

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes - December 8, 2015

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Minutes by Kate Sackett, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic: Accountability

The word "accountability" is one of the most common words programs that work with abusive partners use to talk about what they do. The discussion for today is to clarify how is accountability defined, how is it taught, how is it evaluated and why does it matter in the first place?

What is accountability?

"Ownership" - taking ownership, recognizing what they've done, "I" statements

Awareness

Accountability includes acknowledging the abusive behavior they have done without minimizing, denying, or blaming.

The impact of what I've done on others, not just "this is what I did" but "this is how it impacted my life, everyone around me, the community at large" moving just from the internal all the way to that larger family self and the larger community self

Also describing empathy building -- focusing on his behavior as a pebble hitting the water, you're describing the ripples of what happens when the pebble hits the water—it doesn't just affect the spot where it lands, but sends out ripples affecting everything around it

One study indicated that empathy has been negatively affected by the growing Impact of technology in past 10 years, dropping by 40%

Change in behavior, not continuing the behavior. Not enough to acknowledge just what has happened in the past but also a forward focus as well

Acknowledging that behavior is a choice, can choose something different/learn something

Impact of battering is not just the behavior but the *non-acknowledgement* that follows the behavior □ accountability zeroes in on that non-acknowledgement; that is what really significantly amplifies for survivors the negative impact; it's the moments that follow abuse where it's rationalized/ignored/blamed on her

Stepping outside the circle, getting honest, taking action, actual steps to make a difference; "fear dance" stepping outside of that

If making any kind of justification (minimization, denial, blame) they will do it again, so how do you get them out of that □ honesty is the foundation, being willing to get honest, look at what it is

Another key part of the work is the denial, early part of the work is getting men to work through that, be honest about what's actually happening

Allies in Change talks about "primary accountability". Traditionally accountability focuses on abusive behavior. Primary accountability. means you're accountable for all your behavior.

You're responsible for your well-being as well as your abusive behavior. You are responsible for how you respond, deal with everything that happens to you. It means practicing good self-care, being assertive, not blaming other people (partner or anyone else) for your own suffering. Being accountable for outcome of communication, what is your attitude, how do you communicate, is that successful and effective -- accountability not just for the intent but for the impact. Intention versus perception -- another way to minimize or dismiss behavior is putting it

impact. intention versus perception--another way to minimize or dismiss behavior is putting it on the intention, dismissing the experience of the other person. Since the abusive partner didn't intend to hurt their partner, then their partner wasn't abused. Coercion and influence also comes up around that subject. Intent versus impact is a big thing. They need to take accountability for impact regardless of what their intent was. You need to watch if they are being dismissive of their partner's experience.

Also see abusive men do the opposite -- perceive her as being abusive, intending to hurt, presume that because it did cause harm she intended it to cause harm □ another erroneous assumption.

Continued accountability for what has happened since the abusive behavior as a result of the abusive behavior. This could be in further communications with the partner, e.g. through legal situations, direct contact with partner, accepting the impact of behavior on her and awareness of that in new communications with her on an ongoing basis. A lot of men struggle with that. They "just want to move forward"--they "did accountability", they "were accountable". But accountability is not a one-shot deal, not a single moment in time. It's a process. It's also an ongoing way of being -- that's something they wrestle with, continuing to be mindful, aware of how it ripples not just across people but across time.

You also need to consider the context, intent, and impact. The context refers to looking at the larger setting in which the abusive behavior is done. This isn't just an isolated behavior done separately from all other behaviors, it's typically part of a larger pattern. Impact also is affected by context (and vis-versa). The intent also can play a role. For example, research has shown that, in general, women are more likely to use abusive behavior expressively (to communicate a concern) whereas men are more likely to use abusive behavior instrumentally (as a tool to further their agenda). Also, by putting the behavior in context—what happens before and after — can help clarify the intent.

Role in the victim & current partner's recovery is key here too. Part of being accountable is also being accountable for repairing the damage and to facilitate healing and recovery. They have a part to play in that, taking responsibility for their part in that.

Related to this they need to talk about amends work □ related to taking responsibility for the recovery process. Amends work is typically later-stage work. If it is introduced too early on, they will try to inappropriately use amends as a tool to try to reconcile. When that happens while on the surface it can appear to be amends work it is actually further manipulation and even abuse. It corresponds to the kind of abusive and controlling behaviors present during the "honeymoon" stage--not genuine/deep, instead intended to manipulate and pacify.

Accountability isn't something people can step into overnight. It's something they grow into overtime. In the beginning, you can't hold them accountable for everything. It's kind of like building muscle—it takes time.

