



SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENING WITH ABUSED PARTNERS

Intervening when there is domestic violence present is both a complicated and delicate process. A poorly conceived intervention can lead to an increase in the level of domestic violence. In fact, even the initiation of therapy, without any awareness or focusing on domestic violence, can lead to an increase in abusive behavior. That doesn't mean you shouldn't intervene, but it needs to be done carefully. That is also one reason why it is important to screen for domestic violence with every client you see. Below are some suggestions for how to intervene with those who are abused partners.

Educate them about the types of abuse and control

Abused partners are often not much better informed than the abusive partners about what constitutes abusive and controlling behavior. As they become more educated, they may become more aware of just how much abuse there has been in their lives. Likewise, they may not fully appreciate what its impact has been on them and others around them such as their children. As abused partners become more aware of abuse and its effects, they often become even more motivated and galvanized to do what they can to stop being exposed to the abuse.

Invite/encourage them to tell their story.

An important part of helping an abused partner in their process is to allow them to be with that process. Part of the victimization and trauma process is that abused partners rarely have opportunities to talk about what happened or how they were affected by it. The process of talking about what happened makes it more real and manageable. It can help them in their trauma recovery process. It may also help them move through any denial they might have about the situation. It can lead to greater clarity about what to do next.

Help them to identify and express their feelings.

Abused partners often have a range of feelings about what has happened. Often those feelings have been dismissed, ignored, or minimized. Abused partners often disconnect from their feelings for a variety of reasons most of all because it is often not safe to have or express them. For these reasons the process of identifying feelings may be difficult. But an important part of recovering from the abuse is talking about how they have been affected by it.

Accept and validate their experiences.

Abused partners often question themselves because their feelings and experiences are so often ignored, dismissed, minimized, or challenged by the abusive partner. It is important that their experiences are not questioned, rationalized, or dismissed. Assume that what they are saying is true for them. In rare cases, an abusive partner may present/self-identify as an abused partner. If you suspect that may be the case, consult with an expert in domestic violence to provide guidance in sorting that out.

Let them know that they are not alone.

Abused partners often feel isolated and alone. Regardless of whether they have any support they

often feel like they are the only ones experiencing this, that they are different or deviant. It is important that it be made clear that they do have support in staying safe. It can also help for them to hear that domestic violence is relatively common and that many people are going through or have gone through what they have. Enrollment in a survivor's support group (often offered through your local survivor service agency) can also help with this.

Don't blame them for the abuse.

It is tempting to want to identify what a person who has been victimized did to contribute to their victimization. In part this is rooted in the, often unconscious, belief that if the victimized had some role in their victimization, then we can avoid experiencing that same victimization by not repeating those mistakes. Two common ways this shows up with domestic violence is looking for what role the abused partner played in being abused, as well as presuming that they intentionally chose an abusive partner.

Abused partners are not perfect and have their own problems and short-comings. However, whatever their own struggles and issues, none of it caused or contributed to the abuse that they experienced. The abusive partner is 100% responsible for their abuse. No matter how difficult or provocative the abused partner may have been, their partner did not have to respond with violence. If they had been with a non-abusive partner, the abused partner could have been the exact same way in a relationship and they would have experienced no abuse at all. In fact, research has found that most domestic violence survivors have only been/will only be in one abusive relationship.

Don't let them blame themselves for the abuse.

It is also common for the abused partner to blame themselves for the abuse. It is natural for people to look for their role in any conflict. However, as mentioned above, when it comes to abusive behavior, 100% of the responsibility for the abuse rests with the abusive partner. A second reason why they may tend to blame themselves is that often the abusive partner has repeatedly blamed them for their abuse. An important part of the healing process is to challenge and rebut the idea that they had any role or responsibility for the abuse that was done to them. They did not.

Don't blame them for choosing to be in an abusive relationship.

Likewise, it can be easy to reduce an abusive partner down to that single quality. In truth, abusive partners are incredibly diverse in their backgrounds and can have a variety of positive qualities. Most are not particularly abusive and controlling at first in the relationship. Those qualities only gradually emerge over time, typically related to how close and committed they have become. It is extremely uncommon for abused partners to want to be abused or in some way willfully chose an abusive partner. For the vast majority, they chose their partner for many other reasons and only later realized that their partner also happened to be abusive and controlling.

Focus on their safety rather than the other's abuse.

Abusive behavior is enormously distracting, drawing all attention to the abusive partner. It is important that when working with an abused partner the focus stays on them rather than on the other. That includes focusing on their feelings, experience, and concerns. Likewise, the goal is

not to get the abusive partner to stop their abuse, but to help the abused partner get safe. Help them understand that they can't "make them stop." Often abused partners have tried many different things to get the other to stop, none of which were ultimately successful. It is important that the focus remain on the person before you, not the one who is not there.

