

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes June 10, 2014

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Minutes by Rachel Smith, edited by Chris Huffine

Editor's note: Rachel has provided several links in these minutes. To follow the links push down the control button on your keyboard and then click on the link.

Today's Discussion: "Life After Group"—Preparing group members for sustaining their work once they leave the program

The original round of state standards were 48 sessions with 3 monthly follow-ups, and the original intent with the follow ups was to help men with the transition. The revised standards dropped the requirement for follow-up sessions, in part because providers didn't find them particularly useful.

What are people's thoughts about what they are doing in terms of follow-ups? For sex offender groups they tend to offer drop in. Most providers offer some sort of free aftercare. Typically as long as they have completed the program they can come back whenever they want (either monthly, or, in some cases, as frequently as weekly). They would come back and talk about what they have been dealing with since finishing the program and what has come up for them since graduating. It was a really positive process (and it was definitely a process). Aftercare can also be a way to assess on-going risk after the program.

Most providers have not had much success with follow-ups and graduated participants' coming back to the group. It is one thing to say "Oh, I'm going to come back with the group I've been traveling through this process with", but participants soon realize that they will not be with those same people and often don't come back. It may be that men who say they want to come really do want to but they end up not coming back because of scheduling issues - it just falls off their planner. It is also probably contingent on the level of cohesion in a group. Also, some of these men may be having contact outside of the group and therefore don't feel a need to return to the group. Another possibility is that for some a return to the group for a visit may convey that they're "failing" in some way. In particular if they have had any struggles or are queried about how they have been doing they may feel badly if they can't give a completely positive report. There might also be some fear that they will be pressed to engage again full time.

Thinking about drop-ins there seem to be at least two categories of men who do return. One is those who are doing well. They typically really respect the group and the agency. It is usually great to see these guys and they are a good influence on people in the program. The

second category are completers who are in crisis. A significant lapse/relapse of abusive behavior or other crisis may lead them to drop in on the group. At least some of the time these men might actually need to re-engage fully with the program. We need to be careful not to collude with them with the monthly dropping in - if you are seeing that something is going on then that is important and needs to be addressed. One way abusers manipulate is to appease victims by implying they are doing more work than they really are by doing these drop-ins.

What about men who wish to re-engage in the program, either via a new charge or voluntarily who either did substantial work and dropped out or who completed the program? One provider has a small group of men who leave and come back (5% or 3%) - and they are a mix of voluntary and court ordered. What is true about all of these men is that they did a significant amount of work and they are coming back - so they are not brand new. One strategy is to start prepping a returning participant to get ready to do more work when doing the intake. We can also think about it as an onion - reframing it as a layer versus "this didn't work" when talking to these men. Going from a substance abuse perspective may be a good place to start for some men. For some men it takes multiple go arounds for the message to stick - just like "her" leaving and substance abuse. One provider has had one guy who is on his third time back and found that returning was empowering for him - he had gotten to that place of ready to do work and realized that he had not invested himself in this on the first go around. There are many reasons why a program may not "take" the first time. One reason is that they were secretly abusing substances. Another reason is some were going through tumultuous things, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (e.g., not doing well with certain triggers).

Men's Resource Center had an aftercare group back in the mid-1990s and some lessons learned from that are:

1. It is really hard to get men to re-engage in aftercare once they finish
2. Really need to identify a core group of 3-to-4 men who are willing to make a 3-6 month commitment to attend to keep the group going
3. Need to have cross talk because there is drift - the group can start to drift potentially into less accountable circumstances. The way this was addressed with this group was to have a first hour of group with no staff member present and the second hour with a staff member who can moderate any drifting that occurred.

Allies in Change has what is called an "advanced group" for men who have done extensive work in becoming non-abusive, but want to continue doing work on a longer term basis. Several men in the group have been attending for over a decade. This is a subset of men who have the financial circumstances that allow them to do this (e.g., insurance to pay for it) and also the desire to continue long term. These are not necessarily men who cannot get the hang of the message, but who want to continue doing work. This seems like a model formula for doing "purely" aftercare groups. They make an on-going commitment and form a cohesive group which they remain loyal to.

