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## **Bathhouse Counselling (TowelTalk) Protocol**

The Bathhouse Counselling Program (TowelTalk) is a community-based program housed at the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT). TowelTalk is a pilot program geared to reach diverse populations of gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (msm). We believe that reaching men in an environment where they feel comfortable can facilitate their access to other important services (health, mental health, social and community services). Furthermore, it is a high priority for the goals of prevention and risk reduction of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) to reach men and support their informed decision making process. As a Bathhouse Counsellor in this program, you are part of a groundbreaking initiative grounded in the important community prevention work that ACT has carried out since its inception in 1983.

This document provides a written record of TowelTalk requirements of you in this program. It spells out details of revised protocols that all ACT staff/volunteers who work at bathhouses are required to follow, as well as other regulations more specific to TowelTalk. It also contains tips to make your counselling shift more effective.

### **Shifts and scheduling**

As a bathhouse counsellor you are expected to complete two bi-weekly shifts per bathhouse (12 shifts a month approx.). A shift is defined as a 3 hour period of time. Currently, we do not have fixed schedules as part of the pilot phase of this program (mapping phase).

The bathhouse counselling shift schedule works in conjunction with the Bathhouse Outreach, and HIV/STI testing provided by the Hassle Free Clinic and the M2Men Network. The M2Men Network Shift Calendar is a combination of fixed and floating outreach, testing, and now TowelTalk shifts. The M2Men Network Calendar is negotiated in monthly meetings, and the TowelTalk Program Coordinator is a member of this network. Available shift options are discussed in these meetings. You may confirm your shifts with the program coordinator. We are expected to provide our monthly bathhouse shift schedule to bathhouse management and other AIDS Service Organizations (ASO's) before the beginning of each month. This honors the agreements that we have with the venues, assures that there are no double bookings, and provides the possibility to get support from outreach workers/volunteers when needed. Scheduling bathhouse counselling shifts can be complex in terms of logistics, your flexibility and

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capacity to accommodate shifts in advance is required. Talk to the program coordinator if you need cannot make a shift.

Please keep in mind that it is not permissible to be a patron at the venue you are doing bathhouse counselling for a period of 24 hours prior or 24 hours after your counselling shift. All counselling shifts are confirmed with bathhouse management and with other organizations conducting bathhouse outreach and testing work. Every effort is made to ensure you have immediate access when you arrive and that no conflicts with other agencies occur. You are required to honour your commitment to carry out a counselling shift. You are required to start and end your counselling shift on time

As a part of your counselling shift it is important to distribute condoms and lube to patrons that request them, TowelTalk is an important part of the provincial HIV/STI's prevention strategies. It is important that you (re)stock your bathhouse counselling bag. If for some reason the bag is missing or unavailable, you may be unable to distribute condoms and lube during your shift. Please try and contact the TowelTalk Coordinator by phone in case the problem can be solved quickly. If your counselling shift is scheduled at a bathhouse where we have a clinic/outreach room you can use that room, except in venues where we have an agreement to use "regular" rooms (Central Spa and Steamworks). You are expected to complete your counselling shift and to make the best use of the outreach materials that are available.

TIP: It's a good idea to bring at least a cold beverage with you to ensure you remain hydrated, especially in the warm environments of bathhouses.

### **What to do if you are running late or need to miss a shift**

We understand that on occasion you may be late for the shift, or due to an emergency – defined as a serious personal crisis that prevents you from carrying out your shift – you may not be able to honor your commitment. Being ill is always a legitimate reason for not carrying out your counselling shift (or leaving one early). In fact, we support this as part of self-care and as workers in the sexual health field and in a public environment. Our expectation is that you will not take advantage of this understanding.

In the event that you are unable to carry out your counselling shift commitment, you are expected to notify your manager and/or TowelTalk Coordinator by phone as soon as possible. Our normal requirement is 8 hours notice as agree in the collective agreement. The more notice you provide, the greater the likelihood the counselling shift can be re-scheduled (or filled). If the

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counselling shift can't be filled, then more notice causes less damage in our relationships with our bathhouse venue partners and patrons.

If your counselling shift is scheduled on a weeknight and you are calling because you will be late, or are unable to honor a counselling shift commitment at all and you are calling 8 hours or less from the start of your scheduled counselling shift, then you are additionally responsible for contacting the relevant bathhouse management directly. Please use the Bathhouse Contact List provided. You must ensure that you leave a message with other staff if management is not available. Record their name.

