

## Tri County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Attendance: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change), Phil Broyles (Teras), Sandi Rorick (Multnomah County Dept. of Community Justice), Linda Castaneda (Manley Interventions), Jennifer Hopkinson (Clackamas Women's Services), Emmy Ritter (Raphael House), Katherine Stansbury (Central City), Matt Johnston (Domestic Violence Safe Dialogue), Diana Groener (Allies in Change), Jeff Hartnett (ChangePoint), Suzanne Guy (Multnomah County DV Coordinator's Office), Wendy Viola (Portland State University), Regina Rosann (ARMS), Jennifer Warren

Minutes by Wendy Viola, edited by Chris Huffine

### Topic: Pro-social sexual attitudes

Editor's note: While the intent of today's discussion was to focus on healthy sexuality, the group repeatedly drifted into discussions of sexual abuse. For the most part, while off topic, those conversations have been included in the notes below.

Most of our participants have engaged in some form of sexual abuse, including pressuring, making their partners feel guilty about sex, and generally being manipulative around sex. The intention for today's discussion is to talk about what participants should do instead. Traditional sex education does a lousy job of describing healthy sexual behavior and what it means to engage in a healthy sexual relationship.

In order to have productive conversations about healthy sexuality groups should be more established and more highly functioning. Talking about sex is uncomfortable, and discussions about sexuality will be much more effective if participants are able to share personal examples. Getting participants to disclose their sexual attitudes and behaviors requires making themselves vulnerable, which can be very difficult if the group isn't cohesive. Participants who are not yet accountable are prone to twist this information. This is also pretty low on the hierarchy of needs for BIP groups and participants. Initially providers are not primarily concerned with getting new participants to be more kind and romantic partners, they're more concerned with stopping the perpetration of abuse. Providers prefer to begin by stopping the "bad behaviors," and then move on to increasing participants' "positive behaviors." However, we tend not to talk about this topic enough, and where else are men going to get this information and opportunity to discuss healthy sexuality?

Many participants claim that they haven't done any sexual abuse because they've never raped their partner. Providers have to help participants broaden out their understanding of "unwanted sexual contact" to include the creation of coercive sexual environments. In discussing this notion, providers bring up the integration of sexual and non-sexual bad behaviors.

Some participants begin deferring/submitting to their partners as a straight-forward and simple way to deal with the consequences of their past behavior. Many participants go from being

highly in control to totally deferring to their partners, which feeds their victim stance. When they do so, they also avoid practicing the skills that are necessary to have difficult conversations. Perhaps more important than skill-building is teaching participants regard for their partners, because any skill, including communication, can be used abusively. It's less about teaching skills, and more about applying skills properly in relationships. Any technique is secondary to the intent of its use. The foundational work has to be about global beliefs, which have implications for the more nuanced issues that apply to parenting, household management, etc.

You can broach the topic of healthy sexuality by talking about participants' core values and asking, "how are you expressing yourself sexually, and how does that resonate with your values, religion, etc?" For example, some participants are raised with the core value of non-harm (and the belief that if they are not hitting their partners, they are not causing them harm). If participants have this core value, you can ask them how they might be harming others in their sexual relationships. If a core value is fidelity, you can help participants think about the importance that he places on staying faithful, what this means for him, and how he interprets that value in his life; besides not cheating, are there other lines that participants have to draw for themselves? Participants might value trust, so we might ask, "What does it mean to trust someone sexually? What does it mean to be honest sexually? What does it look like to practice trust sexually?" It might also be helpful to initiate conversations about healthy responses to various situations (e.g. if she doesn't want to have sex when you do, what do you do now?).

One way in which sex can be used pro-socially is to build intimacy. This can only happen when it is non-abusive.

A common belief is that one's partner is responsible for their sexual well being, so if they're not satisfied, it's their partner's fault. Part of accountability is shifting this responsibility, such that our participants take responsibility for their own sexual contentment. Most participants are pretty disconnected from their hearts and bodies, and gaining more awareness can help them to be more aware of this. Increased self-awareness may also increase their awareness of their partners' nonverbal communication.

How do you go about asking participants how they reach agreements? Typically, they don't make agreements, they avoid conversations because they're afraid of how they will go--the more agreements there are, the less control they have. While conflicts are about establishing a winner and loser, there shouldn't be a winner or a loser when couples are reaching agreements. Men with a power-over stance are especially resistant to having these conversations and risking losing control.

