job. Others who don't have legal documentation are afraid to seek help when they are being exploited because they fear deportation. Did immigration issues impact your ability to seek help or leave your situation?</p>	<p><i>Ask an evocative question:</i> What worries you the most about your current situation?</p> <p><i>Reflect:</i> So, you feel like your employer is taking advantage of you, but you are fearful that there are no other options for you to stay in the country and get a good education for your children.</p>
<p>6) Devaluing of mental health services for males</p>	<p>Males might not seek mental health services in part due to society devaluing these services. What is your perception of mental health services?</p>	<p><i>Use importance ruler:</i> On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all important, and 10 is extremely important, how important would you say it is for you to receive some type of mental health support to cope with what has happened?</p>

Acknowledgments

This tool was developed by the following members of the Men and Boys Working Group: James Dold, J.D., Robert Lung, J.D., and Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman, L.C.P., M.Psy, with Noel Mendoza and Steven Procopio, A.C.S.W., L.I.C.S.W., as lead writers. Elizabeth Hopper, Ph.D, also assisted in developing the tool. This working group, organized through the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, comprises individuals with lived experience and allied professionals who all serve as practitioners with a background in working with male-identifying survivors of human trafficking. This tool was developed as a follow-up to two listening sessions that provided a forum for attendees to use the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's social-ecological model to build gender-responsive services for men and boys who have experienced human trafficking.⁵

⁵ National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center. (n.d.). *Report: Listening Sessions on Men and Boys Meeting Minutes*. <https://nhhtac.acf.hhs.gov/resource/report-listening-sessions-men-and-boys-meeting-minutes>.



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