If your counselling shift is scheduled on a Saturday or Sunday, then you must contact the bathhouse venue directly if you are unable to call the TowelTalk Coordinator before noon on Friday. We must communicate when we cannot honor our commitment with our bathhouse partners and patrons.

### **Check-in procedure at venue**

When you check-in, please introduce yourself by name and make it clear you are a bathhouse counsellor with the "AIDS Committee of Toronto" and that you are there for your scheduled TowelTalk shift (give times). Knowing the manager's name of the venue you are working in is a good idea. For Steamworks only, you may be asked to sign in. If you are not asked to sign in, do not worry. If you do sign in, please make sure you sign out. Collect the key to your room from check-in at the venue you are doing bathhouse counselling in. Ask for the best room for counselling that evening. Inquire how many guys are in the venue. Confirm that you will return to make an announcement on the PA system. (All venues except Steamworks). Sometimes staff will offer to make the announcement for you. Politely decline the offer so you ensure a personal touch and that our key messages are communicated.

TIP: Cultivate a friendly and professional relationship with bathhouse staff. They facilitate our counselling shifts and can refer patrons to TowelTalk. If issues arise inform the program coordinator at the earliest opportunity possible.

### **Room set-up**

Wear an ACT badge and your counsellor T-shirt while on your counselling shift and remove same when not on your shift. You are responsible for maintaining and bringing these items to your shift location. You may wear the T-shirt under other clothing while in transit to your shift as long as the logo is not visible. **Never wear TowelTalk's T-shirt outside of work.** Cargo pants

with roomy pockets are handy in bathhouse outreach. Shorts are permissible clothing attire.

Set-up in clinic/outreach room or assigned room. Review supplies on hand. Tidy and organize the space. Set-up your contacts summary form. (Please note on your summary form if room is unusually messy, and other descriptors of your counselling shift: staff attitude, manager assistance, and level of comfort while on the shift, etc.) Make sure everything you will need is handy. Ensure that your cell phone or pager is turned off. You may use your cell phone only for emergency purposes while on shift. Set up the materials you will be distributing. Arrange the materials in an attractive, easy to identify way in baskets provided. Carry small quantity of palm cards on you as you circulate, and display them in strategic areas where possible (locker room, washrooms, tables). Remember to place condom-lube packs in strategic locations throughout the venue as well. Normally this would include the locker area as a minimum.

TIP: Post the sign "Counsellor is in" in the door of your room, and a TowelTalk Poster should be visible in the room.

### **Announcements**

When you are comfortable, but no later than 30 minutes after the start of your shift, return to the check in desk and make your first announcement and at least 1 additional announcement in the middle of the shift. Example: "Hi my name is X, and I am a counsellor. If you feel like talking, I will be here until X in room X (room number, clinic room or outreach room). This is a free counselling program, and we also have free condoms and lube".

Suggested announcement: "Hi my name is X, and I am a bathhouse counsellor. If you feel like talking, I will be here from (time of your shift) at room (#)."

TIP: Keep it friendly. Ask staff about the correct distance to position the mic for best sound quality.

### **TowelTalk goals**

Primary TowelTalk goals in the pilot phase are: raising awareness about this pilot program, engaging patrons in conversations regarding possible areas of support, identifying when patrons are in need of support (counselling), providing a confidential and safer space to discuss the patrons' concerns with professional counsellors, assisting and supporting referrals, de-escalating possible crisis situations with TowelTalk patrons, and distributing safer sex materials. We are

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interested in reaching and engaging with men that may need support, and who have difficulty accessing services in a standard way (agencies, waitlist, etc.). This is why it is important to provide this service in an environment where men already feel comfortable, included and safe.

### **TowelTalk Sessions**

Once a need for counselling is identified, the patron might agree to have a counselling session. Sessions can last between 10 minutes to 45 minutes, and they can happen in the Clinic/Outreach room, the regular room assigned to you, the halls, and/or public areas (bar, lounge, gym). Where ever the patron feels comfortable to talk, except in the patron's room. It is important to be aware of the level of comfort that a patron might have with being in a room with a counsellor. Assess if the patron feels comfortable with you closing the door, and be mindful of your own level of comfort during a session as it can be a useful guide for the type of intervention needed.

It is important to assess the patron's need during the initial stage of the session. This brief assessment will allow you to conduct the counselling session in a more structured manner, and it will help you tailor your interventions to the patron's needs. Keep in mind that the bathhouse counselling sessions are anonymous, and while this requirement might be odd, it is important that you do not ask for the patrons' name. Having said that, there might be situations where it is beneficial for the helping relationship to address the patron by his first name, use your clinical judgment to assess if that is the case and feel free to do it.

