

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes 10-12-2010

Present: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change Counseling Center), Sara Windsheimer (Choices), Taylor Stark (Allies), Regina Rosanne (ARMS), Paul Munson, Jennifer Warren, Paul Lee (Men's Resource Center), Dean Camarda (Men's Resource Center/Allies), Phil Broyles (Teras Counseling), Brad Peterson (A New Life Christian Counseling), Camille Curry (Men's Resource Center), Guruseva Mason (Choices), Johnnie Burt (ARMS)

Minutes by Jennifer Warren, edited by Chris Huffine

Today's Topic and open group discussion: **Self-Awareness Techniques**, and should they be done with male offenders in BIP's?

Self-awareness techniques, mindfulness techniques, meditative techniques are all included in this category. They are wide ranging, but share common ground of being about bringing oneself more into one's body and mind in the moment. They are clearly behavioral techniques and interventions, with no obvious connection to beliefs or to being non-abusive. There is growing popularity with both the therapy field and forensic intervention field with the use of self-awareness techniques. Perhaps the most popular evidence based practice that incorporates such techniques is Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT).

One member present stated she runs a SMART recovery group, and uses mindfulness techniques in this environment to help the group participants stay focused and mindful during the meeting. A drawback to this may be a sense of "hokiness".

Some present feel that self-awareness techniques are an important part of the work with abusive men.

When an abusive man is distressed, the entire family can be distressed in anticipating how he is going to react. Mastering ways to calm his own distress can also help ease the distress the family feels around him. It should help him remain accountable. Abusive men are much more prone to blame others for their own distress. If these men are able to learn self-awareness techniques, they can reduce their negative self talk, and negative ruminating thinking cycles. Connections can be drawn by the facilitators that accountability is about becoming more internally aware vs. externally focused, leading to the use of power and control. The focus becomes the client's internal world and therefore his internal locus of control. Mindfulness can slow down the reaction time for men and can be empowering of them rather than blaming the other for their abuse. It relates to the idea that HE is responsible for his level of intensity and others are not. Self-awareness techniques can be used as a pro-social alternative to abuse and control where there is an internal, rather than an external focus.

One person commented that describing these techniques as "mindfulness" can be somewhat misleading since true mindfulness work is an on-going practice of being present in the moment, whereas what we are typically doing is teaching/practicing this for just a few minutes. That's why he prefers to refer to them as self-awareness techniques. In addition, mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist and other Eastern religions, which might be off-putting to

some of the men in our groups. Calling them self-awareness skills remove them from any sort of a religious context.

As men become more externally focused they escalate, bringing them back to how they feel can be de-escalating. In part this can happen by interrupting their negative/escalating thought patterns. Becoming more focused on their bodies in the moment can help clear their minds of their negative thinking and make it easier to shift into more prosocial, but less familiar and habitual ways of thinking. It can almost be like hitting the “reset” button on their thinking.

Clients in this work are well-known for twisting the group tools offered in order to manipulate their partners. However, attendants of this discussion state they are aware of few complaints of partners’ of the clients twisting the self-awareness techniques. The clients have been known to twist other tools, such as “self care”, “time outs”, and “healthy communication techniques” to continue to control their partners. It was joked that we have not heard reports of men rubbing “Look how self-aware I am” in their partners’ faces.

It was posed that some conservative Christian men may be resistant because of some Buddhist roots in the practice of mindfulness and other self-awareness techniques. One way to work with this group’s resistance may be to make sure to validate “prayer” as an acceptable “tool” that can be discussed in a group.

It is important to educate men about the importance of doing these techniques outside of group, not just in group.

WHAT DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES DO FACILITATORS USE?

“What’s your breathing” is a phrase that can be used to interrupt an escalation, and have the clients focus on their breathing. Neurological benefits have been seen to come from this technique. Males who have been traumatized may need to engage different parts of their brain in order to make more respectful choices. Shifting awareness to their breath can help with this.

Increasing the awareness of physical and behavioral warning signs is a useful technique, along with “mind mapping” (organizing the information into boxes for visual learners, gives the client specific steps to work through)

Facilitators can guide clients through silence, and explain how to create silence, notice breathing, recognize how the body feels, recognize how physical warning signs relate to emotional reflection. A goal of this technique should also be to really learn to value breathing techniques and benefits. Focus should be on making the client more aware of their breath, making it deeper and more regular and full. It may be helpful to do this as a group, and then debrief how they feel after using the breathing exercises.

An exercise focusing on how one feels in the moment may be helpful. Things to look at are: body temperature, muscular tension, physical sensations, noticing specific areas of the body and tension (noticing it, not trying to relax at this point). Discussion about the hypervigilance of family members due to trauma from abuse can be looked at, and how family members often are aware that the client is in distress before he does. Clients can be asked if they had

a father that they felt the need to “walk on eggshells” around, and what it was like experiencing this.

Another technique is having the client set an alarm to go off every 3 hours, or another period of time, and get them used to just checking in with themselves after pausing for a minute. This increased self-awareness may lead to a reduction in controlling behaviors. At least one facilitator present in the discussion reports seeing a significant reduction in controlling behaviors with clients using this method.

There are progressive relaxation exercises outlined in the workbook *Learning to Live without Violence* by Sonkin and Durphy.

When clients become aware of subtle emotionally abusive behaviors, they can tune in better to their own emotional intensity, and may then manage it better.

These self-awareness exercises should be framed in such a way as to help clients see the relevance of being non-controlling and non-abusive.

The client's should be shown what the difference is between “willful vs. non-willful tension” (clients often believe the” family is very sensitive to the radiation of negative energy”). Men often believe that if they are not “trying” to be abusive, then in fact they have not been abusive. These belief systems should be explored and challenged, and the client should be asked to consider the impact.

Less blaming/externally focused men in groups may be more self-aware, and may recognize “moodiness” as a controlling behavior which they have used.

An awareness of expectations and examination of thoughts, not just body scanning should be used. Clients should understand that being non-abusive is a willful act, and they must be tuned into their expectations that set them up to be most likely to respond with abuse.

Another technique is to work through the 5 senses: SILENCE 1) what do you hear? 2) feel? 3) temperature? 4) smell? 5) taste? (taste sensations can be “activated” by eating a piece of fruit in a group and being mindful of the experience). This exercise can lead the client's to recognizing that there is much more going on with them at any given moment than what they may be aware of.

We must be cautious not to allow these clients to believe that stress is a causal relationship with power and control, versus their beliefs and thoughts, which lead to feeling distressed. Questions should be posed such as “how are you talking to your partner?” “Are you giving her the respect of a full human being? The awareness of how the words we say creates an emotional/physical field....” “I hate her vs. I find some of her behaviors difficult”—emotional vs. physiological state. It may be helpful to see someone act out the physical body stance, and discuss how that aggressive energy impacts others.

It was noted that as clients speak with more accountability, they tend to become calmer. He has a “self-awareness problem” if he ignores the intimidation vs. the intensity. Why does it not cause him stress? He may be aware he is not getting what he wants, but unwilling to have an increased awareness of the impact of how his lack of accountability impacts his awareness

of himself. He must look at the impact of selfish belief systems re: a sense of superiority over others.