Focus on helping them become safe rather than simply leaving the relationship.

Many abused partners have said that they didn't necessarily want to leave the abusive relationship, they simply wanted the abuse to stop. Sometimes people become over-invested in helping them to leave the relationship when that isn't necessarily what they want, at least not yet. One of the things that keeps abused partners from seeking support is a fear that they will be told they need to leave their partner, which they may not want or be ready to do. Please refer to the hand-out listing fifty reasons why abused partners stay in the relationship to better understand the myriads of legitimate reasons why abused partners remain in the relationship.

A better approach is to focus on how they can better keep themselves and their children safe. If an abused partner leaves before they are truly ready, they are more likely to return, which just further increases their risk of more severe abuse. Leaving the relationship is one of the times of greatest danger including the risk of an escalation of abuse. It's a minefield that they should only have to cross once. Better to wait until they are truly ready. Once they are truly ready and wanting to leave the relationship as a way of staying safe, support them in that goal.

Help them develop a safety plan or refer them to someone who can.

This is a core aspect of working with abused partners who are still experiencing abuse. Safety planning is an on-going process of helping an abused partner take steps to get themselves and their children safe from the abuse. It involves preparing for and responding to future abuse. It focuses on both more immediate and longer-term safety and related planning. It includes identifying supports, safe spaces, items that may need to be readily available, etc. Safety planning should be done with all abused partners who are still experiencing abuse. If you have not been trained in how to safety plan, then have the abused partner reach out to their local survivor services agency for help with this.

Identify and validate their strengths.

Another central part of working with abused partners is highlighting and emphasizing their strengths and value. Most have been routinely put down, devalued, and heavily criticized by their partner. Most have experienced a significant loss of self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. This needs to be directly addressed and remedied. Identify and emphasize their skills and personal resources. Highlight their positive qualities and what they are doing right. This is an important part of empowering abused partners.

Affirm and support their right to make their own choices.

One of the rights we all have is to make our own choices, even if they turn out to be mistakes or choices we later regret. One way we can revictimize abused partners is by attempting to control what they do—to get them to make "good" or "smart" choices. It is vital we model respect for them by not becoming paternalistic or condescending (like their partner often has). It is their life and they get to choose how to live it. You don't have to agree with their choices and you can express those concerns, but it is vital that you respect their right to make their own choices.

Offer them choices rather than directives. This becomes more complicated when juvenile children are involved/being affected, but it is still important to consider and respect the agency of the person in front of you.

Help them to identify their options and make decisions.

Abuse is about option reduction. As a consequence, abused partners may not be as skilled or familiar with thinking about or exploring what all of their options are. Help them to brainstorm and evaluate the various possibilities available. Part of this process includes sharing information with them and providing them with referrals and other resources.

Recommend they read/listen to relevant books.

While they came out decades ago, two of the most helpful books available to abused partners are *The Verbally Abusive Relationship* by Patricia Evans and *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft. Countless abused partners have reported finding each of these books incredibly helpful and validating in their process of getting free of the abuse and control in their lives.

Keep in mind that traditional interpersonal interventions may escalate danger.

It is tempting to suggest that the abused partner use traditional interpersonal skills with their partner such as communication or assertiveness skills. While these can be quite helpful with a collaborative partner, they can be dangerous to use with an abusive partner. The abusive partner may respond to such efforts by escalating their abuse and control. Check out with your client how they anticipate such interventions are likely to go, keeping in mind their safety.

Focus on planting seeds rather than quickly resolving the problem.

It is important that you respect the abused partner's pace in this process. If you push too hard for changes then you are pushing your pace rather than respecting theirs. The best you can do is to offer them suggestions, information, observations, which they can then do with what they want.

Predict future abuse and effects.

One concrete way of planting seeds is to warn the abused partner that if they are still having contact with their partner, there is likely to be further abuse and control. As this happens, point this out, including how it persists. Work out agreements (including additional safety planning) that if the abuse does not stop as they had hoped/expected, that they will seek out additional support and do additional safety planning

Encourage them to consider attending a support group for abused partners.

Early on in the process, it is important that abused partners receive individual support. As they move along in their process, becoming involved in a support group for abused partners can provide some additional benefits that individual counseling does not. Compared to only doing individual counseling, group work for abused partners can help to reduce their feelings of isolation, offer peer support, normalize and validate their experiences, and provide them with a broader and richer education. Many have had few, if any peers, they could talk with and listen to who have experienced and understand what they have been through and are going through. For these reasons, becoming involved in an abused partner support group can be particularly helpful.

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