

Creating a Judge-Free Zone

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Jessica Foster, Counseling Solutions of Chatsworth

Jessica Foster, BS, CACII, began testing in March of this year at the medication assisted treatment program Counseling Solutions of Chatsworth. Since then, she's developed an approach to help put patients at ease. When Jessica began, she knew very little about HIV. She's trained herself to be precise in both the way she communicates and the words she chooses, part of a process of establishing what she calls a judge-free zone. Before asking any personal questions she takes extra steps to make patients feel comfortable.

"I don't walk in and tell them I'm a professional giving them an HIV test," Jessica explains. "I sit down and have a conversation. The men usually like to talk about football and I'm a football fan so we'll talk football for a minute. What I'm doing is showing them that we're both here to make sure they succeed in treatment. That five to ten minute conversation makes all the difference."

When Jessica first started, she thought she needed to get on point and stay on point. She quickly learned that taking the time to sit, chat, and get to know patients made the testing process more relaxed and comfortable. Within the judge-free zone she finds that clients speak more freely about HIV risk behaviors.

Patients are offered opt-out HIV testing on admission and then, if they have ongoing risk, as part of the annual physical. Before the testing starts Jessica explains what HIV is. "Throughout the process I explain everything – even the simple act of putting on my gloves. They're informed the whole way through."

Most enter treatment at Counseling Solutions at a low point. "They essentially give us permission to help them start a new life, a new chapter," says Jessica. "I see people come in at the most broken time and within a few months I begin to see a whole new person. Over time they go from not having a job to working. Or going to college. They smile and walk with their heads held high. And they want to help others. It's a beautiful transformation. To be a part of that transformation is what inspires me." ■