

Religion and Domestic Violence

Information and Resources

KEY ISSUE

Batterer Accountability



prepared by

National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

A project of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence

6400 Flank Drive, Suite 1300

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17112

Tel: 800-537-2238 ■ TTY: 800-553-2508 ■ Fax: 717-545-9456

www.nrcdv.org ■ www.vawnet.org

Copyright 2007 National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV)

The contents of this publication may be reprinted or adapted with the following acknowledgement: “This material was reprinted/adapted from the publication titled *Religion and Domestic Violence: Information and Resources* (2007) by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.”

KEY ISSUE

Batterer Accountability

Battering exists across religious and faith systems. Batterers use various forms of abuse and coercive behaviors to intimidate and instill fear, thereby maintaining power in the relationship and control over their partners. Some people believe that abusive behavior is a learned behavior or an inability to express feelings appropriately and control anger. Many experts, however, assert that abuse is a deliberate pattern of behavior, or choice, with the intended purpose of controlling someone else's behavior (Nichols, 2001).

Family, friends and other community members are often swayed by the batterer's ability to shirk responsibility and make seemingly valid excuses for abusive and controlling behavior.

Batterers seek to control not only their victims, but also to manipulate those around them as well. They may be respected members of their community who portray themselves as pleasant and charming individuals. They are often adept at making excuses and also shifting the blame from themselves to the victim. Family, friends and other community members are often swayed by the batterer's ability to shirk responsibility and make seemingly valid excuses for abusive and controlling behavior. Victims are often inappropriately advised to change their behavior in order to prevent an abusers' "outbursts." Understanding the role of power and control within an abusive relationship is crucial to recognizing the potential danger of expecting victims to avoid abusive behavior by being more tolerant and accommodating.

COUPLES COUNSELING AND VICTIM SAFETY

Faith and spiritual leaders may choose to respond to batterers and victims by providing spiritual guidance and counseling to both parties, or referring them to secular practitioners who provide such services. The option of couples counseling may appear to be a means to support the preservation of the family. It also appeals to many victims who do not wish their batterers to go to jail, but simply to change their behavior. For couples counseling to be safe for victims of domestic violence, however, it must take place in an environment that allows each partner to discuss differences openly, risk being vulnerable, and confront fears about the future of the relationship (Chrysler & Milgrom, 1999).

Victims who are controlled or intimidated by their partners may not speak freely for fear that their batterers may retaliate if

For couples counseling to be safe for victims of domestic violence, however, it must take place in an environment that allows each partner to discuss differences openly, risk being vulnerable, and confront fears about the future of the relationship (Chrysler & Milgrom, 1999).

information they deem inappropriate is revealed. Victims who do not freely engage in the dialogue expected in couples counseling while in the presence of their partners may be mistakenly perceived by the therapist or counselor to be uncooperative or unwilling to work on the relationship, and may be asked to modify behavior so as not to provoke their partners. This implies that the victim is responsible for the abuse when in fact the victim's behavior is neither an excuse nor justification for the perpetrator's behavior. Battering is a choice and it is the batterer who is solely responsible for his behavior. Consequently, it is the batterer's motivation and commitment to ending the abuse that will determine whether or not things will change.

Aldarondo and Mederos (2002) provide the following guidance regarding the use of couples counseling:

“In our experience, couples counseling is contraindicated if the abusive man expresses no remorse, denies his actions, blames the abuse victim or has little commitment to change. Similarly, if the abuse victim shows fear of further violence, assumes responsibility for it, or feels deserving of maltreatment, couples counseling should not be considered. The abuse victim's participation in couples therapy should not be pressured in any way. It is inappropriate and potentially harmful to require couples counseling in a service plan if the abuse victim is reluctant and if conditions outlined here have not been met.

