Guidelines for Couple’s Counselling in Cases of Violence and Abuse

Couples sometimes turn to relationship counselling in order to address conflict that may be rooted in violence. Couple’s counselling is not recommended as the initial intervention when there is violence and abuse between partners. Conventional marital therapy is neither safe nor effective in cases of ongoing violence. Many abusive partners succeed in preventing victims from addressing the abuse in counselling or punish victims for what they dare to say. Effectiveness is compromised when abusers attempt to manipulate counsellors to collude in blaming the victim for problems or to support the primacy of the abuser’s needs over those of the victim. Abusers also subvert effectiveness by refusing to listen respectfully or negotiate fairly, and by using anger and oppositional tactics to control the process. These behaviours are defences to avoid facing responsibility for abusive and controlling behaviour. Under some conditions however, couple’s counselling can be useful and appropriate (e.g., when safety concerns have been addressed). In this bulletin we identify some guidelines for assessing when couple therapy is appropriate, guidelines for appropriate couple intervention, and create awareness of the risks in couples therapy.

Criteria for readiness for couple counselling include:

- Violence and threats of violence have stopped.
- The victim feels safe in the presence of the person who had abused her.
- The victim can speak honestly and freely without fear of reprisals.
- The former abuser can listen to negative or confronting comments without reacting with aggression or blame.
- Both partners freely agree to work on the relationship and are not coerced.
- Couple’s counselling may be appropriate as a second stage intervention, when the abuser has successfully completed a specialized group or individual program to stop relationship abuse and the victim has received support.

Guidelines for Couple’s Counselling

Counsellors providing couple’s counselling when there has been relationship abuse are encouraged to follow these guidelines:

1. Take specialized training in relationship abuse dynamics.
2. Screen for violence and abuse, as a high proportion of those who request couple’s counselling will have experienced abuse.
3. Partners should be seen individually as part of the assessment process.
4. Women (and others) who have been victims of violence, threats, intimidation, control and harassment must be assured of confidentiality and given the opportunity to assess their safety and their partners’ behaviour, in confidence, at regular intervals.
5. Offer or refer for individual work as needed to address accountability and safety issues.
6. Couple’s counselling with formerly abusive partners must make safety and accountability the first priority, not the relationship.
7. Great care must be taken to hold those who have abused solely accountable for their abuse, and not to use systems approaches that may infer mutual responsibility or blame the victim for the abuse. Abuse is always a choice, although both partners can work to reduce risk factors.

In cases of severe violence or high risk, couples therapy should not be attempted under any circumstances.