

A Social History Tool using the IF-IT-HELPS mnemonic

This tool is designed as a reference, teaching and practice tool to assist in performing a social history in the context of healthcare provision. It is to be used as a guide for assessment and intervention, as opposed to a checklist.

GENERAL APPROACH:

Strive to use a non-judgmental and attentive manner that creates a safe space for a patient to share, and build trust and rapport. Try to ask open-ended questions in a narrative manner, explaining the reason for certain questions and normalizing the process. Ensure that patients are aware their information is confidential and they are under no obligation to answer. Consider leaving the most sensitive topics (e.g. trauma) to emerge naturally in conversation or for when there is good rapport. Be self-reflective about your potential unconscious biases and work to mitigate them striving for using an anti-oppressive and culturally safe approach. Consider gathering information over several visits and documenting the social history in the patient chart for ongoing use and updating.

	Potential Opening Statements or Questions	Potential Interventions
I	IDENTITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about yourself. • Where were you born? Where did you grow up? What is your ethnic background? • Do you have any aboriginal or indigenous heritage? • What language are you most comfortable speaking in? • Is faith or spirituality a big part of your life? • How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation? • What gender pronouns do you prefer (he/she/they, her/him/them)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ID clinics • Professional interpretation • ESL classes and settlement services • Indigenous services • Culturally-specific services • LGBTQ services • Youth services • Seniors services
F	FAMILY AND FRIENDS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there people in your life you can count on for support? • Who lives with you at home? • Do you have children? Who helps you with child care? • What is your relationship like with your family? Your parents? Your siblings? Your children? • Are you currently in a relationship? • Tell me about your past relationships. • Do you have a case manager or worker? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case management referral or connecting with existing case manager • Early years or parenting centre drop-ins • Community drop-in centres • Seniors groups • Parenting groups • Potential identification of trauma or safety issues (see below)
I	INCOME <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you ever have difficulty making ends meet at the end of the month? • What are your current sources of income? • Do you ever run out of money to buy food? • Do you have trouble paying for public transportation? • Do you have access to a phone or a place to leave messages? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the Poverty Tool to find benefits • Assistance with income benefits forms • Suggesting filing income taxes • Referral to food banks or meal programs • Completing transportation forms/letter
T	TRAUMA <p>Consider leaving the most sensitive topics to emerge naturally in conversation or for when there is good rapport.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you had any significant negative experiences in your life that have left a lasting emotional impact on you? • Have you ever experienced or witnessed violence of any kind? • Did you ever feel unsafe during your childhood, or in any of your relationships? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a trauma-informed approach - communicating safety • Counselling or trauma therapy • Assessing mental health and safety • Understanding a patient's health risks based on Adverse Childhood Experiences

Potential Opening Statements or Questions		Potential Interventions
H	HOUSING	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are you staying right now? • When did you last have a stable place to stay? • Do you need help finding housing? • What is your housing like? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to emergency shelter • Drop-in services • Housing worker • Legal clinic • Tailoring care to challenges of homelessness
E	EMPLOYMENT	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you working right now? • What do you do for work? What other kinds of work have you done in the past? • Do you have benefits such as drug coverage? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resume-writing services • Employment counselling services • Ensuring medications are covered or low-cost
E	EDUCATION	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How far did you go in your education? • How did you do in school? • Do you have any trouble reading or writing? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy classes • Tailoring patient information and communication • Developmental assessment and services
L	LEGAL	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any legal issues you need help with? • What is your current immigration status in Canada? • Have you had contact with the legal system? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal clinics • Immigration support services
P	PERSONAL SAFETY	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any safety concerns? • Do you feel safe in your relationship? • Has your partner ever hurt you? Your children? • Do you feel safe in your home / neighbourhood? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence Against Women services • Crisis helplines • Legal services • Counselling • Support groups
S	SUBSTANCES	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you smoke? How many cigarettes a day? • How often do you drink alcohol? How many drinks on average? • Do you use any recreational drugs? What about in the past? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivational interviewing and pharmacological therapies • Support groups and counselling • Inpatient and outpatient rehab and programs • Detox and harm reduction services
S	SEXUAL HEALTH	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you sexually active? • How many sexual partners have you had in the past six months? • What kinds of sexual activities do you usually engage in? Vaginal intercourse? Anal sex? Oral sex? • Have you ever had any sexually transmitted infections? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • STI screening based on exposure history • Contraceptive counselling • Barrier protection counselling

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SOURCE: Goel R, Buchman S, Meili R, Woollard R. Social accountability at the micro level. One patient at a time. Can Fam Physician 2016;62:287-90 (Eng), 299-302 (Fr).

SOURCE: Centres for Disease Control. A Guide to Taking a Sexual History. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/sexualhistory.pdf>

Concept adapted from Kenyon C, Sandel M, Silverstein M, Shakir A, Zuckerman B: Revisiting the social history for child health. Pediatrics 2007;120:e734-8 and Hager ER, Quigg AM, Black MM, et al Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity Pediatrics 2010;126:e26-e32.