At the end of the session, and before you fill out the bathhouse counselling form, please hand out a feedback form for the patron to fill out. Advise the patron to drop the feedback form on the "TowelTalk Drop-Box" located at the venue (where available), or to return it to the counsellor in a sealed envelope.

### **Boundaries**

Keeping professional boundaries in a highly sexualized place like a bathhouse can be challenging, but is necessary. You are bound by your professional college and by ACT's policies to behave in a professional manner while doing a bathhouse counselling shift. It is not permitted to engage in any sexual behavior with patron during a counselling relationship, and remember it is not permissible to be a patron at the venue you are doing bathhouse counselling at for a period of 12 hours prior or 12 hours after your counselling shift.

We recognize that there will be patrons that will be consistently “hitting on” you during your bathhouse counselling shifts. It can be a gratifying and a threatening experience at the same time. It is part of working in the bathhouse environment. The important part is how you navigate the experience in a respectful and sex positive way. It is essential to be clear and firm while re-stating your boundaries. Phrases like: “Thank you, but I’m here to work today. Feel free to come back if you want to talk” can be useful.

**TIP:** It is important to have a space to reflect about the complexity of providing mental health counselling in a bathhouse. Discuss with your supervisor, clinical consultant, program coordinator your reactions to cruising situations in the context of TowelTalk. They can help you navigate these experiences.

### **TowelTalk Data**

Once the session is over and you have handed out the feedback form to the patron, enter the data on your Bathhouse Counselling Form, and track on your Contact Summary Form if the counselling session stemmed from an initial contact with a patron. Record the length of the session (between 10 min to 45 min), and all the demographic information. Make sure to reflect in each check box the themes covered during the counselling session, and write up a brief summary of the session on the space provided at the back of each form. The summary is of outmost important as it is the only physical evidence of the counselling session. Reflect the main theme thoroughly, and any other theme that you deemed important and particular to each session. Use your clinical judgment to summarize the session. Remember to track non-identifying information only. We do not want to appear to be writing notes during the session, please wait until the session is over. Check off as many themes as were relevant to each session on the bathhouse counselling form, and make sure you reflect them on the summary notes.

We are increasingly interested in the questions that some patrons have about the program, even though those conversations might not turn into a counselling session. These questions will be captured on the contacts summary form. Contacts are the conversations you have with bathhouse patrons that last less than 10 minutes, and are not necessarily counselling conversations. This information is gathered so that we can have a better idea of what happened in the session, and what guys concerns are. Our evaluation team reviews our notes, and they have a great impact on the outcome of this pilot project. Furthermore, communities’ educational resources are developed in response to feedback from the communities we serve. You play an important role in being

the eyes and ears of TowelTalk, ACT, and other organizations in the sexual environment of bathhouses.

### **Bathhouse Counselling locations**

Every venue has variations in where the outreach team is permitted to do outreach, and the same rules apply to bathhouse counselling. The TowelTalk Program Coordinator will make these clear to you in advance during your in-venue training. In general, it is important to do a combination of moving around throughout the hallways and positioning yourself in the vicinity of the room itself to allow patrons to reach out to you. When the venue is not too busy check for places where you can stand and not block traffic. Every venue has common areas that make for suitable access to patrons: landings, entrance to locker areas, corners, near ACT Info Boards and even lounge areas.

The following areas are always exempt from outreach and counselling regardless of venue: patron's rooms; activity areas: mazes, glory holes, slurp ramps, dark rooms; wet areas: washrooms, sauna, steam rooms and tubs.

TIP: Be on the lookout for new outreach locations, they can help facilitate your counselling shift. If you have an idea for an outreach location when in the venue, but aren't sure whether it's appropriate, as a courtesy please check with staff or management before occupying.

In addition to actively engaging and greeting patrons, and offering safer sex materials, we would like you to provide condoms and lube in a container at the entrance to the room you are using wherever practical. Make sure to leave condom-lube packs and pick up the palm cards in locker areas before you leave the venue.

### **Physical safety**

Your safety while performing bathhouse counselling is very important. Use your gut feeling when working with a patron inside of the outreach/clinic/regular room. Neither the outreach/clinic rooms nor the regular rooms will allow the bathhouse counsellor enough room to get out of the room fast if the need be. For this reason, it is important to use your gut feeling and assessment skills to try to anticipate if working with a patron might endanger your physical safety. If talking to a patron feels threatening to you, after using your assessment skills you are allowed to stop the session at any time and may request the patron to leave the room. It's also a good idea to be aware of what is beside and behind you for the same reasons.