Healthy relationships are based on many agreements across a range of domains, including sex. A lot of participants make agreements around sexuality that they don't intend to keep. For example, the use of pornography, fantasies, and masturbation may be in violation of agreements that they've made with their partners. Many participants avoid having conversations to reach these agreements, and find justification for violating them. You can fold sexuality into discussions

about negotiations and maintaining relationships in general. When you're talking about how you negotiate what you're going to have for dinner, you can also talk about how you'd negotiate whether or not you have sex. We can also discuss sex in the context of maintaining relationships, because sex and relationship quality are closely related.

It's important to make the point that the sexual agreements in participants' relationships are different because of their track record of abuse. It may seem like she's only giving 8 – 10% when you're giving 100%, and that is because she's working with all of the baggage from the rest of your relationship. Participants have to understand that their behavior over the day, the week, etc. impact her desire from sex, and as does her recovery process. It can also be helpful to remember that it will get better, that relationships change and their partners may eventually be giving 20%, 50%, etc. Having open groups with men at different stages can be helpful for making this point. Participants who report more positive connections with their partners, including more positive sexual relationships, can demonstrate that doing good work is related to having better sexual relationships. There are also cases where it's too little too late, and it could be harmful to set participants up to expect that their partners will ever give more than they do currently. This may be helpful in thinking about whether it's time to end a relationship. If partners realize that they will not be able to fully recover, they may recognize that they have to end the relationship.

It can also be helpful to make basic agreements about birth control and condoms so that couples don't have the same disagreement about the same unsolved problem every time they go into the bedroom. This is in line with establishing and honoring agreements about the purposes of sex. Reproductive coercion is a form of sexual abuse that is gaining increased attention. It relates to an abuser seeking to get his partner pregnant or prevent her from getting pregnant without her consent. The Battered Women's Justice Center recently hosted a related webinar about reproductive abuse.

Talking about affairs can be complicated given that sometimes it is the partner who has had the affair. While affairs are clearly a form of sexual abuse (a violation of a sexual agreement), when it comes to the partner having had an affair, it can be helpful to help the man to see how his behavior may have contributed to her bad choice. We can acknowledge that their partners are not perfect and may have their own bad behaviors, but the focus primarily needs to remain on the men and how they respond and behave.

A discussion of pornography is another complicated area. Different providers take different stances on the use of pornography. Some believe that any pornography use is abusive since it involves the objectification of women. Others take a less extreme view. Regardless, there is agreement that part of a discussion of healthy sexuality should include a discussion of the role of pornography. For example, participants can talk about how the inaccuracies and distortions in pornography influence their perceptions of their partners and sexual relationships. There can be a discussion of whether they use pornography in a compulsive way and/or whether the use of pornography is a violation of any sexual agreements that they've made with their partners. Groups can also discuss the implications of pornography for participants themselves, specifically

the pressure that he puts on himself. If you ask participants, they can make a pretty good list of how porn affects them, but it doesn't necessarily change their behavior. It can also be helpful to talk about the role media and fashion play in shaping how participants' partners define their own sexuality and sense of attractiveness.

A big part of achieving healthy sexuality is helping participants overcome their very negative and stereotyped perceptions of women's intentions in relationships. For example, participants often believe that the only reason that their partners don't want to have sex is to punish them. These initial perceptions that women are not playing honestly in relationships enable disrespect and prevent participants from thinking about what else might be going on with their partners that's preventing them from wanting to be sexual. A lot of participants also have a victim stance regarding sex, believing that their partners are always the ones who get to decide whether or not they have sex, and that if she says no, he's a victim. Similarly, many participants who have turned to prostitutes believe that it is their partners' fault for not having sex with him.

Most participants aren't sufficiently educated to apply what they learn in group about other domains to their sex lives. They tend to compartmentalize sex, claiming that their relationships are crappy but that they never had to be coercive around sex, or the sex was always great. There are a lot of men who have never been explicitly sexually coercive, but they've been coercive in so many other domains that their partners are already beaten down.

It is also important to discuss differences in libido. Our culture doesn't really respect the high libido partner, and we don't know how to negotiate around this. Being the high libido partner tends to lead to taking the victim stance. We have to think about how we can help participants negotiate being the high desire partner on any issue, but especially sex, and particularly while honoring agreements around fantasy, porn, and masturbation. It's not always the man who has the high libido (though that is the stereotype), and sexual abuse can take the form of withholding sex. Similarly, providers can also help coach participants in being the low libido partner so that they avoid shaming their partner for having a higher libido and/or suspect them of cheating. Participants also express some shame around being the lower libido partner, often saying things like "she wants it all the time."

Another aspect of healthy sexuality involves broadening participants' definition of what it means to be sexual. Sexual behaviors and interactions go way beyond intercourse. It can include looks, words, and all the ways that you can shift into a sexual energy. On the flip side, these can all become forms of sexual harassment.

