

## **When 50-50 Is Not Fair: The Case Against Couple Counseling in Domestic Abuse**

by Phyllis B. Frank and Gail K. Golden

Therapists and counselors in a variety of settings are frequently called on to counsel couples who seek help with many aspects of their lives. These can range from assistance with child rearing to communication, sexuality, and other relationship issues. It is only in recent years, however, that we have begun to recognize that many couples who seek marriage and family counseling do so against a background of domestic violence.

Current estimates suggest that in 50 percent of all marriages there will be at least one physically abusive episode during the course of the marriage (Peachy, 1988). This estimate does not include the untold numbers of women who are systematically abused through nonphysical patterns of coercive and controlling tactics inflicted on them by their partners. The result of this emotional and psychological abuse, often reported by victims to be equally or even more damaging than physical violence, is women who are not free-- to speak, to do, or to be.

This reality raises important issues for therapists and counselors. We know that both partners, for very different reasons, are generally reluctant to disclose information about his abuse and violence in their relationship. To balance this fact, we must raise our own consciousness about all forms of men's abuse of women in heterosexual couple relationships. Further, we must assume responsibility for learning about the climate of control that he has created when the couple is not in our office. To accomplish this, it is imperative to interview each partner alone and to ask specific questions related to violence and other controlling strategies (Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland County, 1993). Failure to gather this information can result in counseling that at best is a waste of time. At worst, such uninformed counseling colludes with and perpetuates men's violence. This further endangers women.

Women who are being beaten, intimidated, or controlled by their partners are not free to engage in the kind of open dialogue that counseling promotes. In fact, a woman who does speak openly to a therapist or counselor in the presence of an abusive partner may be in serious danger from him when she returns home (Jones & Schechter, 1992).

Those who counsel couples whose relationships are marked by stated or unacknowledged violence are conducting sessions in the presence of a powerful censor. Men who abuse their partners control their relationships by instituting serious restrictions and rules (Jones & Schechter, 1992). The women know what those rules are, although often they cannot articulate them. The therapist who knows nothing of these rules may unwittingly encourage a woman to cross a line that will seriously endanger her. For example, he may use a variety of tactics to punish her when she talks about his family. The therapist, however, may see her as a valuable source of information and may encourage her to share her thoughts in his presence.

Therapists or counselors who are aware of abuse in a relationship, and who agree to see the couple together, collude in another way with a set of damaging insinuations that further imperil women. Although the very act of working with a couple in which there is an abusive partner implies that the problem is in the relationship, today we know that this is not so. (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Abusive men are solely responsible for their abusive behavior (Thorn-Finch, 1992). Conversely, the victim of abusive behavior has no part in the attacks against her. No

matter how provocative or inappropriate women's behavior, it neither justifies nor excuses men's abuse (Jones & Schechter, 1992).

When working with those in violent relationships, therapists have been tempted to encourage women to learn to alter their behaviors so as not to provoke their partner's abuse. However, women cannot succeed in this effort. (Davis & Hagen, 1992). Her behavior is in no way responsible for her partner's abusiveness. Therefore, any changes she makes will not be the deciding factor in his stopping the abuse.

Men are abusive to their women partners because of thousands of years of patriarchal culture, institutions, and laws that have permitted, condoned, and even encouraged these actions (Jones & Schechter, 1992). Counseling a violent or abusive man together with his partner conceals and therefore perpetuates such sanctions. It also gives the message that one can improve relationships without exposing and stopping men's abusiveness. In fact, men must end their abusiveness (and sense of entitlement to their partners and their services) before couple work can be even considered (Adams, 1988).

Counselors providing treatment must understand the cultural context of domestic violence. This context includes the implicit permission for men to abuse that is embedded in our institutions and in our communities. Strong, confrontive, educational counseling conducted with men individually can encourage men to stop their abusive mistreatment. Such counseling must define the spectrum of abuse, and hold abusers solely accountable for their actions. The kind of intervention with men that we have described is the best protection for women against therapeutic mishandling. The assumption that she has a part in provoking her partner's behavior ultimately constitutes therapeutic abuse. It holds her accountable for behavior which only he can control.