Another core aspect of accountability talked about at Allies in Change is shifting from an external to an internal focus. Most abusive men have an external focus. They tend to continually look outward at what others are or are not doing and that everything that happens to them is due to (and the responsibility of) those around them, particularly their family. They blame their family for their struggles and they make it all their fault. Therefore they need to control those people so they can be happy. An internal focus, on the other hand, means looking inward at their own thoughts, feelings, needs, physical states, etc. It then ties into accountability in realizing that they are responsible for taking care of those things. While others may assist them, it isn't the responsibility of them. Accountability involves shifting from an external to an internal focus. This is the single biggest aspect of accountability, this shift. This is easier said than done and is also counter cultural, especially for males. This internal focus needs to be done while still be aware of/thoughtful about others so it does not become selfish. It involves being relational.

For the internal focus they also need to be accountable for the internal beliefs that led to the behaviors themselves. You need to take a look at the intent and the belief systems behind it. Another key thinking change is developing empathy for the impact of the abusive behavior on others.

Listing off what you've done in the past is just one piece of accountability. Another important aspect is one what you are doing/going to do differently. You still have to know and understand what you did in the past because if you don't look at the past, how do you know what you need

to do differently in the future? The first step is knowing what you did, the second is knowing that you need to change it.

Another aspect of being accountable involves one's affect as one is being accountable. It's not just about listing past behaviors but understanding the affect that goes with it. Is he saying this like he's reading a laundry list or a troubling report? It shouldn't just be detached accounting but should include affect consistent with the seriousness of what was done and suffering that was inflicted. Part of being accountable is that you're going to be troubled, it's going to be painful -- that's good! One of the many reasons we choose to be non-abusive is that it would be hurtful, it would hurt me to hurt you. It's not about making the men suffer but a natural process of becoming accountability involves becoming stressed, disturbed by bad behavior.

One other aspect of becoming accountable is letting go of their sense of entitlement. They tend to feel like they are entitled to certain things, can do what they want ("need") to get them. The internal belief system of entitlement needs to change; part of supporting accountability is challenging that.

Obstacles to accountability

One of the biggest barriers is shame. There is so much shame in our culture regarding domestic violence, rape culture, etc. so getting them to see "yes, I've been abusive and controlling" is difficult. This is one way using a group format is helpful. When they start hearing ownership of abusive behavior from other men in the group, that sort of breaks the ice.

You really can't have accountability until you have progress (e.g., skill-building), otherwise it's shame-based (I'm a crappy person). But if they are starting to behave more appropriately then it is easier to become accountable.

Collusion is another factor—others supporting an abusive partner avoiding accountability. This includes supporting their denial.

Not surprisingly, some abusive partners can fake accountability. This is especially easy with more rigid programs which often have very specific ways of talking and being accountable (e.g., coping to everything in the police report, making specific acceptable statements).

Another obstacle to accountability is not being willing to talk about the abusive behavior. You give it power by not talking about it. It's possible to heal, recognizing that you can move forward once you start dealing with it.

Another challenge is that early on abusive partners may swap out one set of abusive behaviors for another. Typically, they willfully stopping higher risk, illegal abusive behavior but replace it with new legal abusive behaviors, subtle forms of control. So it's not just about listing old ways of being abusive, but looking at their current behaviors as well.

Some feelings can also be barriers. Embarrassment, disrespect, jealousy are other obstacles.

A shaming stance toward domestic violence and violence in general is a barrier. It makes it difficult for discussion.

Even asking about abusive behaviors is not very comfortable. People are much more comfortable screening for if you've been abused rather than checking and preventing signs of abuse as an abusive partner. So they need to get comfortable with the language of abuse.

Another issue more common in more rigid programs is a heavier focus on compliance rather than true accountability. This can be tempting because this strong, rigid, direct confrontation can feel righteous and good. It also aligns with those who believe that punishment is an effective (it's not). It shouldn't be just about checking off the boxes but generating real thought about what do I really want to be accountable for. It takes time and patience to foster true accountability. It also means tolerating mistakes and resistance until they can get there.

Be careful not to objectify the men in the group as "batterers". If they get labeled as such it is easier to see them as things rather than people and to be less respectful as a result. This actually reinforces their pro-abuse belief systems and lowers their accountability.

Compartmentalizing their accountability is another sign of a barrier -- "90% of the time I'm accountable, but there's a couple people I can still be an asshole to because it's justified". In other words, they may not acknowledge certain bad behaviors or certain victims or certain situations in which they were abusive.

