

Batterer Re-education vs. Counseling

In the early 1980s most counseling programs were not set up to work specifically with batterers and were ill prepared to address men's violence within a context that views violence against women as the use of male privilege to gain power and control over relationships. At this time, therapists and counselors saw domestic violence as a symptom of a dysfunctional relationship, and believed the batterer's anger, stress, or poor impulse control to be the primary cause of his violence towards his partner. Couple counseling, anger management, and developing communication skills were the methods of intervention at this time. Conversely, battered women reported that participating in therapy or counseling created more fear and isolation in their lives; many reporting that they were beaten after revealing the abuse during a counseling session or intimidated into silence about the abuse because of their partner's presence.

In addition, many women found that therapists focused on the idea that the woman carried half the responsibility for the abuse, stating (directly or indirectly) that she contributed to the violence by instigating arguments or "nagging" the batterer into hitting her when he was in a bad mood. Therapy sessions involving both parties focused on the woman learning new ways of communicating, including learning how to avoid stressful situations with her partner and to help him diffuse his anger by giving him cues about his "triggers", certain behaviors or incidents that make him violent. These first non-violence programs used the above anger management models, but quickly discovered from battered women that anger was not the batterer's primary problem, rather, the underlying problem was the belief system that allowed him to assault his partner.

Today, many programs still use couple counseling and therapy as the basis for intervention, even though some therapists trained in the dynamics of domestic violence are acutely aware of the dangers involved in working with batterers in this way. Therapy is a useful tool when legitimate psychological problems exist; however, therapy is an overused and inappropriate method of addressing men's violence. Sometimes the only resource available to reservation communities is social services, while the nearest mental health program is usually a non-Native therapy based program, located off the reservation. Some of these programs fail to meet the needs of batterers and focus on the secondary or contributing causes of his use of violence. When such therapy fails to stop the violence, tribal courts react with disbelief. "Why does he still abuse women after going to counseling?" Many batterers manipulate their therapist, soliciting support and understanding by presenting the likeable and respectful side of themselves. It is highly unlikely that the batterer will be confronted about his violent behavior when the therapist only sees him as a polite charming man. All too often, batterers benefit from a psychological diagnosis: they use it to hide their violence and request that letters of sympathy be sent to the court stating that their problem is psychologically based and beyond their control. When batterers given a psychological diagnosis, they carry that label everywhere they go to gain support. Having a particular diagnosis also allows him

to avoid responsibility for terrorizing his partner and children. Batterers learn a new language with which to frame their violence. For example, “My therapist said I’m dealing with trauma from when I was a kid”. Batterers benefit from one-on-one therapy sessions, they allow them to keep the violence private, while attending a men’s re-education group, on the other hand, makes the violence a public issue.

Batterer’s re-education programs are designed to teach violent men to take responsibility for their violence and the impact of their actions on their partners, children, family and community. When well-trained workers develop batterer’s programs, these programs serve several purposes. They assist the community in shifting its belief system away from blaming the woman by placing responsibility on the batterer to stop the violence. Batterers learn that the concept of ownership of women and children comes from a European belief system and is supported by the patriarchal system (also European) that is too prevalent in Native communities. Men in batterer re-education programs have the opportunity to learn non-violent behaviors and to reconnect with traditional values that include strong sanctions against violent behavior and recognize the sacredness of women.

Effective men’s groups should be lead by a male and female facilitator, preferably from the community. Both facilitators are essential to the group process; they maintain balance and avoid the collusion that can occur when only a male facilitator is present. Recruiting community members to lead men’s group is important in that it shows that communities can develop their own programs to meet their specific cultural needs. It also acknowledges the community’s role in stopping men’s violence against women and children.