

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes December 12, 2017

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Minutes by Kate Sackett, edited by Chris Huffine

Discussion Topic: What is “success” in our field?

This discussion is related to the earlier topic regarding the pros and cons of criminalizing domestic violence. Often in the criminal justice system, success is defined as reduced recidivism. The re-arrest rate for DUI's was recently cited as 10-11%, though that seems low to some people here. For DV treatment, recidivism (as defined by getting new legal charges) seems to be around 20-30%. It is rare for new men on probation and in BIPs to engage in illegal abuse (e.g., physical abuse). It may be more common for people who have problems with addiction and those who have complex trauma.

How else can we think about success? One way is when clients continue to talk about it (the work) and continue to tell others. Some clients with a DV background who are living sober now still get together regularly every three months for dinner to check in with one another. Men hearing from others who have gone through the program and who share with other men that they have been through a DV program let them know that it is going to be okay and that they can change.

One definition of success is whether people change the way they think. Are they continuing to embrace that? Do they change the way they live on an ongoing basis?

Another definition is that change results in the community when the men who have gone through the programs talk to other people, call other people, and this information flows through the abusive men into the community.

Statistically, the rates of DV in the country, based on homicide rates and DV arrest rates, have dropped by 2/3 over the past 20 years, especially in the 90's. That is quite a dramatic drop, so that could be considered an indicator of success. However, there has also been a decline in crime overall in the country, as the age of the country's population increases. Abusive partners are also learning that physical abuse is not tolerated by society, so they are engaging less in physical and illegal behaviors less while continuing or even escalating their verbal/psychological and other forms of legal abuse.

We can also consider definitions of partial successes, when people have stopped some bad behavior but not all of it. Although this is not ideal, it is at least the start of awareness and a step toward success. This is also known as “harm reduction” in some other fields. There are two very strong camps in the addiction world regarding harm reduction.

Partial success seems to result when people have been able to stop certain behaviors, but not made an attitudinal shift in the general way they regard their partners. For example, clients say “Next time I’ll just walk away” show that they still feel a need to walk away, rather than doing the work on the front end so that there is no need to take a timeout. If they cannot process and need to step back then they can use a timeout or walk away as a last resort, but they should be doing the work to not need to do that in the first place. There’s a difference between “I’m still thinking about her in the same way but I don’t want to get arrested or get in trouble” and “I don’t want to hurt her, this is not good for us.” One facilitator uses the phrase “take a mindful moment” to STOPP (Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Process, and Proceed) to slow down, pay attention, think about what they are about to do, and then move forward.

Partner reports show a diversity of opinions about what is “success”. Many report partial success as being an improvement (“He’s not as abusive as he used to be, and that’s better. Things are not great, but they’re better.”). Others report significant differences in observable abuse, but that things do not “feel different.” One provider speculated that women who are more satisfied with partial success may be less aware or willing to settle and may be making excuses for the abuse from internalized oppression. Those who feel like nothing has changed may be more “tuned in” and more aware, with a higher consciousness raised regarding what their standard is for feeling “safe.” Some partners may also become more aware of subtle behaviors when bigger behaviors change. Partial change may also minimize the severity of other behaviors as less “abusive.”

The strength of the group members’ support systems and the quality of their self-care contributes to their long-term success. In substance abuse, that is especially well-known. There is a visible recovery community and support network in this country that is very verbal and active.

Puentes program does a graduation where food and family can come to an event when people complete the program. They have an alumni group that is not led by a facilitator, though it starts with a facilitator, rather the alumni group goes out into the community and talks to businesses and others.

They tried to do something similar for the BIPs but no one ever showed up. It may be an issue with a lack of commitment and/or timing (e.g., a monthly meeting is too infrequent), so maybe having it be a weekly or biweekly commitment would help them come at least every 4-6 weeks. Drop-in groups that meet once a month do not ask for that kind of commitment and so people rarely attend. Drop-in groups also miss the relationship component because the same facilitator and/or group members are not there and so they feel like they miss that connection. A holiday

potluck for some of their groups happens and this year they are inviting everyone who has graduated in the past year. An annual reunion may be a way to do that as well (e.g., as a 2-3 hour gathering) to visit the agency, see staff, check in with everyone to see how things are going and see if they're working their program.

People also seem to show up if they feel like they are making an impact or making a difference and leave if they are not getting that contribution component. That may be why the four men who have stayed continue to gather because they are giving something back to the group. It fulfills a basic need of purpose, making a difference.

There is also a tension between those who are motivated by external "payment" (e.g., not going to jail for mandated guys) and those who are not, so when that payment stops (probation ends) then they are not motivated to go anymore. There is lots of research to support that as a problem with external reinforcers/punishers. There may also be issues related to their identity in going to the group for a stigmatized group, so that going to an alumni group means they are still affiliated with a group that makes them feel ashamed.

Success could also be seen more broadly as a society-level acknowledgment that domestic violence is a human issue, done by human beings, and that some people need help with this. We have shifted that framing for substance abuse issues, but not for domestic violence. Success would be having domestic violence be something that can be acknowledged, addressed, and talked about, rather than something shameful that is still hidden or ignored.

