Understanding Treatment for Men Who Use Violence in Relationships

The Vision of ERA is to contribute to stopping violence in relationships through province-wide provision of effective, accessible, ethical services for individuals who have used abuse in relationships. Although we wish to respond to all abuse in intimate relationships, our primary focus is on abuse against women given that official statistics indicate that 85% of reported incidents are of men abusing their female partners.

Treatment programs for men who use violence in relationships have the primary purpose of increasing safety for women and children through the reduction or elimination of future abuse and violence. In BC the Ending Relationship Abuse Society of BC introduced the term “The Common Hybrid Model” to describe programs that have a cognitive-behavioural foundation and a pro-feminist orientation. The emotional and physical safety of women and children is the primary goal of program delivery and is reflected not only in the treatment program itself but also in pro-active participation in a coordinated community response.

What to Expect

Regardless of treatment model, most programs have common procedures that include intake, assessment, participation agreements, victim contact, treatment orientation, group treatment and follow-up. Programs also incorporate strict guidelines that spell out clearly what is required for completion and the reasons men can be asked to leave or start the program over. Typically programs for male domestic violence offenders run from 3 to 6 months and include the following content areas:

- identifying abusive behaviours
- identifying the elements of respectful relationships
- confronting minimization, denial and blame
- identifying individual factors that get in the way of having stable relationships and creating high risk situations
- gender role socialization and power and control issues
- Identifying values, attitudes and beliefs that support violence
- Identifying values, attitudes and beliefs that support healthy relationships
- teaching skills for managing difficult emotions including jealousy
- conflict resolution/problem solving and communication skills
- understanding the impact of abuse on self, partner and children
- empathy and compassion building
- self-care
- family of origin work
- parenting skills
- healthy intimacy and sexual interactions

Victim Safety

No discussion of treatment programs for men who are violent in relationships is complete without a discussion about victim safety. In working with offenders, the physical and emotional safety of victims is the highest priority. It takes time for change to occur, therefore, men’s programs need to provide external structures for victims’ safety while the men are building internal change. The man’s counsellor should also:

- Contact the women partners before and during the program.
- Refer women to resources such as counselling, shelters and legal aid.
- Notify the woman if the man stops attending the program or if there is any indication she may be at risk.
- Send a clear message that simply because a man is attending treatment, it does not ensure her safety. (Programs must not be used as part of her safety plan.)
- Prioritize victim safety over confidentiality.
- Not advocate for custody, removal of no-contact orders or reconciliation.
- Develop clear standards of practice regarding safety.

Summary

Counselling programs for men who use violence are one part of a coordinated response to end violence in relationships. These programs invite participants to examine their abusive behaviour, practice alternatives to abuse and incorporate a belief structure that will create a foundation for respectful relationships and long-term maintenance of non-violence. To be most effective programs need to: target known risk factors; be delivered by trained staff who are skilled at therapeutic engagement; and be part of a coordinated community response.