

## **What Can I Do To Help Hold Abusers Accountable?**

An abusive partner intervention program is not enough to stop domestic abuse or change abusers' behaviour. Stopping domestic abuse requires the entire community to respond differently to abusers. No one individual or system can do it alone, but every individual and system can do part of it

You can begin the process of holding an offender accountable in your initial response by determining who the victim is and who the perpetrator is. Reassure the victim that they are not responsible for the abuse and enhance the safety of the victim as a priority. Evaluate risk, taking into account the previous history of the perpetrator, any threats to kill, stalking and harassment and presence of coercive control.

Create policies and protocols to ensure that domestic abuse cases are handled efficiently and effectively.

### **Understanding domestic abuse**

Within society, the idea of power is gendered and linked to stereotypes of how men and women should behave. These typically portray men as strong powerful decision-makers, and women as weaker, emotional homemakers. The vast majority of perpetrators use abusive behaviour to exert power and control and create a context of fear. The majority of perpetrators are men but women can also be abusive. However, generally women are less likely to use an on-going pattern of abuse that involves coercive and controlling behaviour as a means to inducing power and fear. Remember:

- Abusive behaviour is purposeful
- Co-occurring mental health or substance abuse issues are not the cause of abusive behaviour but can increase risk
- Treating co-occurring issues will not end abusive behaviour
- Domestic Abuse is not a mental health issue
- Domestic abuse can be physical, emotional, sexual, economic and involves a pattern of coercive control

Motivating a perpetrator to change is difficult, they are often in denial and their behaviour represents their attitude and beliefs. Whether they acknowledge it or not, perpetrators benefit from their behaviour and are seldom punished or challenged. Despite these difficulties, how you engage with clients who are abusive partners can support your community's accountability measures.

Breaking up with an abuser can be very hard to do. Few abusers readily allow themselves to be left. When they feel a partner starting to get stronger, beginning to think for themselves more, slipping out from under domination, abusers change their game and some common tactics are: promising to change, agreeing to start a perpetrator programme, stop drinking, apologise, telling them they will be lost without them, telling them no one else will want them, threaten suicide, threaten to take the children, restrict money, discredit them to agencies/family/threaten to harm.

### **Child to Parent Abuse**

Is similar to intimate partner domestic abuse, in that the majority of perpetrators are male and their victims are mothers. The child has negative views of women and the abuse can be emotional, financial exploitation, death threats, physical assaults, destruction of the home and social isolation.

Parents will have feelings of guilt, blame, shame and fear and will be reluctant to disclose what is happening or the severity of the abuse. Parents often look for help for the child rather than themselves, particularly if the child has mental health, drug or alcohol problems.

Professionals need to be alert to the issue and not assume the young person's behaviour is as a result of 'poor parenting'. Advice about boundary setting is not helpful in situations where the young person is controlling the parent. Mothers are not lax but worn down by manipulation and stress and a coping strategy is to not challenge their child's behaviour. Mothers will be reluctant to lose contact with their child and abandon their parenting duties. Helping mothers with safety planning, developing support networks, stable accommodation and maximising income is helpful in strengthening their resources.

## **Screening for perpetrators**

Even if you do not routinely screen for abusive behaviour, there may be occasions where it is important to talk to a client about perpetrating abuse:

- Both parties use your service, and you have a duty of care to the person who be the victim
- Under S17 of the Crime and Disorder Act there is a responsibility to take 'reasonable' action to prevent a crime. Asking a client about their behaviour may be appropriate
- Under Article 2 Human rights Act 1968 public authorities have a duty to protect life and therefore must take positive action to reduce/remove any risks when they are identified

Perpetrators are unlikely to approach a service with a full disclosure but many disclose concerns about their relationship (fighting, arguing, depressed, angry etc.). You might ask how this makes them feel, how they think their partner and children feel, do they think their partner has ever being scared of them, examples of a recent incident, has it ever escalated to violence. You can then probe further for evidence of coercion and control. Ask if they have or have ever had a Non-molestation Order against them. If appropriate, name domestic abuse and explain the behaviours.

Do not ever condone or excuse the behaviour but be positive that they have sought help. Ask what they think effects their behaviour and explore what they would like to do – are they motivated to change? You may want to keep going back to this.

Explain the limits of confidentiality.

## **Working with perpetrators of abuse**

Professionals can inadvertently collude with perpetrators and reinforce victim blaming by:

- Asking the victim what they did or said to trigger the abuse
- Not believing what she is telling you
- Misdiagnosing the victim as the perpetrator – it is common for men to report abuse from their partner – be mindful of the context of the relationship and where the impact is. Always refer men to Men's Advice Line, where staff are trained to identify victims and perpetrators
- Directing the women to engage with services such as substance misuse as a tactic to change his behaviour
- Labelling a victim as challenging or difficult to work with, does not reflect that she maybe being restricted from engaging and can imply she is difficult to live with.