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You will be required to stay in the room itself for long periods of time (up to 45 minutes per session). Ensuring that you always maintain control of access to the room may not always be possible. You can conduct counselling sessions in the hall or lounge areas if you do not feel comfortable counselling a patron inside of the room. In situations where you assessed your physical safety might be at risk, you may leave the door of the room open. Under no circumstances should the room be dim or without lighting while you are doing bathhouse counselling. Please report and discuss any situation where you felt at risk while doing your shift with the program coordinator, your supervisor, and/or the clinical consultant. Reflecting upon these situations might provide useful information for the program development and your professional development.

### **Ending your shift**

It is important to write up every conversation you had with every contact in your Contact Summary form as they occur. Questions about the TowelTalk are of particular importance in this stage of the pilot program. Besides your Bathhouse Counselling Session Forms, you are required to fully complete a Contact Summary form for every shift. Give yourself time towards the end of your shift to complete any writing that may have been incomplete due to having sessions back to back so that you do not need to stay past the scheduled end of your shift. Although patrons are directed to leave the feedback forms in the TowelTalk Feedback Forms drop boxes in each bathhouse, some may insist that you take them. Please take the feedback forms that patrons give you and drop them in the drop box, or take them back to ACT if there is no drop box at venue you are in. Please leave those forms on Jessica Cattaneo's (Manager of Evaluation) hot file, and remember **do not read the feedback forms**.

Remove the "counsellor is in" ad and TowelTalk Poster off the door. Please return all ACT outreach materials (trays) to their designated place in the clinic room, and pack up in the bag the remaining condoms and lube. You may be required to sign out when leaving Steamworks. Please thank venue staff on your way out. It is important do fill out the data forms, and debrief at the earliest opportunity.

### **Clinical Consultation**

Clinical consultation is a great opportunity for your professional development as a bathhouse counsellor. It helps you identify possible areas of support, blind spots, and discuss and further develop your skills and understanding of the complexities of providing counselling in a bathhouse setting. TowelTalk counsellors are required to assist regular clinical consultation



meetings at the Clinic for HIV-Related Concerns, Department of Psychiatry at Mount Sinai Hospital with Dr. Peter Deroche. The frequency of these consultations are once or twice a month, please confirm the frequency with your manager.

You will need to confirm dates with the program coordinator and with Dr. Deroche at Mount Sinai Hospital. Clinical Consultation meetings last one hour, and in those meetings you will present your clinical material and discuss it in a safe and private environment with Dr. Deroche. If you have any question about the logistics of the meetings please contact TowelTalk Program Coordinator.

### **Emergency contact**

We care about your safety and emotional well being. It's unlikely you will experience an emergency while performing bathhouse counselling - defined as a need for medical support or an encounter with police services that requires immediate attention – indeed we hope you never do. However, due to the nature of the work we do, you might feel overwhelmed by some of material presented by service users. It is important for you to know that there is always someone at ACT you can call outside of office hours if an emergency arises, and/or you want to debrief a particular session.

Emergencies do need to be reported to your immediate manager for insurance and other reasons. Please use the confidential home phone number of ACT's Manager of Programs and Services (ask program coordinator for it).

### **Important Phone Numbers**

**Jocelyn Watchorn**  
**Manager of Support Services**  
416-522-6731 (c)

**Marco Posadas**  
**Bathhouse Counsellor/Program Coordinator**  
416-725-2566 (c)

**The non-emergency number for Police Services**  
416-808-2222

**Distress Centre Hotline**  
416-408-HELP

**Shepell FGI EAP**

(English) 800-387-4765  
(Français) 800-361-5676

**Spa Excess (SX)**

416-260-2363  
Jean / Peter Bochove, Robert  
Email: [jean\\_lalonde07@sympatico.ca](mailto:jean_lalonde07@sympatico.ca), [mail@spaexcess.com](mailto:mail@spaexcess.com)

**Steamworks (SW)**

Remi Colette  
416-925-1571  
Email: [remi@steamworksonline.com](mailto:remi@steamworksonline.com)

**St. Marc (SM)**

Rolyn Chambers/ Michael Swartz.  
416-927-0210  
Email: [info@stmarcspa.com](mailto:info@stmarcspa.com)

**Central Spa (CS)**

Dan Scotney  
416-588-6191  
Notes: Dan often works from home: (H) 416-901-1994