

An Interview with...

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Q: What are Batterer Intervention Programs?

A: Batterer intervention programs have different names in different places. In Massachusetts, they are called Intimate Partner Abuse Education Programs. There’s been a trend away from calling them Batterer Intervention Programs because of the labeling aspect. No one wants to join “the batterer’s club”. Also, ‘abuse’ is a broader term that includes more than just illegal behavior which the term ‘battering’ tends to connote. The goal of Intimate Partner Abuse Education Programs is to provide an opportunity for abusers to take responsibility for, and to change their behavior, by learning new behaviors that are not abusive. Another aspect of our work is to document non-compliance because not all abusers change. For those whose abusers are court-ordered to finish our programs and they are still showing abusive behavior or blaming their victims, we provide documentation about that because that’s important information for the courts. We maintain contact and have extensive communication with the victims throughout the abuser’s participation in the program. We do this in order to hear from the victim whether there are any new acts of abuse

Founded in 1977, Emerge was the first abuser education program in the United States. Since its creation, Emerge has been a national leader in working to end violence in intimate relationships.

but also to give the victim information about the abuser’s participation in the program. If the victim hears from us at about 12 weeks into the program, that he’s still blaming her for his behavior then that is really useful information for her to have because many victims are trying to decide if they want to remain in these relationships. In Abuse Education Programs we look at stalking as one of many risk factors for lethality. That’s part of the decision making process for victims.

Q: What are some of the best practices for Abuse Education Programs?

A: Most states have effective standards or guidelines now. Almost all include the idea that treatment should be in groups, as opposed to individual treatment. That creates opportunity for accountability and creates room for a group learning process. It gets us away from the idea that violence is private and an individual problem. In many states, including Massachusetts, groups are required to be co-facilitated by a man and a woman. This enables role-modelling of shared leadership between men and women. Most states also require abuser programs to reach out and maintain confidential communication with victims. In some states it’s just to let the victim know that their partner or ex-partner is in the program and if they drop out or are terminated

from the program. Some states choose to provide more follow-up contact with the victim, minimally every two months. This can guide interventions with the abusers because some victims need to learn whether or not he's still lying or minimizing the violence.

Q: What's the confidentiality policy like regarding communications with victims?

A: In Massachusetts at least, communication with victims is completely confidential. Anything the victims tells us is not repeated to anyone, including the abuser or the courts. The only exception is if the victim reports child or elder abuse. We tell the victim that up front.

Q: How can you measure the effectiveness of a Abuse Education Program?

A: I think there's been a lot of misunderstandings about the outcome findings of Abuse Education Programs. Nearly all outcome studies have found that those who complete these programs are two to four times less likely to re-offend than non-program completers. But it should be noted that some researchers and other individuals are not impressed by that. They say those who complete the program are different from those who don't complete the program. But that is exactly how many other rehabilitation programs are evaluated. Substance abuse programs, like abuse education programs have fairly high degrees of non-completion. Abuse education program completion varies from around 40-50 percent for non-completers of programs. If we look at those who do complete our programs, they do very well which is very similar to substance abuse programs where you

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have a fairly high number of people who don't complete the programs their first time.

The first time around many substance abusers don't complete the program, but the second time around they do better. And that's exactly what we find with abuse education programs as well is that we have fairly high numbers of people who don't complete the programs the first time around - either because they re-offend or they are minimizing their abusive behavior. When they come back to the program they do better generally. In a recent study in Massachusetts, we found that 16% of program completers had re-offended, while 30% of noncompleters did so. In other words, non-completers were 2.6 times more likely to re-offend than those who complete the program. That's a very good outcome. Abusers who complete our program seem to be able to refrain from abusive behaviors and have respectful ways of communicating with their partners.

Q: How do you increase the likelihood of completion?

A: One of the outcome findings is that when abuse education programs are accompanied by strong court sanctions, then completion rates go up. When the court gives the message to the abuser that not only must they attend the program, but must actively participate in it, then they are more likely to complete the program and less likely to re-offend.

Q: What information do you provide to the courts about how the abuser is doing in the program?

A: Best practice is to provide information to the courts that's more than just whether the person is attending, but also giving information about their level of participation. There are two aspects of participation. First, is the

abuser willing to talk about ongoing interactions with his/her partner or ex-partner or children? Second, are they willing to provide constructive feedback to other people in the group?

Q: What different programs are being used and which do you think are most promising?

A: There is the Duluth curriculum which is more of an educational curriculum. It is the most widely used, though often with modifications. The curriculum talks about the different types of abusive and controlling behaviors. They spend a certain number of sessions focusing on the various types of abusive behavior like psychological abuse, physical abuse, using male privilege and so forth. Emerge is probably the second most widely replicated model. It's more of a psychoeducational model where there is education, but there is also an avenue for individualized feedback. We have this process where we coach them on how to provide constructive feedback to others in the group and to hold each other accountable. Both the Duluth model and Emerge would be considered models that view domestic violence as a reflection of power and control.

Q: Do any of the programs address stalking? How do you limit the ability of participants to share stalking tactics?

A: If we are dealing with folks who stalk it's within the context of a domestic violence relationship. We tend to view stalking as being part of coercive control and monitoring of victims. We break it down into

different types of behaviors, jealous monitoring, jealous questioning, trying to monitor the victims daily life. We focus on the persons behaviors and attitudes they use to justify following or monitoring their partners daily life. Though there is always the possibility for the participants in the program to learn tactics from each other, we are always confronting those types of behaviors, and promoting respectful behaviors. Their partner has the right to end the relationship. Is it really going to be in their long term interests to try to force someone to remain in a relationship out of fear or intimidation? We tell them "You can't force a partner to want to remain with you." It's not in their long term interests because most abusers want their victim to want to be with them. That can't be achieved through fear or intimidation.

Q: Can some of these programs, like Emerge, be adapted to work with stalkers that aren't current or former intimate partners?

A: Stranger or acquaintance stalkers are not typically referred to us. I think there are some elements in abuse education programs that could be useful for those types of stalkers. However, I think people who stalk strangers sometimes have this kind of magical thinking where they think that a relationship is meant to be between them and the victim. That's really different from the people that we see in our programs because the people in our programs have real relationships with their victims, not imaginary ones. Even if they were brief, they were real. Our ultimate goal is to promote relationships that are based on mutual desire and affection as opposed to intimidation. I'm not sure how applicable these types of programs would be to those who stalk strangers. I think the one kind of stalker that it might work, are ones where there's that overlap of entitlement when they have been in a relationship and they are not willing to let the person go.

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