Mid-point skills towards minimising collusion and persecution when engaging adult users of domestic, family and sexual violence



collusive	mid-point	persecutory
You become matey with the man	You are respectful	You are oppositional and confrontative
You emphathise with his victim stance or criticism of her	You empathise selectively (not with violence supporting narratives)	You butt horns with him
You signal agreement with sexist comments, even if subtle	You adopt an invitational approach	No empathy
You blame his violence on his upbringing, mental health issues, substance use or stress	Your tone is based on curiosity, not moralising	No listening
You see him as the more ‘stable’/‘capable’ parent	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	No interest in his life or circumstances
He feels validated about his behaviour, and there is nothing in the conversation that, even in a small way, invites him to think differently and to take responsibility for at least a bit of his harmful behaviour	You 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	No interest in the oppression he has faced, or the traumatic experiences he has encountered
You avoid tension/anxiety about raising difficult issues	You invite him to focus on what it would look like for him to be his best self in the situation	You do not manage your own internal reactions
You prioritise your working/personal relationship with him above everything else		The conversation is too tense, or he zones out
		He can stay in defensive mode, focusing on arguing his own ‘truth’ – by doing so, 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)

Rodney Vlais, October 2025

Finding the mid-point can feel like a dance. We might veer too collusively at one point in the conversation or become too confrontative at another.

A range of circumstances can also impact where a response to the user of violence might sit on this continuum. In different contexts, the same response might be collusive, in others might sit within the mid-point.

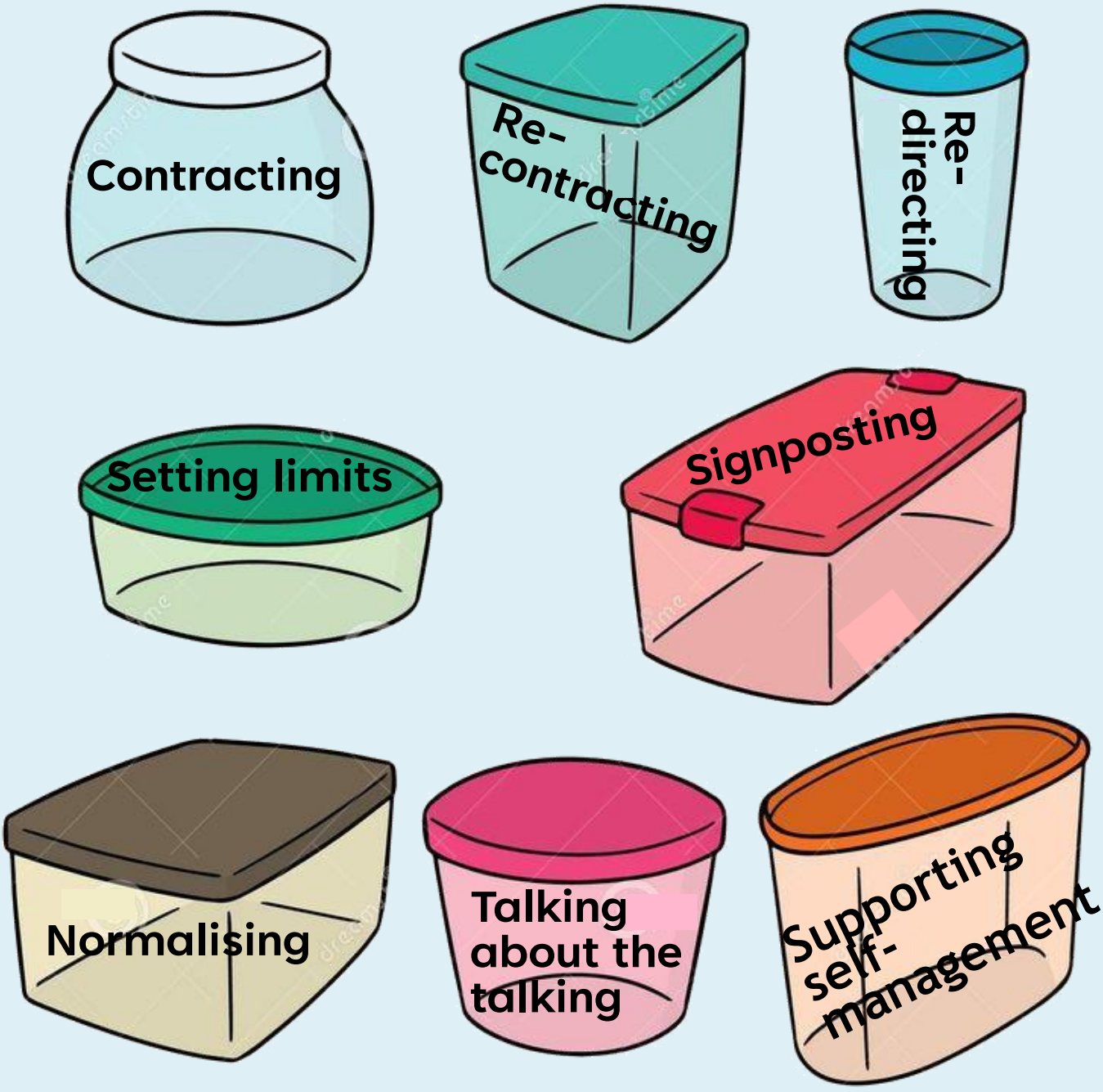
It's OK to make mistakes. Even the most experienced behaviour change practitioners drift or veer too far in one direction and need to correct back the other way.



