

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes—3/13/2001

Present: Michael Davis (Changepoint), Christine Crowe (Choices), Paula Manley, Songcha Bowman, Chris Huffine (Men's Resource Center)

Minutes by Chris Huffine

Discussion Topic: Shame, Guilt, and Accountability

-Shame and guilt relate to feeling badly over what you have done. Accountability is owning up to what has happened—to take responsibility for it.

-While it may be good to feel bad over what you have done, at some point you need to move on. Yet, if we, as providers, aren't careful, some group members may try to leap over the feeling bad part to just move on, without acknowledging the past.

-Guilt and shame are often confused and misunderstood. Guilt typically is defined as feeling bad over a particular behavior. Shame is typically defined as feeling bad as a person. Guilt is about behaviors. Shame is about oneself. Shame implies that a person may not be loveable. Things we feel ashamed of we tend to keep closeted and avoid dealing with out of fear of being judged and evaluated as sub-human.

-Cognitive dissonance is important in the change process. The man needs to feel that his abusive behavior is inconsistent with his self-image or how he wants to be viewed by others. That dissonance helps motivate him to change so that his behavior (being non-abusive) is consistent with his self-image (a good man is not abusive). In guilt there is such a dissonance: good person-bad behavior. With shame there is no such cognitive dissonance: bad person-bad behavior. The fear is that the person IS what they have done. If there is no dissonance, then there is no reason to change (I'm an abusive man and always will be—that's who I am).

-Shame has often been used to oppress people—to put them into "boxes" and dismiss them. It is a tool of abuse and oppression.

-Psychotherapy and the therapeutic change process is rooted in creating a non-shaming environment in which a person can openly and honestly look at his or her issues no matter how bad they may be.

-As soon as you shame someone you are taking a “one up” position—as if you are superior to them in some way. Shaming then becomes about payback and revenge. It is a power play and taking of a morally superior ground.

-According to Daniel Amen, a researcher, uncomfortable emotions, such as shame, may affect the brain chemistry in a negative way.

-But we do need to create uncomfortable emotions in order to create accountability. This includes getting them to see and clearly and explicitly acknowledge what they have done, how others have suffered, the consequences, etc.

-The focus shouldn't just be on getting them to feel bad, but on how they can feel better by changing their behavior.

-Abuse done to a person as a child is intrinsically shaming. A child automatically interprets that mistreatment as something they deserved.

-John Bradshaw writes a lot about shame, toxic shame, and guilt which he refers to as “healthy shame”. He believes that shame tends to be “passed on” across generations and relationships. When you feel ashamed you tend to shame others.

-The better you feel about yourself, the less need there is to abuse or shame others. Shame prone men are more invested in the opinions of others and therefore more prone to controlling those opinions through abuse and control tactics.

-Information

from the book Uncovering Shame by Harper and Hoops was shared. They identify “healthy identity” as experiencing shame as an emotion but not as part of an internalized identity. A “shame prone” identity, on the other hand, incorporates shame as part of their identity. They experience shame as more than an emotion and as a confirmation of their identity. They tend to think that it is better to be bad than to be nothing.

-Shame tends to lead to adamant denial and non-disclosiveness. We generally don't walk to talk about or even admit to the things we feel ashamed of. As shame is reduced, disclosure tends to increase. That's one reason why group is the preferred modality in working with abusive men, because of its shame reducing qualities. As new men observe other men openly admitting to and talking about their past abuse without being shamed or humiliated, it makes it easier for them to admit to and talk about their own past abuse.

-Information from an article entitled “Guilt and shame influence anger expression” by Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, and Gramzow published in 1996 in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology was shared. It was found that shame-prone individuals were more disposed to anger and to become aggressive than individuals who

displayed more “shame-free guilt”. Shame-free guilt was related to more constructive means of expressing anger.

-Another article addressing shame is “The role of shame and guilt in the intergenerational transmission of abusiveness” by Dutton, van Ginkel, and Starzomski from 1995 and printed in Violence and Victims. It was found that shaming experiences as a child had a significant impact on the development of abusive behavior as an adult, possibly even more so than having experienced physical abuse as a child. They found that shame tends to increase denial and that the confessional nature of groups may help to reduce shame.

-Much of what we do is designed to reduce the level of shame that men feel. Group itself is shame reducing, creating a new norm where it is okay/encouraged to admit to and talk about abusive behavior. That makes it easier for them to be more fully honest and accountable. Some providers also point out to group members the negative experiences they’ve had from feeling ashamed to get them to stop shaming others as a control tactic.

-Men of some other cultures tend to feel even higher levels of shame, because of the central role that shame plays in their culture. Typically, because of that, the level of denial among these men tends to be even higher than American born men.

-Shame fuels denial. Things we feel ashamed of we tend to avoid talking or even thinking about which increases a person’s level of denial and defensiveness.

-Repeated disclosures of abusive behavior, on the other hand, tends to lower shame. Creating a safe, supportive, respectful, and accountable, but nonjudging environment also helps to reduce shame.

-It is also important to educate men about shame and to ask them to identify what they are ashamed of. Some providers also work at helping men become more aware of their own past experiences of shame and how those may have contributed to their past abusive behavior.

-A positive group peer culture and positive role modeling within the group tends to encourage disclosure by other men. A negative or shaming peer culture tends to reduce disclosure.

-Disclosure does lead to confrontation, in a respectful manner. While this may lead to some discomfort on the surface, underneath is respect and support to become nonabusive.

-The letter of accountability is another key shame reducing instrument—having men do a full inventory and accounting of all past abusive and controlling behavior, it’s consequences, and the old beliefs used to justify it.