

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network
Minutes April 2, 2002

Members Present: Michael Davis (Changepoint), David Houston (Men's Resource Center), Gustavo Picazo (Changepoint), Lee Parker (Changepoint), Marc Hess (ACJ), Paula Manley, Stacey Womack (ARMS), Courtenay Silvergleid (Portland State University)

Minutes by: Courtenay Silvergleid

Discussion Topic: Post Batterer Intervention Couples Counseling

As a place to begin, the group decided to re-visit when it isn't appropriate to use couples counseling, reviewing the previously generated list of 12 reasons why couples counseling isn't ok. If you would like a copy of this document contact Chris Huffine at (503) 235-3433 or at chuffine@pacifier.com.

Some of the concerns about doing couples work are based on the idea that these relationships are physically violent. 50% of couples who present for "regular" couples work have some history of physical violence. Need to be more clear about what we are screening out. What makes it safe to do couples counseling? Do you wait for the violence to stop or are you waiting for the control to stop? If you are waiting for the control issues to stop, isn't that what "regular" couples counseling is all about?

Is it dangerous to do couples counseling even if physical violence isn't present? One member suggested that it is still important to deal with each of them separately. Let the man focus on his behavior independent of his partner and likewise for the woman. Women often feel annihilated in couples' work even without the physical violence.

When during/after a man's involvement in batterer intervention is it appropriate to do couples counseling? When the man takes responsibility for the violence. When he takes complete responsibility for his behavior and the impact on his family without blaming her. Members suggested that it might be important for the man to continue his individual work concurrent with couples counseling.

How can we define that a previously violent person is taking responsibility for his actions? Based on actions. A necessary assumption to do couples counseling is an even playing field and lack of fear. Benchmark is whether the man is past self-centeredness. Each member needs to be able to empathize with the other. The man needs to be able to hear the damage that he has done. He needs to be able to tolerate hearing about the damage he has inflicted. He needs to be able to tolerate the pain and anger of his partner and accept the effects of his abuse. What is going to happen as he lets up control is that she is going to do more emoting, releasing what she has been stuffing. Part of the rebuilding is that he will have to be able to sit and listen to what she expresses. It is important to assess whether the man comes from a place of blame and denial, or

responsibility. Chris Huffine has a great handout for abusive men about what to expect from the woman you have been abusive to and still involved with when you start changing. It goes into commonly asked questions, “I’ve changed, but she seems to be getting worse. Why doesn’t she just forgive me?” She needs to address not being responsible for his being non-violent. He needs to be able to read when he is being abusive, rather than relying on her to have to identify it.

Additionally, it is important to be able to see some kind of individual change during the course of the batterer intervention program prior to considering couples counseling. If you don’t ever see a man being impacted by the group process, then it feels like a snowjob. You have to see that the work has impacted them. Look for resistance from the man – increased resistance to change, culpability, and a “what about me” stance. Some sense of resistance suggests that the man has realized that “I really do have to change, I’m not such a nice guy, I really do have to change”.

Terrance Real came out with a new book on couples counseling. He suggests using therapist power to level the playing field. Of course, the man must be able to tolerate this kind of attention from the counselor. If a man feels criticized or isolated as the problem and can’t handle those emotions, there could be severe repercussions for the woman. Power and control stuff will really come out when the humiliation gets triggered.

Here is some information provided by Alan Jenkins, author of Invitations To Responsibility on couples counseling:

NARRATIVE THERAPY QUESTIONS FOR COUPLES

I. Develop Context for Safety and Self Responsibility

A. Is separation a good idea?

II. Externalize and Challenge their own restraints to the man accepting responsibility for his violence.

A. How is a man relying on the woman to take responsibility for him/his violence.

B. What is constraining the woman from taking responsibility for her own safety.

III. Consider the relative influence of socio cultural and family traditions.

IV. Deliver irresistible invitations to self-responsibility.

A. Each partner externalizes and challenges their own restraining habits and ideas.

V. Establish creative ways to translate new ideas into action.

VI. Anticipate, predict and plan for obstacles.

VII. Develop realistic criteria for evaluating change.

VIII. Avoid premature trust.

A. Monitor the evidence.

IX. Invite the man to extend his understanding and sensitivity, particularly to his partner's experience.

X. Encourage conflict testing.

XI. Strive for balance in terms of who takes responsibility for maintenance of the relationship.

XII. Strive for balance between separation/independence and togetherness in the relationship.

One of the big issues raised was what are the qualifications of the couples' counselor that works with people who have DV issues? In some ways, we have some work to do with the universities to get DV issues put into the counseling training programs. Additionally, there is still work to do in the criminal justice system. When judges refer domestic violence cases to counselors, there is a concern. Does that person have the skills and knowledge to work with these couples?

Whatever happens on the statewide committee, hopefully there will be a certification requirement for mandated clients. Of course, that doesn't solve the original question. We are only getting a very small percentage of domestic violence through the system. There are lots of couples that present to couples counseling that have never been involved with criminal justice and therefore are not mandated to treatment. There must be some couples counseling listserv that Tri-County can access to provide guidelines, suggestions and information about domestic violence. One member present suggested the Oregon Counselors Association - there is a subgroup for marriage and family counselors.

There was some discussion about the dangers of making policy recommendations that counselors should never work with couples with domestic violence. Perhaps it is better to at least screen the couple so that at least some contact is made. One member felt that if you are below a certain threshold of physical violence, power and control, it is possible to actually work with a couple with some of these issues. One member commented that it is ironic that the people who are most qualified to work with DV issues with a couple, will not work with them because it is politically unacceptable. Instead, counselors who don't understand domestic violence dynamics issues end up working with many couples.

What would you do if you were seeing a couple together and it became clear to you that separation would be good and he doesn't seem psychopathic? Possibly suggest that the woman make contact with victim services and hope that the advocates suggest that she leave. As the counselor you can then work with the couple to negotiate that separation, but you're not the one suggesting it. One member suggested working with the couple to write a separation agreement.

In a couple of meetings recently working with Latino populations, one member was discussing no contact orders and need for batterers to work on their stuff. Members were told that this

stance was an Anglo position. Family work was seen as more valued than an individual working on his own stuff. Not that many resources for Spanish speaking clients. In-laws, family play a big role. Don't see as many professionals, more likely to see pastors or priests. In terms of deciding whether to do couples counseling, I still need to assess the couple. Do women need empowerment? First step is education – getting them to know what they don't have to tolerate. Education is equally important for the men. Need to teach them WHAT abuse is, what it looks like. This might need to be done through different channels, such as Spanish radio – Saturday morning talk shows, etc. It is also important to do an assessment of family values of individuals to determine the best mode of treatment. In other words, it is important to do a cultural or ecological assessment of the person to determine the best course of intervention.