The sheer amount of work that it takes to become accountable is a huge barrier. It isn't easy or fast. For many people, getting them to slow down to find the time to think about themselves can also be a challenge (e.g., working 2-3 jobs, have lots going on, when are you going to find the time to think about themselves?). It's also emotionally difficult demand, if not strong incentive

time to think about themselves! j. It's also emotionally difficult, demand, if not strong incentive to stay there it's hard to stay with it.

Another challenge is that without leverage to stay engaged in a program abusive partners are more likely to drop out before becoming accountable. The abusive partners with the highest drop-out rates are partner mandated men where there is little leverage. Next highest drop out rates are child welfare mandated abusive men where the primary motivation is their motivation to see their children. Court mandated men have the most leverage and therefore the lowest drop-out rates. You even see a difference among those men where those who are on tighter supervision and monitoring are less likely to drop out than those with little supervision or monitoring.

Peer associations can make a difference. There is strong empirical support for this. So negative peer associations (including, but not limited to, family members), where they are supporting abuse and control (and related beliefs) can be a barrier.

Substance abuse can be a barrier in a couple different ways. More obviously, an abusive partner who is actively abusing substances is unlikely to be accountable or to be actively engaged in what is necessary to become accountable. Sometimes the substance abuse may be hidden and not easily detected (and potentially not as extreme). This level of use can prevent otherwise genuinely engaged abusive men from becoming truly accountable. On the other hand, becoming sober can be an obstacle where the prior substance abuse is blamed for the abuse-- "that was drunk me".

Likewise it can be easy to blame other co-existing issues as the problem (e.g. mood disorders, life stress, childhood trauma). This is a common mistake mental health professionals make with their clients.

Resistance to being seen as submissive may prevent accountability. This goes back to the belief system and culture of entitlement, masculine belief system but also a power over belief system.

So sometimes until that belief system shifts men aren't willing to admit and embrace full accountability.

Another word is entitlement, privilege; even among female aggressors, there is a sense of entitlement (I'm owed, society owes me, you owe me) □ strongly supported in the culture that men are entitled to lots of things, sense of ownership (Terrance Real calls it "grandiosity") also called "egotism". This helps to justify abusive and controlling behavior.

How do we teach accountability?

The most obvious and concrete way is via the Accountability Plan/Accountability Statement/Letter of Accountability which is required by Oregon state standards.

Part of this is emphasizing that it's not enough to just be accountable to the victim, you need to be accountable to others as well, including, but not only the other men in the group and the facilitators. This can be modeled in the program policies (not a punitive approach to accountability, give people opportunity and they'll meet halfway if necessary, relationship building piece, do outreach and engagement, let them know you're there to help them through the process, want to know who they are, as individuals). It also involves them moving out of their isolation from others and their excessive dependency on their romantic partner. It's about developing larger social networks of support.

It's important that there be solid, steady, patient support and encouragement for the man to take responsibility.

Another huge piece is challenging and reducing the shame that keeps them from accountability.

John Bradshaw and Brene Brown both write extensively about shame and toxic shame. The group itself is intrinsically shame reducing if it is well run. There is acceptance and support among the men even as they are disclosing both past and present abusive behavior. Having the experience of being met with compassion and support when they talk about their past abuse and control helps them to become more accountable. When new guy enters the group, "words of wisdom" is that they offer that there's no shame in there, they're all in the same boat.

Group process is important to teaching accountability - guys call each other out, they listen, and role modeling with more advanced guys. How groups are developed and built by facilitators can play a role. They need to be judgment-free zone and non-judgmental feedback from each other.

Universality is developed as early on as possible in terms of common charges, etc. so they see they're in a group of people that have the same thing going on as them. The group is a place where they can talk about being abusive. For many that is the only place they can do that and

have real conversations (versus making a single statement and being judged for that statement). Modeling of the group members, benefit of the group, especially with open groups where more senior members are further along hopefully

Recognize the superficial attempts at “accountability” paired with challenging for deeper understanding attempts. Really need to be careful balancing the validation and helping them move forward, recognize their limits, challenge them to go deeper without colluding as a facilitator.

While there is a place for skill-building, but early on when not shifting their belief system they can misuse, abuse skills. As the belief system shifts they will use skills more appropriately. Early on it's easier to have the men see low accountability in others rather than themselves. This can be a fine step in helping them to call out each on accountability. As they label it in others it is often easier to examine it in themselves.