Given these considerations we suggest that couples counseling be considered only if all the following conditions are met:

- (a) the abused partner has chosen to enter in couples counseling after being informed of all other intervention options including support groups for abuse victims and individual psychotherapy.
- (b) The abusive man's violence is limited to few (no more than one or two) incidents of minor violence, such as slaps, shoves, grabbing and restraining, without resulting bruising or injury.
- (c) The man's use of psychological abuse has been infrequent, mild, and has not created a climate of constant anger or intimidation. This guards against attempting therapy in a context where the effect of powerful intimidation and psychological abuse is still present.
- (d) No risk factors for lethality are present even in the absence of severe physical and psychological abuse (see below).
- (e) The man admits and takes responsibility for his abusive behavior.
- (f) The abusive man has made an unshakable commitment to refrain from further violence and intimidation and understands that he will feel "provoked" or justified to abuse his partner again in couples counseling. He must demonstrate an ongoing commitment to contain his explosive feelings without blaming others or acting them out, so that they do not provide a justification that propels him into a relapse of violent behavior during the course of treatment.

- (g) The abuse victim reports, in a confidential interview (when the abuser is not present), not being afraid of speaking honestly in therapy and not being afraid of retaliation by the abusive partner.
- (h) In addition, to further promote a climate of safety, responsibility and freedom from coercion, the following agreements should be in place as conditions for beginning and continuing couples counseling: (i) If the man is violent or intimidating while in treatment, couples counseling therapy will stop and he will enter a specialized batterer's intervention program. (ii) The primary goals of therapy are ending the man's psychological and physical abuse and facilitating the woman's repair and recovery from his violence, in order to establish a reliable and tested climate of safety in the relationship. It should be clear that no substantive issues can be addressed unless this goal is fulfilled. (iii) The woman has a confidential safety plan. (iv) The abusive man has a behavioral safety plan that is the ongoing focus of his work in the therapy.

The abusive man's refusal to agree to such conditions before engaging in couples counseling is indicative of insufficient conditions for safe therapy even in the presence of other positive indicators. In addition, the therapist must be familiar with the subtle dynamics of battering relationships and must be willing to set limits with the abusive man. It is also the therapist's responsibility to suspend couples counseling if the abusive partner renews assaultive and intimidating behavior and to notify the proper authorities about this action. The therapist must be willing to take this step even if the abuse victim wants to continue couples counseling.”

(This was originally published in *Programs for Men Who Batter* by E. Aldarondo and F. Mederos, © 2002 Civic Research Institute, Inc., 4478 Route 27, Kingston NJ 08528, and is reprinted here with permission of the publisher. All rights reserved. For ordering information, call 609-683-4450 or visit www.civicrosearchinstitute.com.)

CONFIDENTIALITY AND VICTIM SAFETY

Victim safety may be completely dependent on whether or not the perpetrator is aware of any attempts the victim is making to regain control or share information with others. If the batterer finds out and does retaliate, the victim may be much more hesitant to seek help or confide in someone again if they fear there is a chance their perpetrator will find out. It is also critical that advocates and faith leaders familiarize themselves with the mandatory reporting laws in their state in the event the batterer threatens to hurt the victim. Many states require that this information be reported to law enforcement immediately. Advocates who are not mandated to report these threats to law enforcement often make decisions to report these threats to the victim in an effort to support the victims' decisions to keep themselves and their children safe.

Victim safety may be completely dependent on whether or not the perpetrator is aware of any attempts the victim is making to regain control or share information with others.

BATTERER INTERVENTION

The majority of literature reviewed for this packet encourages faith leaders to hold abusive men accountable for their behavior through appropriate interactions and referrals to batterer intervention programs (BIPs). The first BIPs were established in the late 1970's out of the need for an alternative to the mental health system's ineffective approaches at the time (Mederos & Perilla, 2003). Three goals of an effective BIP are safety for victims and their children, justice and accountability, and behavioral change (Bennett & Oliver, 2001). These programs are designed as part of a criminal justice response to domestic violence and to create an environment where batterers acknowledge and take responsibility for their abusive behaviors (Gardsbane, 2002). It should be noted, however, there are many controversies surrounding the effectiveness of BIPs. BIPs are often viewed as part of a system that limits men's options and excludes the victim and their community from the process. Designing culturally-relevant BIPs that also meet the needs of low-income men and men who have not been mandated to attend remain some of the greatest challenges to developing programs that effectively hold batterers accountable for their behavior (Mederos & Perilla, 2003).