Arresting men who batter is an effective "therapeutic" intervention *when* there is a coordinated criminal justice response *and* the crime is taken seriously by the courts. Therapy will have a much greater chance of being useful in a community where there is a public commitment to end domestic violence. (Sherman, 1982). Conversely, family systems therapy, which isolates the problem in the relationship, endangers battered women (Jones & Schechter, 1992). Mediation also puts women at risk because the process assumes that the two parties have equal standing in a dispute and that both have the ability to negotiate fairly. In fact, "mediation of an assault" is a conflict in terms (Jones & Schechter, 1992, pg. 239). The power imbalance and the violence preclude equitable negotiations between the two parties.

What mental health professionals do not know about domestic violence can kill their clients. Counselors and therapists have been trained in a variety of approaches (for example, behavior modification, family systems, and psychoanalysis) that seem generally useful with other kinds of clients and issues. Imposing these models on work with men who are abusive and their partners, however, may well prove ineffective. Such work may also exacerbate the risk that he will assault her. The past decades of groundbreaking work in the field of domestic abuse have yielded clear, usable information. It is incumbent on us to be open to theory and analysis that come out of the work that has been done with thousands of abused women. Therapists and counselors in hospitals, courts, schools, mental health clinics, and the like are in a unique position to confront

the issue of abuse by asking the right questions and by disallowing treatment interventions that perpetuate the problem.

Understanding the dangers to women posed by joint interviewing necessitates thoughtful adjustments to clinical practice. Mental health workers can not know what truly happens behind closed doors. Statistically, very large numbers of men are making women unsafe at home. Therefore, ethical practice requires that we craft all of our interventions with the understanding that we may inadvertently place women at risk of harm from her partner. The intake interview is especially important since it is the first contact, and it takes place in the absence of much important information. One family service agency, after years of trial and error, has found the following procedures to be very helpful:

When a person calls to request couple counseling they will be given an appointment. There is no attempt to telephone screen the caller regarding the possibility that a woman is experiencing abuse from her partner. In all instances, we feel it is in the best interest of women to meet with an intake worker, even if she later declines treatment recommendations for individual counseling.<sup>1</sup> We advise callers that couple intakes require about two hours and, as a routine part of the assessment, both parties will be seen separately before being seen together. It is important to leave enough time. Two hours seems about right.

Women are always seen first. A thorough interview is done to determine, as much as possible, whether a partner is perpetrating physical, emotional, sexual or financial abuse against her. If it is determined that this is the case, information is given about domestic abuse. This information includes how to access local domestic violence service agencies and the reason why couples counseling may not be in her best interest. We tell her that after we see him, we will briefly meet with them as a couple to give our suggestions for treatment. We then share with her what we plan to tell them when meeting together.

Battered women's advocates suggest that in order to assure her safety, we should not focus on his abusive behavior as the reason for treatment decisions. They suggest that we say something like: "At this time, the level of marital conflict is too intense for couple counseling. Therefore we will start with individual sessions, and then review." Or: "At this time, each party has individual issues that need to be worked on before couple counseling would help." We can use the inference that couple counseling may be arranged at some time in the future.

Women should be told in advance what we will say and her input should be sought. She knows him best and may have some further thought about how to present things to him. After he is seen, the couple should be seen together for a very short time, simply to present our recommendations.

Even if either partner or both partners decline treatment, women will have been given valuable information about domestic abuse and resources available to help her now or at some time in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Many women request couple counseling because they believe it will get their partners to stop their abuse. Others want to be seen as couples because that is what their partners are demanding.

As mental health practitioners, we have to acknowledge the limits of our abilities to stop a man from perpetrating abuse. **He** must choose to stop his abusive behavior. We can, however, avoid doing damage. We do this, first of all, by refusing to put women in dangerous situations. Secondly, we must hold him accountable for the changes that he alone can make in order to stop his abuse.

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Phyllis B. Frank, MA, is director of the VCS Community Change Project.

Gail K. Golden, EdD, CSW, is clinical director of VCS, Inc., 77 South Main Street, New City, NY 10956  
info@nymbp.org ~ www.nymbp.org

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