Another thing that may make a difference in men returning is their level of connection with the group facilitators. Many of us can remember a teacher who really had an impact on us. It

seems that Batterer Intervention Program facilitators can similarly impact the men's experiences – deep personal connection really impacts the outcomes for the men. This might also lead to a greater likelihood of dropping in to say hi after completing.

It is a great thing to identify outside people who can be ongoing support for the men when they're not in group.

It is important that while the work is long term and there is certainly no guarantee that men will get better, it is vital that the men be told directly that they CAN change and become non-abusive if they want to. A great way of further dashing hope for these guys is telling them that there is no hope for them to change. It is a delicate process but we have to acknowledge that they can change (thinking about people's fear of having "former" abusers working in the community). There is an agency that actively tries to get these men to work in the community, but because it is such a delicate process there are very few such groups. It is also part of the culture of the group.

It was mentioned that the work goes deeper than simply stopping abusive behavior, it is a lifestyle change. It is about their social networks and the way they structure their day-to-day lives. So it is about conveying the work as moving out of an abusive lifestyle. It is not just about checking off the homework assignments, but it is about really changing the way they live. An example strategy for doing this in treating substance abuse is to have "sobriety" drawn on a board as a core for people getting over substance abuse.

It is also about identity: "I'm an abuser" (similar to substance abuse – "I'm an addict"). If you change that verbiage and labeling around the identity piece you can move closer toward ending the abusive behaviors. One descriptor is accountability – "I am working on being more accountable"; "If I am owning my own struggles then I have to work on myself" – reframing from it being about the survivors' struggles). Him not being abusive at all is less important than him being accountable and validating. We see these things in substance abuse fields as well.

Another aspect of life after the program is how to deal with on-going challenges outside of the group to be non-abusive. Men who take the work seriously will talk about challenges outside of the group (e.g., challenges with family of origin, coworkers, etc.). One Batterer Intervention provider had a graduated participant who sent an email back to the agency after moving out of town and talked about his experience of disclosing his work that he did with the agency and becoming targeted for ridicule by his coworkers. Another Batterer Intervention provider had a participant who quit his job after not being able to be around his coworkers who were talking so terribly about women. Yet another Batterer Intervention provider had a participant who talked about having conflict with his brother related to his positive changes.

Another dilemma is that when the men encounter pro-abuse beliefs in others, should they respond? For one Batterer Intervention provider, it seemed that the client really wanted to intervene but wasn't able to do so effectively. Some of us have seen among the men in more advanced places that they tend to do it more on the down-low. One of the tensions with life

after group is that we create this space of accountability and a place for talking about these issues, but outside of this small space they cannot do that and their outside lives are not always in line with the way of thinking created in the group. There is a lot of delicate navigating that has to happen in terms of what we do about the people in men's lives who maintain abusive mindsets. We have seen some guys making less progress because of not having that "soundboard" of supportive network members. Wendy's research was looking at behaviors and men's social networks. She found that it may be that as they are thinking about the abuse more they will use their partners as "soundboards" instead of their social networks reflecting on their own behaviors when talking to other people (e.g., "This has been my experience"; "This is what I learned").

Another finding in Wendy's research was that men's social networks appear to reflect back and reinforce what the men are putting out. If a man is putting out pro-abuse beliefs then those tend to be supported, if they shift to pro-social then those tend to be supported. This also means that if they do not have anywhere to put things out they will not have validation coming. As an example of this, a peer was telling a client that his partner was undermining him and it didn't occur to him that she could be on his side. Thus, we need to move from: "She's always putting me down" to "She's on my side" and this transition can translate outside of the intimate relationship into larger contexts of the men's social networks and it can be a bidirectional kind of thing. Part of one Batterer Intervention Program's accountability model is doing just that. A tell of when a guy is really getting it is when he is changing his interactions with extended family and beyond. We even see their stance and demeanor change when this is happening. Another tell is when they are talking with each other about how concepts apply to other men in the program. There is a new book relevant to this topic, *Unclenching our Fists* by Sara Elinoff Acker, which provides great resources for extending our knowledge ([more information provided here](#)).