Alternatively, studies of community-level sanctions for battering have indicated their preventative effectiveness. Cross-cultural analyses of domestic violence have found a strong association between sanctions against battering and sanctuary for the victims as protective factors against domestic violence (Campbell, 1999). These community-level interventions framed both sanctions and sanctuary through peer groups, adding to a sense of group honor and solidarity based on nonviolence. Communities within the U.S. have integrated this understanding of protective factors to mobilize and develop sanctions against battering (Rath, 1999). Similarly, religious communities may be able to reduce future incidence of domestic violence through the creation of community sanctions and accountability for batterers while providing safety and support to victims and survivors.

Cross-cultural analyses of domestic violence have found a strong association between sanctions against battering and sanctuary for the victims as protective factors against domestic violence (Campbell, 1999).

An awareness of the dynamics of domestic violence and efforts to hold batterers accountable for their behavior has enabled many faith communities to create supportive and safe environments for victims and survivors. Many faith communities are recognizing the need for effective interventions for batterers that support victims' and survivors' individual choices and promote their safety. When faith communities and secular programs take steps to examine issues of batterer accountability in addition to those of victim safety and empowerment, they are better able to create a response that meets the needs of individuals and their communities.

Additional information on religion/spirituality and domestic violence issues are available through FaithTrust Institute (telephone: 206-634-1903, fax: 206-634-0115 and email: info@faithtrustinstitute.org) and the Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute (telephone: 770-909-0715, fax: 770-907-4069, and email: bcdvorg@aol.com).

Works Cited

- Aldarondo, E. & Mederos F. (2002). Common practitioners' concerns about abusive men. In Aldarondo & Mederos (Eds.), *Men Who Batter: Intervention and Prevention Strategies in a Diverse Society* (pp.1-20). NY: Civic Research Institute.
- Bennet, L. & Williams, O. (2001). *Controversies and Recent Studies of Batterer Intervention Program Effectiveness*. Harrisburg, PA: National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (VAWnet), a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.
- Campbell, J.C. (1999). Sanctions and sanctuary: Wife battering within cultural contexts. In Counts, Brown & Campbell (Eds.), *To Have and to Hit: Cultural Perspectives on Wife Beating* (2nd ed.). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.
- Chrysler, E. & Milgrom, A. (1999). *Why Couples Counseling May Be Inappropriate for Violent Relationships*. Training and Research Update on Issues of Domestic Violence. Minneapolis, MN: Domestic Abuse Project.
- Gardsbane, D. (Ed.) (2002). *Healing and Wholeness: A Resource Guide on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community*. Washington, DC: Jewish Women International.
- Mederos, F. & Perilla, J. (2003). Community connections: Men, gender, and violence. In *Discussion 2: Batterer Intervention Programs – Community-based Approaches to Enhancing Safety and Accountability*. Retrieved July 2003 from: <http://endabuse.org/bpi/discussion2.php>
- Nichols, B. (2001). *Why Do Men Batter?* Retrieved July 2003 from: <http://www.menstoppingviolence.org/articles/whymenbatter.html>
- Rath, C. (1999). *Transforming Communities: Creating Safety and Justice for Women and Girls, A Model for Community Organizing*. Harrisburg, PA: National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

ENCLOSURES

The enclosed materials (reprinted with permission) provide research findings, examples of promising projects and referral materials that offer basic information on religion and domestic violence:

FaithTrust Institute (formerly the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence) (1998). *Responding to Domestic Violence: Guidelines for Pastors and Rabbis*. Seattle, WA: Author.
– Enclosed only in print and online (www.vawnet.org) versions of the “Religion and Domestic Violence: Batterer Accountability” (NRCDV, 2007) information packet.

Nichols, B. (2001). *Why Do Men Batter?* Retrieved June 2004 from <http://www.menstoppingviolence.org/articles/whymenbatter.html>.
– Enclosed only in print and online (www.vawnet.org) versions of the “Religion and Domestic Violence: Batterer Accountability” (NRCDV, 2007) information packet.

Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (1996). *Accountable Treatment for Batterers* [newsletter], 15(1).

Frank, P.B. & Golden, G.K. (2002). *When 50-50 Is Not Fair: The Case Against Couple Counseling when Men Abuse Women*. New City, NY: VCS Community Change Project.

Domestic Abuse Project (1999). Why couples counseling may be inappropriate for violent relationships. *Training & Research UPDATE on Issues of Domestic Violence*, 12, 1-2.

Please note: If you are interested in further distributing these materials, you must obtain permission to reprint and distribute from the publisher.