

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Clinical Minutes May 10, 2016

Present: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change), Matt Johnston (Domestic Violence Safe Dialogue), Linda Castaneda (Castaneda Counseling), Jacquie Pancoast (Eastside Concern), Jessica Stanley (Clackamas Women's Services), Sarah Van Dyke (CYF/DV Coordinator), Shannon Barkley (Clackamas County Probation and Parole), Chelsea Penning (Multnomah County Department of Community Justice), Rachel Paris (ARMS), Rachel Smith (Portland State University), Kate Sackett (Portland State University), Tammie Jones (OJD)

Minutes by Rachel Smith, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic: Secrecy versus Privacy

Diana Groener came up with this concept for conversation a few years ago. When the topic was brought up in this group a year or so ago, the conversation centralized mainly around the macro (e.g., how this relates to our work within the larger system, in our interactions with probation, with our group attendees, etc.), so the goal of the conversation today is to focus on using this as an educational concept with abusive men.

Here are some contributions from Diana Groener sent in advance (she was unable to be present for the discussion today): *As always it's easier for the guys to see it when they are the 'victim'. My group recently talked about it when a guy read a journal about hearing his wife on the phone complaining about him to a friend of hers. He thought that was a violation of his privacy, that if she had a problem with him she should ONLY talk to him about it. So we discussed whether she had the 'right' to complain to others, or should their problems remain 'private'.*

It's important to discuss what each person in the relationship can keep 'private', or should EVERYTHING be shared between partners. Does she HAVE to share everything with him? Or can she have any privacy within the relationship? And the opposite argument - when can he keep things 'private' from his partner, and when is that part of his secretive manipulations?

It's important to recognize that each person in the relationship may have different needs/comfort levels in sharing versus personal privacy. He may want to be an open book and share everything, while she wants to have some level of privacy, and that's OK. Wanting privacy is not a sign of something wrong (she's cheating) or he can't trust her. Privacy in relationships is about honoring each other's boundaries. This means also that what is private or shared in relationships is different for each relationship they are in.

The individual's boundaries around what is private/shared constitutes a relationship agreement.

Now, if there is a violation of trust in the relationship, such as cheating, there may be amends of allowing the partner full access to email, cell phones, credit card charges, etc., as a means of amends/repairing trust. Again, this would be an agreement freely made.

Privacy should be discussed in terms of various issues - money/spending habits, past sex lives, masturbation/pornography use, where you are and what you are doing, who you spend time with, etc. And beware the fallacy of keeping secrets “for their own good” or “what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her”.

Privacy is a positive thing to which we all have a right, whereas secrecy reflects intrinsically controlling behavior. Abusive partners can violate/misuse each of these concepts. They will keep secrets, which is manipulative, claiming that they have a right to privacy. They will also violate their partner’s privacy, feeling they are entitled to know everything, which they do not.

Example of this topic in BI group: A man overhears his partner talking on the phone with her friends about him and feels that it is a violation of his privacy and that she shouldn’t be doing so. Is he violating her privacy by overhearing her? Is she violating his privacy by talking with her friends? This led to an extended group discussion, further highlighting and illuminating each of these concepts.

When it comes to minimization or blame, secrecy issues do not necessarily come up very often. It does come up in conversations related to cell phones/technology.

Isolation. Is it that he does not want her telling anybody because he does not want her telling "their" secrets, or is it that he does not want her sharing with others about his abusive behaviors? It is probably a little bit of both. When there is abuse, it is not reasonable to expect people to keep that private, because they are, appropriately, trying to reach out, which is where an individual's right to privacy can be violated by an abusive partner, which further isolates the individual experiencing abuse.

In group, it can be useful to get them to discuss the intent behind wanting to be secretive, as well as intents behind violating their partners' privacy. This can help the facilitator to assess when there is an awareness of personal respect, what you share and what you do not about your partner.

In terms of boundaries, to what extent do you have the right to share various pieces of information? An important part of healthy relationships is having conversations about boundaries, and is it safe to have those conversations? For some of our men, part of their change process is letting her know that she can speak up, and her experience of doing so, safely.

Suspicion of privacy being violated and actual violations of privacy. Men do a lot of projecting of their feelings, and one of the ways they do that is through suspicions. This reflects an outward focus of emotions. Part of what we can teach men in this situation is to ask them to explore what the underlying emotional states are that they are experiencing behind these suspicions.