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

How much rapport you have / how long you have worked with him	How he presents in the conversation → his mood, agitation, etc.	What you know about his behaviour from other sources… and what he knows about what you know
Where he is at in a behaviour opening or behaviour change process	His current shame tolerance, both globally and in relation to particular aspects of his behaviour	The goals of the current conversation with him about his behaviour
Whether you need to covertly assess risk by giving him space to express what he really thinks and believes	How much time and opportunity you have to repair rupture in the working relationship… and how 'comfortable' he is being 'challenged'	What the risks might be of 'pushing' too hard at this point in time

Conversational container micro-skills

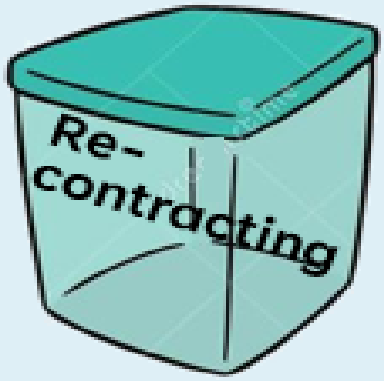


can help you to stay in the mid-point



This micro-skill can help to set an initial container for the conversation. Explain how you would like to focus the conversation and why, and how he would benefit from this focus.

“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?”



Often we will need to remind him of the focus and respectfully bring him back. If we need to re-contract too often, however, it might mean we are too ambitious about what we hope he will focus on at this time.

“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...”

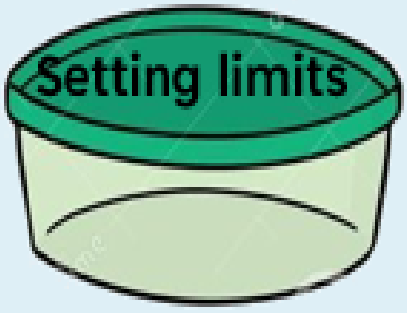
“Is there a way to put aside that urge to talk about Sally, so that we can focus on what you can do to make things better? Can we work on that together?”

“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...”



Sometimes when the adult user of violence is being critical of or blames the victim-survivor, we can redirect general aspects of his discourse to focus back on him, in positive, non-shaming and invitational ways.

"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?"



We can interrupt to set limits, or wait for a pause to do so, in ways that do not shame him. Remind him of the benefits of staying respectful. You are inviting him to stay respectful because of these benefits, not because you are scolding him from a 'politically correct' position.

"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, rather than just barging into the next bit. He might be more willing to go with your focus if he's not taken by surprise. This can include preparing him that bits of the conversation might be hard.

"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?"



Frame the focus of the conversation as routine, so that he doesn't feel that he's been particularly targeted or singled out. This might also help him to become less suspicious about what his ex/partner has disclosed.

"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..."



This can be a fall-back micro-skill when other things aren't working, to take a time out and talk about what might make it possible to get the conversation back on track. Try your best to 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?"



There is often a parallel process between a person stepping away from responsibility for their violence through using blame, minimisation, denial and justification, and the person stepping away from responsibility for the conversation about that violence.

"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?"

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?

Selective validation





In the understandable desire not to collude, we can rush past opportunities to selectively validate what might be some good intentions of the adult user of violence.

Of course, in many cases, the adult is very deliberately intending to cause the victim-survivor to experience fear, terror, humiliation and degradation. There can still be, 'however', something non-collusive to validate.

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."