Another way of encouraging accountability is by modeling it as a facilitator. For example, being accountable for what you do (“sorry I’m late”), sharing examples about process, being accountable for your mistakes and your choices. This requires a great deal of humility to practice well. Related to this is that facilitators can model vulnerability by sharing examples from their own life, even if made-up. This can help encourage the men to get more vulnerable and accountable. Modeling from other aspects of the other staff, being treated well by admin as well as clinical staff, being treated like a human being

Examining their internal self-talk can also play a role. What sorts of things do they think that give themselves permission to be abusive or not? This includes saying the beliefs out loud. If you don't feel good about saying this, you don't feel comfortable - that gives the facilitator something to work with.

Making judgments in a positive, supportive way (not a shaming way). For example, asking “were these behaviors meeting your needs?” It is important to work with those in order to get to the feeling piece -- if uncomfortable, something didn't feel good, what life changes do you need to make for that?

Encouraging men to look beyond the moment of the incident-- can you articulate where you were when this behavior happened, what you learned in the course, and what you're going to do in the future moving forward?

Another tool is to have solid dialogue with referral sources. If each is sharing information with the other that will help limit triangulation. This will also increase accountability if everyone is in the loop and on the same page.

Direct confrontation is another key aspect of this work. The group process is not just about giving testimony, but challenging each other, both from facilitator and from group members. Daily inventory, assessing the day; process of using it to say “I am responsible for everything that I do”

Bringing it back to the person in the program (so ___ happened, what are you going to do about that?) The original “I feel” statement was modified years ago at Men's Resource Center adding “and I will” to bring it back to personal agency, an internal focus. You are not 100% responsible for all problems in the relationship, but you are 100% responsible for *your part* of the problems in the relationship.

Impact of their behavior on others on a deep feeling level -- they become more accountable, because don't want to go around being mean, cruel to everyone, start pulling back about certain behaviors

How can we tell if they really are accountable?

What are the “tells”?

One way of recognizing accountability is they start talking about self-comparisons and how they have changed.

While they might not mean it, would be men who are no longer in a relationship choosing not to be in a relationship for a period of time so they can work on themselves. This seems to be more trust-worthy if it holds true over time.

Obviously it's easy for them to simply lie and claim they are not being abusive, but there are some more subtle micro-behaviors that are tougher to fake or conceal. Most notably are the more subtle behaviors associated with an internal focus including greater serenity, acceptance, less investment in what others are/aren't doing and more of a natural focus on how they are managing themselves in any given situation. Serenity -- focusing on true power over themselves

managing themselves in any given situation. Serenity -- focusing on the power over themselves, practicing that and natural consequence of that is one of the more gratifying aspects of the work seeing that change. Change in their self-care □ look different, healthier, taking better care of themselves. Happier -- creates greater happiness, faces are more relaxed, smiling more (even though same stress at home, not rattled the same way). And in small ways, are they still feeling good about what they do even if the outcome is not to their liking. Did I do the best I could? Even if I didn't get what I wanted, can I still understand that?

Listen to what's *not* being said as well as what is being said.

Take a "we'll see" stance--if it's really true, it will still be true in the future. Especially with longer term work it's harder to fake it and easier to see if it really is sustained.

Another way would be to talk directly with the partner or other family members. One common measure is whether the family has seen improvement and can then tell if he has missed a group or two. If they see regression then he's not yet ready to complete. Likewise, if what the victim is reporting is consistent with what he is reporting, that is a good sign.

How they respond to other guys' stories can sometimes be telling. Do they join with non-accountable comments and statements or do they confront them? Are they able to identify and articulate when someone else in the group either is or is not being accountable?

New stories telling focus more on themselves (not egotistical) talking about own feelings, own behavior.

Not viewing completion of program as entitlement to something in the relationship, etc. -- seeing that piece drop away, not necessarily going to get back together.

Another good sign of accountability = report that they've cut off unhealthy relationships, it was hard to do but they feel it is necessary to make the changes they need to.

They tend to be quick to acknowledge and report abusive and controlling behaviors and quick to report continued struggles. What's more typical when they are faking is to just report that everything is going great. Very transparent; accountable men continue right to the last day to acknowledge real things that are happening -- accountability, behaving imperfectly and recognizing it.

Moving beyond accountability

One of the most accountable things you can do is to think about what you are going to do differently in the future. Research indicates that accountability for behavior is not an indicator of change or reduction in risk. The biggest indicator of change is to be able to practice, say what you're going to do differently, the steps you are going to take to make sure it's not going to happen again.

It appears that the field is moving in this direction—away from such a heavy focus on accountability alone. There's been an overemphasis on accountability at the expense of other important change aspects. For example, there are abusive men who can be quite accountable while still continuing to be abusive. Accountability may be necessary, but it's not sufficient.