

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes 1/14/2020

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Minutes by Chris Huffine, edited by Chris Huffine

Ways to Increase Empathy in Abusive Partners

Empathy was defined as putting yourself in the shoes of others. This is different from sympathy which involves you noticing how you would feel in a similar situation. If the other does not have the same reaction that you would then you tend to be judgmental. Empathy is seeking to understand the other and how they emotionally experience the world.

Some related concepts . . . The Platinum Rule means don't treat others the way you want to be treated (that's the Golden Rule), but rather treat others the way *they* want to be treated. This involves seeking to understand who the other is and treating them accordingly. Being empathetic is a part of that process.

Narcissism aka grandiosity aka egotism involves being self-absorbed and struggling to be aware of and mindful of others, especially in ways they are different from you.

There are at least two kinds of empathy that programs may be focusing on and helping to develop. One is empathy towards their specific victims and how they have suffered, the other is empathy for people in general. Most programs focus primarily on the former and less on the latter.

Survivor Impact Panels are a great way of building empathy by allowing abusive partners to directly hear from abused partners about what they went through. Likewise, there are a variety of videos on Youtube and elsewhere that feature survivor testimonials.

A common empathy building technique is to discuss in group the impact of their abusive behavior on their partners and children. One way this can be done is as a brainstorm where the group generates a list of the various ways their loved ones have suffered from their abuse.

Another simple technique is when group members are talking about a recent situation in which they were abusive to ask them how they think their abuse and control affected the other.

You can't really increase the men's empathy while they're still viewing their partner as being against them or as their enemy. You also can't easily have empathy towards someone who has wronged you that you haven't forgiven.

For abusive partners, empathy seems to be the most difficult towards their partner and children due to their sense of entitlement.

Another way of building empathy is to connect privilege and empathy. For people who are part of the subordinate group, it is easier to connect with the suffering that they are going through as part of that. As they can connect with their own suffering it can facilitate them better understanding the suffering that their partner and children have gone through due to their abuse and control.

A variation of the above is to have group members connect with ways they have been victimized in the past (but not from their partner or children). It is often easy for them to connect with their own feelings and ways they suffered. In helping them connect with those it can then facilitate them developing more empathy for their partner.

Another important aspect of developing empathy is increasing their own emotional awareness. As they become more emotionally self-aware it becomes easier to develop empathy for others. Emotional disconnection with themselves, on the other hand, can also make it more difficult to have empathy for others. It is possible that individual therapy can play a role for some. Individual work to help them become more emotionally aware and connected can then lead to increased compassion and emotional understanding of others, including their partner and children.

There are a variety of program homework assignments that are intended to increase empathy for others. A common feature of Duluth Control Logs, Allies in Change Journals, and other similar accountings of recent situations is to directly ask how their abuse and control affected others.

The Accountability Statement/Responsibility Plan and related exercises routinely have a section asking group members to describe the many ways their past abuse and control have affected others. This is required as part of group curriculum in Oregon.

Another common exercise used by some providers is to have group members write an empathy letter. One version involves them writing a letter to themselves as their victim, describing the ways she was abused, the impact of the abuse on her as well as anything the children were exposed to. There is an emphasis on the abused partner's emotional experience and how that has shifted over the course of the relationship from more positive to more negative. A common mistake group members will make is to confuse analysis with empathy. They will focus on the motivation or thinking rather than the emotional impact. It is important that such letters have no victim blaming or self-soothing statements.

Another way to help increase men's empathy is to get them talking about challenges in the workplace and how to navigate those. Part of this includes focusing on the behavior that is of concern (complaints) vs. focusing on the person as a whole (criticism).

Doing community service work and volunteering are other ways to increase their awareness of others including the suffering they may be going through.

Empathy is like a muscle; the more you do it, the more you practice it, the easier and stronger it becomes.

Brene Brown has a 3 minute video on empathy that is quite good.

Another approach is to seek to dismantle empathy blocking behaviors. For example, a common intervention is to require group members to refer to their partners and children by their first name rather than by a title. Using their first name helps to humanize them and make them more real. Being careful not to overgeneralize. The more they are talking about populations in general, the easier it is to see the other as simply a faceless part of the masses. Instead it is important to stay focused on that specific person. Finally, perspective taking is another helpful empathy increasing skill that requires on-going practice to develop and strengthen.

It was suggested that group members could also be asked to list positive qualities of being the kind of partner they want to be. How would they behave to get that kind of love and regard? Presumably part of that would be to be empathic.