

SBIRT for Health and Behavioral Health Professionals: How to Talk to Patients about Substance Use

Module 5: Pointers for Conducting a “Referral to Treatment” Brief Intervention

Adapted from work by Denna Vandersloot, MEd (5/8/15)

The following are modifications of the Brief Negotiated Interview for a patient in the Severe Zone of substance use. The aim of the brief intervention is to enhance a patient’s motivation to accept a referral to treatment *for an initial appointment/assessment*.

Step 1 – Raise the Subject

If a patient scores in Zone 4, he/she is likely to have some “initial” awareness of consequences related to substance use as evidenced by the items marked on the AUDIT/DAST.

- In addition to asking about alcohol/drug use patterns, ask about the patient’s concerns about substance use:
 - “I’m interested in finding out what concerns, if any, you have about your alcohol/drug use?”
- Listen carefully and provide reflections of change talk and sustain talk (strategically).

Step 2 – Provide Feedback

- Provide feedback on the AUDIT and/or DAST:
 - “On the screening form, the range of scores is 0-40 and you scored xx. This places you in “Zone 4 – the Severe Zone.” Individuals who score in that Zone are usually experiencing consequences related to their alcohol/drug use. They often benefit from more assessment and assistance (than I can offer).”
- Elicit the patient’s reaction and continue with Step 2 (low-risk drinking limits, connection to health, etc.).

Step 3 – Enhance Motivation

- Provide a summary and express concern:
 - “As we just talked about, your alcohol/drug use puts you in the Severe zone. I am concerned about how your alcohol/drug use may be impacting your health, and it sounds like you have some concerns too. I would like to [have you talk to our behavioral health specialist, or refer you to _____], to assess together what might be most helpful for you relative to making some changes in your alcohol/drug use.”
 - Explore the patient’s reaction to the information; listen closely and reflect.
- If the patient doesn’t express “significant” concerns or seem interested in a referral, then proceed with exploring readiness using the standard pros/cons questions and readiness ruler.
- If the patient is somewhat open to referral, use this readiness ruler:
 - “On a scale of 0-10 how ready are you to consider seeing someone to talk more about your alcohol/drug use?”, use “why not lower” follow-up question.
 - Ask pros/cons of seeing someone for an assessment or treatment (ask about cons first, then pros).

Step 4 – Negotiate Plan

- If not motivated for referral or to change substance use, stop, thank patient, offer patient education materials, negotiate follow-up visit.
- If not motivated for referral but motivated to try changing, proceed with the usual planning.
- If interested in accepting the referral:
 - Explore the patient’s understanding of what “treatment” is, provide feedback to explain types of treatment and support, and most importantly that treatment takes many forms. Elicit reactions:
 - “Sounds like you are open to considering getting some help, I’m wondering what you know about the different types of treatment options?”
 - Use a warm handoff and plan how to get help or support:
 - “Would it be okay if we called right now to make you an appointment?” or “Can I call in my colleague to talk to you right now for a few minutes?”
- If needed, assess for withdrawal risks and management.