One program talked about having two levels of completion: minimum completion and goal completion. Minimum refers to understanding how to be non-abusive, being able to articulate what they should be doing and know what they should be doing (like those who take a class and pass the class, not that they can do it but that they know what it is). Providers estimate that this is possible in ~9 to 12 months. The gold standard of goal completion is a significant decline in the patterns of abuse and controlling behavior that a person does and that their family feels safe and comfortable in their presence. This seems to take 2 to 3 years longer (3-4 years from the start of their work). Probation has a financial incentive from the state to get men off probation in 18 months, so although some probation officers may support using the criminal justice system to accomplish that gold standard, there is a lot of pressure to end probation sooner (e.g., reduced caseloads).

"The report of an enlightened partner" has been posed as the best definition of success. This refers to a partner who has had her own consciousness raised and has a good understanding of what it means to be in an abusive relationship. Many partners report significant sustained change, even when the men have not stopped all their abusive behavior, but their beliefs have shifted into an accountable stance and a collaborative stance. They do still occasionally have abusive behavior (there's not zero abuse), but there is significantly reduced abusive behavior, controlling

behavior, the patterns of control have stopped, and while there are moments of abuse and moments of control these moments are abbreviated (quicker to cut them off, contain them, be accountable for them, and correct them). That is the real tipping point, rather than a man who does better for a while, then sinks back into a bad place for a while, then gets better for a while, then sinks back for a while, This can sound like “He’s doing better, he’s doing great, I hope he stays that way” then “Now it’s awful again, he’s back into it” as a pattern of sustained periods of doing better than sustained patterns of doing worse again.

The field is very ambivalent about partner contact though. When working with mandated people, facilitators usually do not hear from the partners much. Facilitators can give an expert opinion in the partner’s stead, but that is less reliable than a partner report from an aware partner. Facilitator observations or “intuition” based on micro-behaviors and observations can give some of that picture.

In talking about success, we also need to ask ourselves if we are pushing this behavior above ground or pushing it underground. A lot of times, we like the second option because it looks like everything is better. A consequence of strong social sanctions is often that it does not stop the behavior, but it pushes it underground. Shame works that way in pushing things underground, where things look good but things cannot be talked about or acknowledged. Substance abuse treatment is an example of the problem being pushed above ground where now sobriety can be a badge of pride and people can earn respect by being publicly sober. It is not okay still to acknowledge positive change for people who were abusive to their partner or sexually abusive or abusive toward children. It is not okay to talk about this or talk about how to support that change. Our system has functioned to very effectively keep these issues underground for a very long time. Taxpayer money has been spent to keep the abuse of people in power hidden, underground, and not talked about.

Part of this change can come through training for facilitators because they are modeling how to talk about abusive behavior in a non-shaming way and how to help them find support for their people while not supporting their abuse. Being able to hold a nuanced stance to regard someone well, while simultaneously regarding their behavior badly is a difficult dialectic stance.

When partners are okay to talk openly about what the abusive partner does, this is also a sign of success. This can be a place for complaints to happen and to have ongoing issues addressed. Part of success is also the empowerment of women and victims, especially the most vulnerable, who are often targeted by people seeking to control and hold power over someone else.

When people in BIPs have conversations with family and friends to help people around them stop blaming their victimized partner, this is another form of success. This involves taking accountability, not pushing it off on the partner, and saying “no this is me.” People need to really

move into the action stage of change to be addressing that and addressing how their friends and family perceive their partner.

The level of coordinated community response can also be an indicator of success in terms of the extent to which the community is aware of and responding to domestic violence. The larger community of employers, health care providers, churches, businesses having greater awareness and responsiveness in the larger community also impacts domestic violence. For example, a self-disclosure by an employer who tells their employee “Yes you can go to the BIP group, I went to one myself” means that this employer can be another part of the CCR if they then check to see if their employee is continuing to go and checks how that group is going. Two men in a group also recently had to sign releases of information regarding their program completion and conditions of their discharge (successful or unsuccessful) in order to be hired in a job.

Another measure of success is risk reduction. In the RNR model, we are trying to reduce risk level. This happens within peer networks, in dynamic risk factors, and in risk factors that are targeted in the groups. To what extent do people in groups have a greater stake in conformity and in not breaking laws? There is tension between the criminal justice system and BIPs, where the CJ system is so focused on criminal behavior whereas BIPs are focused more on non-criminal behaviors as well. While keeping people sober contributes to this, the question always seems to come down to whether you are reducing their criminal risk.

We can also see some failures as a different kind of success. For example, although we may not know how many times someone has recidivated, this person could be doing so at a lower level than what they may have done if they had not gone through the domestic violence group. This frames recidivism reduction through a harm reduction lens. Another “failing success” is that involvement with the abusive partner could be what the abused partner needs to get her consciousness raised, have time to arrange how to leave the relationship, or take other steps to increase her safety and/or their kids’ safety. Facilitators can communicate to the partner what they see working with the abusive person so that she has more information on which to plan and act. There can be exchanges like “We’ve done everything we can with him, he is not changing, what do you want to do?” This can help her make a decision about staying or leaving or other actions she may want to take. When partners get out of a relationship because they see the abusive qualities of the relationship can be another success in raising consciousness, whereas before they had contact with the BIP warning signs before were not seen or not acted on. BIP contact can also plant the seeds for later change, like for men who go through a group once and do not change immediately but change later on.