Another relevant topic related to life after group is the idea of being in relapse related to abuse and control. This is an issue that *Allies in Change*, among others, addresses in its groups. This concept as it applies to abusive individuals was briefly reviewed. This material was originally developed within the substance abuse field, but appears to have relevance for patterns of abuse and control as well. First, it is important to understand that relapse is a process where a return to abusive behavior is the last step in the relapse process, not the first. In other words, a person can be in relapse without yet having patterns of abuse and control. Relapse is only a relevant concept for those who are in recovery. You can't be in relapse if you haven't been in recovery. In terms of abuse and control this means having stopped patterns of abuse and control and practicing on-going accountability. It is likely that everyone will occasionally be in relapse. The goal is for them to realize when they are in relapse before falling back into patterns of abuse and control (just as an alcoholic can realize they are in relapse before actually returning to alcohol use). People can move in and out of relapse while they are in recovery. Those people that understand the signs of relapse and who understand this idea that relapse is a process can navigate that process when they see the signs in themselves and they can interrupt the relapse process. As a real life example, one former participant called after having completed the program several years earlier. He said he was calling because he thought he was probably in relapse. While he had not become abusive and controlling, his partner had shared some concerns about some apparent regression. While

talking on the phone he was quickly able to realize that he'd actually been drifting into relapse since the birth of his first child several months earlier. In the wake of this conversation he was able to make some lifestyle adjustments to move out of relapse and not fall back into patterns of abuse and control. This is a great example of the importance of on-going monitoring of possible drift and intervening with it before it yields to more abuse and control.

Part of the work is not just making a fix, but making it permanent. For some participants it takes a while. It could be a good concept for POs to be trained to look for those warning signs of relapse rather than noticing the police contact/crisis moment(s). It is also important to not just notice the negative behaviors. In substance abuse work we look at the absence of positive behaviors. Relapse is not said to be innately bad, it is real and it happens. It is more of a realistic goal to learn how to correct relapse than avoiding it altogether.

One concrete tool for addressing life after group, originally developed at Men's Resource Center, is a Continuing Accountability Plan. A copy of this is attached to these meeting minutes. It is typically done the last time in a group and is intended to highlight what the men need to keep in mind once they have left the group to make sure they don't fall back into old patterns of thinking and being abusive. There are 10 questions they need to answer:

1. What were the old ways of thinking (i.e., defense mechanisms) that allowed you to deny your bad behavior to yourself.
2. What are your relapse warning signs
3. What are you going to do if you see your warning signs
4. What are your slippery situations, where you are most tempted to be abusive and controlling
5. What are your situational-specific plans for dealing with those
6. Who are the people you can truly trust and confide in and who know your program
7. What were the wants and needs you were typically meeting by being abusive and controlling
8. What are non-abusive and non-controlling ways you now meet those wants and needs
9. How will you continue to monitor your level of accountability?
10. What are ways you continue to be abusive and controlling and what is work you still need to do.

The final question is positioned at the end to re enforce the idea that they need to continue doing this work after ending the program, that it's an on-going process rather than being "fixed". The intent is that they keep this information with them as one thing they can continue to look at after leaving the program: Something that needs to be conveyed is that you (the participants) need to be thinking about life after group – that this is ongoing work. It is more than checking off assignments and moving on – it is about changing the way you live. That is what one Batterer Intervention Program does with the men's weekly updates. We are seeing men making progress when they are thinking about their life and how the abuse relates to things outside of the arrest or crisis moment(s). What can we offer to extend that to life after group? One strategy could be moving from counting weeks to talking about goals.