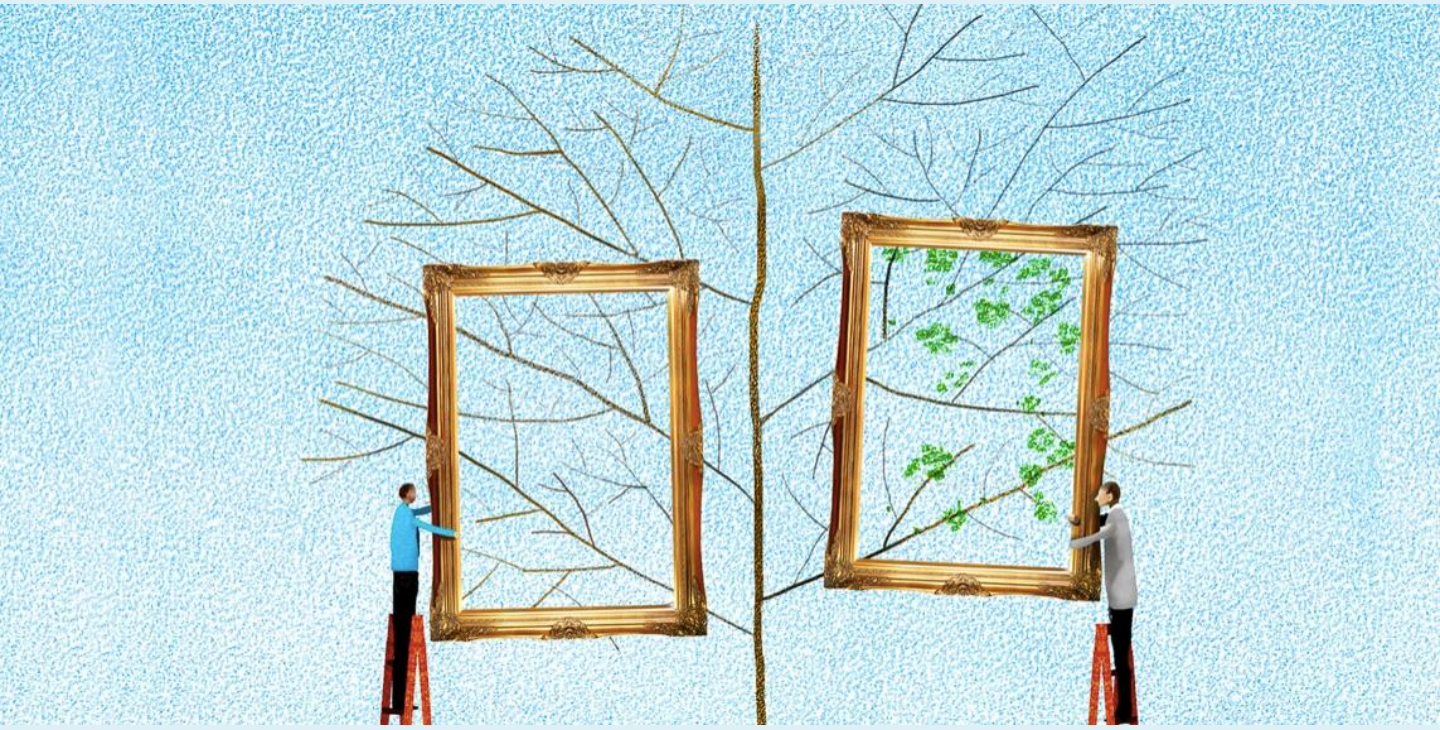
"I don't trust her, I'm sure she's cheating on me."

"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]

Reframing



Reframing attempts to shift from a negative evaluation made by the user of violence of another person's actions or decisions, to a more neutral one.

It demonstrates that you have heard the adult.

If your reframe is *too* different from what the person expressed, it might be rejected. It's often enough to strip out the sexist language and meanings in your response.

"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."

Open, directed questions



Open questions that have their own container that try to ‘nudge’ the adult into a particular lane in their response.

These questions can also be used to infer key messages – for example, that 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. Open, directed questions can also be used to 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, etc. → 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?”

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 he is avoiding taking responsibility about. This can help you to minimise collusion without him feeling that you are against him. **Find the part of him that does not want to engage in the harmful behaviours (that he might feel shame about) → be on the side of that part.**

"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?"

Non-verbal communication



- Be mindful of automatic tendencies to nod, smile
- Remember to use soft eyes if you are risk of glaring out of frustration
- Leave a 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
- If in-person, sitting at an even height at a slight angle to each other
- Communicate openness, interest, curiosity

Zero collusion is often impossible. Don't beat yourself up if you find yourself veering in that direction. Notice that you have drifted, breathe, manage your own anxiety, and find ways to return to the mid-point.

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





Take a moment to check in with yourself before engaging the adult user of violence – what might you be carrying that could cause you to veer towards collusion or persecution?

Support your colleagues in your teams – look out for each other and give supportive feedback. Staying in the mid-point is a collective endeavour.