The issue of double standards (e.g., "I can check your phone, but you can't check mine"). This is where you can see a lot of justification for behaviors and core beliefs in the form of either blaming the partner and/or carry-over from past experiences/relationships. An important thing for

the men to understand is that he and she may have different standards and that is okay. Another thing for them to understand is the difference between a challenge and a threat. Assumptions of malice also come into play here.

Another thing that comes into play here is a lack of understanding of others' needs. They may mistakenly presume that they have the exact same levels of privacy. As a result he may falsely accuse her of keeping secrets when she is simply invoking her right to privacy or he may violate her right to privacy or he may accuse her of violating his privacy when no such agreement was actually made.

Social media. The notion of privacy has become much more of a complicated conversation with the continued expansion of social media and communication technologies in general.

Working with survivors. We have seen survivors trying to 'get his Facebook under control', because he will use his social media network to violate her privacy by sharing information about the relationship to get sympathy from his friends.

Note about social media and probation: In Multnomah County it is a violation of offenders' probation to even mention the victim's name on social media. In Clackamas County it is more difficult to get violations for this.

Even our abusive men have some right to privacy.

The idea that he gets to set the level of privacy 100% of the time is only true if he is never going to be in a relationship.

While we have talked about men being really pushy about their boundaries, there are also those that do the opposite as part of their abusive behaviors. That is, some men will be more passive about communicating their boundaries to their partners and still expect the partner to be responsible for intuiting those boundaries.

A common thing our guys are doing is violating all kinds of relationship agreements, particularly around sexual agreements, such as those around masturbation, use of pornography, and looking at anyone other than your partner. Violating these sexual agreements is a common way that our men are sexually abusive. Instead of problematizing any of the specific behaviors specified in these agreements, we can talk about whether or not the men are violating the agreements about the behaviors. So while these men have a right to privacy about any of these behaviors, they need to be honest about these boundaries rather than making empty agreements and then routinely violating them. For example, he has a right to privacy around his sexual behavior, provided such behavior isn't violating any agreements that he has made (or implied). If they are, then he is keeping secrets. So, for example, he is welcome to keep information private about his sexual world independent from her. What is a violation (and secret keeping) is when he makes

or implies agreements that he then violates (e.g., agreeing not to look at porn or masturbating but then doing that anyway without telling her).

Financial secrecy. Another area of complexity with regards to privacy vs. secrecy are financial agreements. Men will keep secret significant spending patterns that their partner would expect to know about. On the other hand, some will badger her about every single dollar she spends, violating her right to some privacy.

We are talking a lot about agreements, but how do you make real agreements when there is a power imbalance? You cannot. We can talk in group about what real agreements entail (i.e., both partners are fully free to agree or disagree). We are also assuming people know how to communicate, which is not also (or is rarely ever) true. This is also used as an abuse tactic: "if you love me you should know". This often occurs with more narcissistic abusive men. There is also the stereotype of women purposely not communicating effectively (e.g., "I'm fine, nothing's wrong" when something is in fact wrong).

Privacy should be discussed comprehensively in terms of all aspects of the relationship (e.g., sexual behaviors, finances, etc.).

In general, a lot of our guys use secrecy by actively not making agreements and not sharing information. In other words: they do a lot of secret-keeping. There is a lot of willful avoidance of discussions to keep secrets. This goes into the intent behind keeping secrets. What is the purpose of keeping secrets for our men?

Vulnerability. It is also good to ask about what their support system looks like. What are the key components that help the men we work with to talk about their feelings? Dominant cultural values encourage men to not share their feelings, which transcends into not sharing a lot of information in general. The emphasis in toxic masculinity is to be tough, self-reliant, to not be vulnerable or share personal information.

When the subject of sharing comes up in a group, it seems to often shift to the work context.

When protecting one's own privacy moves into secrecy is when it starts to have negative effects on the relationship/family. This comes up often in terms of maintaining privacy around past traumatic experiences (e.g., being molested as a child). Another issue with privacy is that it blocks intimacy, which inhibits a couple's ability to maintain a healthy relationship.

Generational differences. There is a big difference between how dating plays out today versus how it played out twenty or more years ago. Relationships progress much more quickly today than they did in the past, which contributes to evolutions in how issues of privacy and secrecy come up among abusive, as well as non-abusive, individuals. Is accelerated courtship part of the secrecy?