

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network meeting minutes--6/1/2004

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Minutes by Chris Huffine

Topic: Shame and Domestic Violence

-This topic was previously discussed at the 3/13/2001 meeting. The notes from that meeting were shared with this group. Much of what was discussed at this meeting overlapped with, but was different than what was discussed at the other meeting. If you are interested in getting a copy of those earlier minutes, contact Chris at chuffine@pacifier.com.

What is shame, how does it work?

-Shame involves judging the other and equating them with a particular behavior. To be shaming is to say "this is who you are" vs. "this is what you do". Another way of thinking about it is that with shame the view is that "you are not welcome at the table" in contrast to guilt which states "you are welcome at the table but you need to check your inappropriate behavior at the door".

-Shame seems more self-perpetuating than guilt.

-People often speak of feeling "ashamed" of things. While shame is the root of the word, when people speak of feeling "ashamed" they often are speaking more about the guilt they feel over their behavior. That is very different from shaming others.

-Labels are shaming others. It equates a person with a behavior, as if that's all there is to them. For example, "batterer" is a label implying that person is defined solely by their abusive behavior vs. "abusive man" or "man who batters" which distinguish the person from the behavior. Another example of the negative aspects of labeling is assigning young children labels as if that is all they are (e.g., sex offenders, juvenile delinquents, etc). If anything, such general labels may encourage them to only think of themselves as the hurtful behavior rather than striving to rise above it.

-Shaming behaviors can be very powerful and hurtful. One recent example has been the torture of Iraqi prisoners which has come to light in recent months. Many of the techniques used (e.g., nudity, simulated sexual behavior, derogatory remarks, picture taking) were intentionally shameful with the knowledge that the damage would be greater.

-Shame tends to be very polarizing and encouraging of black and white thinking. In contrast to that is acknowledging shades of gray--that people are not all good or all bad. Neil Goldschmidt is a good example of that. While it has recently come to light that he sexually abused a teen-age girl, he also did a number of positive things for the city and the state as a politician. Some people want to only focus on the political good that he did while others feel that all of the public good he did is now moot because of his sexual abuse and the resulting cover-up. The truth is that all of it is true--even as he was sexually abusing the young woman and later covering up, he was also doing a number of positive things to help the general public.

Cultural aspects of shame

-Shame is a socially created condition.

-Shame is common and widespread within the Asian community. In part this due to the extent that Asian culture is a shame-based culture, more so than Western culture. Shame seems to have more of a moral feel (sin) whereas guilt has more of a criminal feel (crime). Within many Asian cultures, there is no distinction made between those behaviors. For example, "Sin" and "crime" have the same Chinese character.

-Many Judeo-Christian faiths view all people as being equal. Many Eastern religions have social strata where all people are not equal. This creates more room for being shamed.

-Non-American born men tend to display more across the board denial. They are more likely to claim they have done absolutely no abuse of any kind. American born men are more prone to acknowledging abuse, but understating it, minimizing it, justifying it, rationalizing it, etc. Another contributing factor to this, besides higher levels of shame, is that non-American born men may feel put off by the "one up" status of the facilitator being from America and not of their cultural group.

-Shunning is a shame based behavior and a fear of this drives many people's shame.

Shame and domestic violence

-What is the connection between shame and domestic violence? Shame can perpetuate DV by the person (perpetrator or victim) not being willing to look at it out of shame. Even if they are willing to look at themselves, they may feel too ashamed to admit or talk about it. It can lead to further perpetration as perpetrators become abusive out of their own sense of victimization (he feels shamed by others and then channels his sense of shame into abuse of his partner). The need to maintain appearances can also lead to more escalated levels of control.

-As mentioned earlier, shame is also a powerful tool used by abusive men on their

partners.

-On a social level as well, shame/shaming can be used to keep women in an abusive relationship and to pressure them to stay/remain. Shame can keep DV in the shadows, both in the general culture and among individuals.

-Gender socialization is also tied into shaming. As females and, especially, males, drift from their traditional gender roles they are often shamed by others into conforming with the traditional gender roles. Likewise, men who choose to become non-abusive and practice mutual respect may become the targets of shame and ridicule by others.

Ways to address the role of shame in domestic violence

-Create a non-shaming environment within the group that makes it easier for men to disclose their past abuse and control. Distinguish between accountability (appropriate) and judgment (inappropriate and shame-inducing).

-"We" statements by the facilitator, when appropriate, rather than "you" statements are less shameful. The common ground we all share is the experience of various things, the differences are how we choose to respond to those experiences. For example, we all have been in arguments with a romantic partner (common ground) but some of us have chosen to become abusive during those arguments, while others have chosen not to.

-Educate men about shame, how it differs from guilt, and the role shame plays in keeping DV in the shadows and undercover.

-On a larger social level, it needs to be okay to talk about domestic violence with others rather than only in the batterer intervention program. This is comparable to the shift made in the past few decades concerning alcohol abuse. Once no one would talk about or admit that they had a drinking problem. These days it is much more common for people to casually talk about their level of alcohol use, ask others about their level of alcohol use, talk about past problems from alcohol, etc. The same thing needs to happen with domestic violence--where discussions of abuse and control can be part of the general public dialogue.

-We, as a culture, need to move beyond punishment and judgment of domestic violence to acknowledgement of and intervention with domestic violence. This is made more difficult by the larger cultural forces that encourage shame (e.g., punishment as a primary intervention for inappropriate behavior).