Working with perpetrators who have mental health and/or substance misuse problems is difficult. There is no causal relationship between these issues, as not all people who have mental health or substance misuse issues are abusive

and people who are abusive continue even when their other issues are resolved. It is therefore not sufficient to only address perpetrators mental health/substance misuse.

Assess risk – direct questions about physical violence, strangulation, stalking, and jealousy, associated children in the household. Risk is not static and this will not to be checked regularly for escalation. Perpetrators use threats or attempts of suicide as a means to control their partners and it is not necessarily an indicator of mental ill health. Depression, self-harming and threats and attempts are established factors in domestic abuse murders and should be taken seriously.

As far as possible, evaluate the safety implications of your involvement. Specific interventions may have safety implications that you are not aware of. Because of the danger that is known to be involved, do not provide or recommend:

- Couple counselling before agreeing to any request for couple counselling, screen for domestic abuse in private interviews with each partner
- Anger management as a response to domestic abuse

Write case notes carefully and accurately; never include conclusions about the victimised partner based solely on what the abusive partner says. Carelessly written case notes can harm victims if they are brought into court.

If an abusive partner makes threats against their partner or children, inform the partner, the police, and the client's probation or parole officer (if applicable).

Never expect a victim to accept your judgment that their partner has changed. You cannot know for sure, and you may put the victim in further danger if your assessment encourages them to remain in the relationship.

The following measures should be taken:

- Encourage clients to examine and change any abusive behaviour.
- Remind clients that they are in control of whether they act abusively.
- Confront excuses and rationalisations, such as "I was only trying to..."
- Challenge entitlement beliefs (spoken or unspoken) no matter what they are based on.
- Confront abusive behaviour – toward yourself and others – especially:
  - The use of communication, anger, and boundary violations as weapons of control.
  - Talking about their partners in ways that are lacking in empathy, condescending, contemptuous, and disrespectful; trying to get you to agree with such attitudes.
  - Misogynistic language, if the client has a female partner, or homophobic or transphobic statements if the client is LGBTQ.
- Avoid colluding with abusive partners; they may try to manipulate you to get you on "their side". This could include wanting you to see their partner as "the problem" and the civil and criminal justice systems as "unfair"
- Focus on accountability with abusive partners. Remind them that they are always responsible for their choices and behaviours. Call attention to their minimizing, denying and blaming. Point out the consequences of their behaviour and the impact it has had on their partners and children.

## **What are abusive men like as fathers?**

Men will claim that their behaviour towards their partner is separate and different from how he acts with his children. However, decisions made in a household have an impact on everyone in the family. Abusive partners will consider their own judgement as superior and will solely focus on how things will impact on them. Just as he views

his partner as his possession, this will extend to the children. Abusers tend to be authoritarian parents and will not entertain choice or compromise from the children or mother, on their behalf. Their coercive and controlling behaviour towards the mother has a direct impact on the children. Children of abusers often find their father's attention and approval hard to come by and this scarcity has the effect of increasing its value.

Children living in the household are not be hidden from the abuse and apart from the mental impact of living in a tense, volatile and controlling household, they are at risk of physical harm and of being manipulated into the abuse. A threat to harm the children is an effective weapon against mothers. Their behaviour damages the mother child relationship as her authority is constantly undermined which interferes with her ability to parent. Abusers are a poor role model for children.

After separation, some fathers disappear from their children's lives, whilst others maintain a high profile and can use the children to retaliate against the mother for leaving him or as pawns to try to get her back. He may try to make parenting life difficult so that she struggles to move forward, pump the children for information and use this to stalk and harass, discredit her to the children.

## **Serial perpetrators**

Research shows that abusive men tend to go from one abusive relationship to another. 18% of perpetrators recorded as re-offending, did so against a different partner to the one they were originally reported for to the police. 'Serial' means the perpetrator is alleged to have used/threatened abuse against two or more victims who are unconnected to each other and who are or have been intimate partners of the perpetrator (as opposed to repeat offending against the same victim or persons in the same household)

## **Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes**

Make sure your expectations about what a program **can and cannot do** are realistic. Research shows that, were the consequences of continuing the abuse far outweigh the benefits of stopping, are shown to make the most positive progress on perpetrator programmes. Initially these consequences are external – a partner who will definitely leave, no contact with children, prison. After a time on the programme, some men will develop their own internalised reasons for change.

The purpose of a perpetrator programme is to make women and children safer by giving men a chance to change their behaviour. Programmes will look at his thinking and provide education and challenge around entitlement, coercive control, disrespect, superiority, selfishness and victim blaming. Men are not allowed to continue to be abusive whilst on the programme

If you working with someone who is attending a perpetrator programme:

- Be familiar with the policies and procedures of the program and maintain contact with the provider
- Respond immediately to an offender's **first** failure to enroll in or attend a mandated program

## **Victim safety**

Make victim (and any associated children) safety a top priority Do what you can to ensure that your work with an abusive partner does not further endanger the victim– while realising that you can't guarantee safety.

Give victims details of local and national domestic abuse services.

