Conversation Starters - Forced Marriage

If you are a health professional and you suspect a young patient might be at risk of forced marriage, it is essential to handle the situation with sensitivity, discretion and without judgement. The priority should be to create a safe and trusting environment, where the patient feels comfortable and encouraged to talk. To help initiate this kind of conversation, here are some gentle questions that open the door to a discussion.
Never promise you won't tell anyone!

Building trust and encouragement

- I want to make sure you feel safe and supported, how are things going at home?
- Sometimes people face pressure in their personal lives that can affect their health and how they feel. Is there anything you would like to talk about?
- You said you have been feeling anxious. Is there anything worrying you?
- Is there anything on your mind that you would like to talk about?
- Some things are difficult to talk about but it is OK to chat with someone who can help.
- If anything is worrying you, we are here if you want to talk about it.

Understanding pressure

- What plans for the future are you excited about?
- What plans do your family have for you? Are there any expectations that worry you?
- Sometimes stress or pressure from family or relationships can affect our health. Is that something you have been experiencing?
- You mentioned feeling low. Has anything changed at home or with your family recently?
- When did you start feeling low? Do you remember a specific time?

Signs

- Do you feel you have control over decisions about your future, like relationships or marriage?
- You said you might be going abroad soon. How do you feel about this trip?
- You seem a bit anxious about this trip. Is there anything you are concerned about?
- Are you looking forward to the visit, or is there anything about it that worries you?
- Have you been asked to do anything that you're uncomfortable with?

Safeguarding

- If the patient is under 18, reassure them about having talked to you and advise them that for their safety, you have a duty to talk to social care. Reassure the student this is to protect them. You can explain to the young person that forced marriage is not legal and there are agencies that can help.

- Refer immediately to your DSL and to Children's Social Care, if under 18 years old.
- If over 18 years old, encourage them to seek support and ask for their consent to speak to authorities and support agencies. You should also consider a vulnerable adult referral to social care.
- Explain that there are legal remedies available to support young people in this situation, such as Forced Marriage Protection Orders.
- Under no circumstances should you share information or attempt mediation with the student's family. This can increase risk of harm and, in some cases, bring forward the marriage. The family may also punish the student for trying to get help.
- Always complete safety planning and book a follow up appointment.