

Training & Research UPDATE

on issues of domestic violence

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Why couples counseling may be **INAPPROPRIATE** for violent relationships

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In this issue...

Page 3
A broader definition of child "witness"—and the importance of intervention

Back page
Vancouver conference on Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Insert—page A
Training workshops on program evaluation and groupwork with children of battered women

Insert—page B
DAP manuals

Insert—pages C & D
Order articles, reports, manuals, T-shirts, and sweatshirts from DAP

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IN DAP'S TREATMENT PROGRAMS for abusers and abuse victims, we frequently encounter clients who have been through couples counseling before being referred to or seeking treatment for abuse. In these cases it is evident that the couples therapists either were not aware of the violence in these relationships, or they do not have an adequate understanding of the dynamics of abuse. Too often the result is that couples counseling not only fails to resolve the relationship problems, but may in fact contribute to increased violence.

The primary goal of couples counseling is an examination and adjustment of the balance of power in the relationship. This examination should take place in an environment with a level of safety that allows the partners to feel they can discuss differences openly, risk being vulnerable, and confront the typical fears about the future of the relationship such as depth of commitment and strength of common interests and goals. Violence and the fear of violence are not considered to be in the range of typical or "normal" relationship concerns. Violence and/or a history of violence in the relationship throws the power out of balance and prevents openness.

How therapists can be drawn into the abusive relationship

It is not valid to assume that a "good" therapist can help couples who have experienced domestic violence. For these couples, equality and safety are displaced by the dynamics of unequal power and control. In this type of relationship, the abuser uses covert and/or overt violence to maintain control over the partner. The abused partner is intimidated and may fear being physically harmed. Typically, the abuse is a well-kept

"family secret" and the observable evidence of an abusive relationship is often subtle and easily missed or dismissed.

Couples therapists are trained to help people move from behavior based on fears about the relationship toward resolving problems together by talking about them openly. Candor and cooperation are prerequisites to the success of the therapy. Because victims of domestic violence are likely to feel intimidated in the presence of their partners, they may appear to be neither candid nor cooperative during counseling sessions. Therapists may misconstrue this behavior and presume that this partner is unwilling to move past "normal" fears to work on the relationship.

This misjudging on the part of therapists can lead to severe repercussions for victims of abuse. Victims may be made to feel they are the cause of problems in the relationship because they are not willing to work in it. The abusers may, in turn, use this assessment of the therapist to justify further abuse and violence. Victims who implicate their abusers may be putting themselves in danger and suffer greater abuse for having shared what is often expected to remain secret.

Misreading the dynamics of violent relationships

Therapists who are not specifically trained to work with couples who have experienced domestic abuse might either overlook or dismiss references indicating that abuse is occurring. Such indications could include:

- Signs of isolation on the part of the victim, such as confiding that "You are the only person I am telling this to"
- Showing intense fear in confrontational situations
- Appearing to lack interest in talking about the problems of the relationship

continued on page 2

If the therapist is unaware of violence in a relationship, behavior might be misinterpreted. As in the observations often recorded by police called to the scene of a domestic assault, the therapist may see the victim as being out of control while the abuser appears extremely calm and rational in the counseling sessions. A victim's actions taken in self-defense might be mislabeled as abusive by both the abuser and the therapist.

If the couple shares information about a past occurrence of domestic violence, the therapist might be inclined to dismiss it as a bygone, failing to realize that even one occurrence of violence by one partner against another invariably changes the dynamics of equality in their relationship.

Abuse victims might choose not to disclose the violent nature of the relationship because:

- they fear that therapy will be denied
- they fear being punished by the abuser for speaking out
- they feel it is important not to appear vulnerable

Ensuring the appropriateness of couples counseling

Every therapist working in family and couples counseling should be familiar with the dynamics of domestic violence. It is important to learn to recognize signs of a violent relationship in order to avoid putting the victim in a dangerous situation as a result of the therapy.

Therapists working with couples should implement a screening process for domestic violence. Because victims of abuse are unlikely to speak about their fears in their abusers' presence, screening should include an individual assessment of each partner.

The therapist should be aware that if a couple has experienced a domestic violence intervention in the past, or if the victim has been in a past abusive situation, they may be less likely to share information, already knowing the consequences of doing so. For instance, if a woman has previously reported a domestic assault or called the police, she will be aware that her partner was most likely

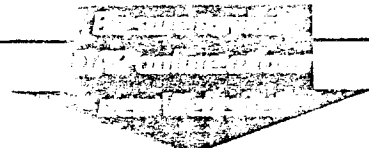
mandated to seek counseling for the abuse and possibly serve some jail time.

The therapist who recognizes that violence is occurring in a relationship must not make the mistake of believing it will stop if only the therapist can help the couple address the imbalance of power. This can be a trap. Working alone with the couple, the therapist is likely to reinforce the imbalance by unwittingly helping to blame the victim or helping to justify the abuser's behavior.

Domestic violence program before couples counseling

Instead of attempting couples counseling with people who have a history of domestic violence, therapists should refer them to groups designed specifically for people who have been in abusive situations. A typical program will have separate classes for abusers and victims. In the abuser group the facilitator will use cognitive-behavioral therapy to help abusers:

- learn new methods and behaviors for dealing with their emotions
- learn to take responsibility for their actions
- benefit from feedback from others who have similar beliefs and experiences
- create a self-control plan



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- ✓ Review DAP's four main areas: Advocacy, Therapy, Training & Publications, Research & Evaluation
- ✓ Be introduced to DAP's philosophy and mission statement
- ✓ Review DAP's services and get contact information
- ✓ Stay informed of upcoming trainings—and register online
- ✓ Learn all about our great manuals
- ✓ Order products online—manuals, T-shirts, sweatshirts
- ✓ Download our complete Domestic Violence Awareness presentation complete with handouts—available for anyone to use in community education settings
- ✓ This issue of the *Training & Research Update* will be on the Web site!

We feel our new Web site is consistent with our goals of gaining an increased national and international presence and increasing awareness about domestic violence in our communities. We welcome your feedback about the Web site!

The group for abuse victims will focus on helping them to:

- rebuild self-esteem
- learn that the abuse is not the fault of the victim
- create a protection plan for times of danger

Such a program allows the couple, if they choose to stay together, to redefine their relationship and their respective roles in it. It is this redefinition that brings people who have completed domestic violence programs back into couples therapy. At this point in the relationship, upon completion of the program, it is safer and more productive to administer couples therapy.

Studies show that often it is the victim of the domestic violence who initiates couples therapy after completion of the domestic violence program. In fact, such therapy may often be sought as a safe and structured way to end the relationship. It is important that therapists remain open to this outcome.

For partners who decide to stay together, couples counseling can help them rebuild the relationship. □

For information about the warning signs of abuse and screening for abuse, contact DAP or visit our Web site.