Another common misconception is that "all roads lead to intercourse". It's possible that there is some misunderstanding around what their partners actually want and when. Participants may believe that if she wants a hug she wants sex, and that if she doesn't want to have sex, she must not want to cuddle or kiss. As a result, participants may end up stonewalling their partners sexually, intentionally or not. Partners often feel like she can't give him a deep kiss unless it's going to lead to intercourse, which will result in much less sexual contact in general.

Another aspect of healthy sexuality is being sexually thoughtful about their partner. It can be helpful to talk about the platinum rule in this context, and that the golden rule does not apply to sex. For example, many men have faster arousal patterns than women, which they should strive to understand to respond to.

Hopefully, participants will reach the understanding that their partners are autonomous human beings, as opposed to the vending machine theory of relationships (which is the notion of acting upon people in your life). This involves teaching broader core values, which may not be enough to change participants' sexual behaviors. Providers need to talk explicitly about sexuality in addition to these bigger picture orientations.

These days sex education with high school students can involve weeks and weeks of talking about healthy sexuality and what it means to give consent. We don't do sex education that's nearly as intensive in these groups. It might be thought provoking to ask participants what they want to teach their children about sex.

Sexual activity is a huge area where short-term thinking dominates. Do we have any techniques for getting men to think longer-term and about building intimacy? Discussing the difference between junk food sexuality and health food sexuality (which is healthier for you and more sustaining) may be helpful. One of the ways that participants are guilty of being short term is in the belief that "we stopped having a fight, so now we can have sex, right?" without integrating how other factors from the day could be integrated with sexual behavior. The positive counterpart of compartmentalizing is integrating.

A lot of this is very counterculture—how do we deal with the fact that we're teaching very counter-cultural ideas in groups? A relevant conversation is what masculine intimacy looks like. For some participants, leaving a culture of male privilege can mean alienating themselves from everyone who is important to them, including their partners, and that can be very challenging. Much of our culture is also pro-addiction, and challenging an addiction can be a similar process. Unfortunately, there are not the same subgroups supporting non-abuse and non-control as there are supporting sobriety. Outside of BIPs, there aren't a lot of places where men can go where they will be actively supported in being accountable.

Another basic sex education notion that many participants are missing is that orgasms are not necessary to have good sex. A lot of men talk about how many orgasms they give their partners, which makes women feel a lot of pressure to have orgasms and a lot of them. It can also be helpful to discuss how you can be sexually nurturing even if you're not in the mood or vice versa. The higher libido partner may end up having more orgasms because their partner is using sexual behavior purely to satisfy them. Sexual activities don't always have to be bidirectional, as long as it is respectful, which requires non-objectifying, non-blaming conversations, without any notion of right versus wrong.

It can also be instructive talk about sexual communication and the different purposes that sex may serve for participants and their partners. Doing so involves communicating about what both people do and do not like without feeling rejected, and constructively giving and receiving feedback. Providers can also emphasize the need to debrief sexual encounters. In general, couples don't do enough follow up. Checking in after the fact creates safety and trust.

Basic rape education can be very helpful. Men and women grow up in very different sexual environments and most men, as a result of their male privilege, don't have the basic education that rape is most often perpetrated by someone that you know. Once men have had this education and a little while to think about it, it really opens them up to think about the very different cultures that they've lived in. It's always challenging to educate a privileged group about their privilege. As a result, many men don't understand the pervasive culture of sexual harassment that women experience, and to which men are often oblivious. You can help participants understand the impact of sexual harassment by playing on their homophobia, and asking them to think about how they would respond if another man behaved the same way towards them as they do towards women. Sometimes participants will talk about the few times that someone has come on to them or touched them in ways that they're not comfortable with. Related to this, in doing education about sexual harassment in high schools, it can make a big difference to have one or two students, particularly women, who were willing to talk openly about it.

Contemporary youth are exposed to a whole lot of pornography and sexual information at such an early age these days. We really don't know what the impact is going to be. While some areas have noticed much more overtly sexual behavior among middle school students, youth are also much more sophisticated and much more tolerant of sexual expression than previous generations. They know about so many more ways of being sexual, and have a degree of knowledge and candor about sex that many adults are lacking. But what they don't have is the context of the porn industry and the stark differences between pornography and reality.

A lot of participants have their own sexual trauma histories, and for many of them, their whole identities are based on being sexual at a very young age. It's important to remember that men can be objectified as well. A lot of both men and women have experienced early sexual trauma. Most women have experienced some sexual abuse at some point from somebody, but many men fail to see their experiences as sexual victimization—it's just part of "becoming a man". Some have observed that, in Latino culture, fathers or other older male family members take men to see prostitutes at quite young ages. These are topics that are very important to address, but the group isn't the appropriate context to help individuals process their own trauma.