



## Counselling, Perpetrators and Women's Safety

In my work with survivors of abuse, throughout delivering training to practitioners and in conversation with people on the issue of domestic abuse, there is one myth that regularly reveals itself within people's questions, conversations and interventions. That is the myth of perpetrator counselling.

Often stemming from the need to believe that people only choose to do terrible things because they've been through something terrible, the perpetrator counselling myth is as dangerous as it is wrong.

### **1. Perpetrators do not abuse because they were abused**

Abuse is a choice. Lundy Bancroft's book "Why Does He Do That?" (which everyone in the world should read) states that approximately 50% of men who perpetrate abuse towards a female partner have witnessed a father (or step-father) behave abusively to their mother (or step-mother). He emphasises that it is the learnt beliefs and behaviours of how men behave towards women that is the underlying issue, it is not because of abuse, but because of role modelling, that someone may grow up thinking abuse is acceptable. That said, 50% of abusers have not experienced abuse.

There also must be a gendered analysis of the issues. Women who have experienced abuse as children, rarely become perpetrators of abuse as adults. That's not to say women cannot be abusive, they can. However, if abuse led to becoming an abuser, surely we would be seeing equal levels of violence and abuse perpetrated by women, and no matter what Men's Rights Activists want to tell you, men commit 97% of violent crime within the UK.

### **2. Counselling is dangerous for perpetrators**

The focus of counselling is generally to look at my feelings and other people's actions. Generally within therapy the counsellor's role is to non-judgementally support their client in processing their feelings and experiences. Their focus will be on supporting their client. Similar to the medical profession, their practice will be about "the patient". Unless safeguarding issues are raised then the focus of counselling will be on the client, their feelings, their worldview, their lives.

Effective and safe work with perpetrators must have an almost "opposite" approach. Work must be done with the perpetrator primarily on their actions and other people's feelings. Perpetrators dehumanise their partner and children in order to be able to abuse them, so work to increase empathy and make visible the consequences of their behaviour must be part of work with perpetrators.

A counsellor approaches their client 100% believing what they are told. If over time there seems to be inaccuracies in the client's story, this will be explored. Work with perpetrators must assume that they will minimise and deny their behaviour. Perpetrators are skilled in never taking



responsibility for their behaviour and also in enlisting allies to support their views and choices.

Most counsellors receive little to no training about working with perpetrators. They are often convinced by the emotional manipulation of the perpetrator. Rarely are counsellors skilled in assessing risk, one of the most important aspects of any work around domestic abuse.

I was speaking at an event a couple of years ago. A counsellor approached me to share a story about a client she had been working with. He was a perpetrator of domestic abuse and had begun visiting her in order to deal with his experiences of his father's bullying of him. She encouraged him to "let his anger out" within the session. The next week she found out he had gone home and stabbed his wife to death.

It cannot be underestimated how important it is to get work with perpetrators right. Even if a perpetrator doesn't go home and kill his partner (and/or children), counselling will often give him ammunition to control and abuse his partner. Actual things abusers say:

"My counsellor says you need to help me with my journey of healing by not winding me up."

"I'm getting help! I'm going to counselling. The least you can do is have sex with me when I want it."

"My counsellor says you're fucking crazy."

"I've spoken to my counsellor about your behaviour and she thinks that you might be bipolar or something."

Working with perpetrators can be really dangerous if not done safely. Rarely do counsellors have the training to understand domestic abuse properly and the damage that has been done by uneducated counsellors cannot be overstated. Counsellors are rarely trained in a gendered analysis of domestic abuse. Often beliefs rooted in neurosexism, traditional gender roles and myths about domestic abuse provide a toxic foundation for counselling perpetrators, and for those suffering abuse.

### **3. Couple counselling and abusers**

Often couple counselling is suggested to someone who has an abusive partner. This relates to another significant myth about abuse; that abuse is a relationship issue.

Couple counselling should never be offered where there is an abuser in the relationship. One of the fundamental assumptions of couple counselling is that both people have equal power and are equally responsible for the issues within the relationship. When one person is abusive, neither of these are present. The abuser has all the power and all the responsibility

There is also an assumption within couple counselling that both people are participating within the counselling because they want to improve the relationship. For an abuser, couple counselling can be used in various ways, including to:



- Reinforce his worldview
- Recruit another ally to support his abusive behaviour
- Persuade his partner back into the relationship
- Prevent the relationship ending
- Humiliate or degrade his partner by disclosing information about her within counselling sessions
- Prove he is right
- Prove to other people he is making an effort
- Prove his partner is to blame for the abuse

So we find that an abuser intends for couple counselling to actually become part of his abuse and is intending to further his abuse, not to benefit the relationship or his partner, solely to benefit himself. Though many counsellors refuse to offer counselling to couples where there has been abuse, there are still some who will.

#### **4. Women's safety**

Working with perpetrators is fundamentally about improving the lives of women and children. Accredited interventions with perpetrators must include support and interactions with a man's current and ex partners. Counselling doesn't do this. When a perpetrator tells a counsellor that his girlfriend has been sleeping with other men, that she makes him feel small, that his ex-partner won't let him see the children because she's a vicious cow, the counsellor has no facility to check if this information is true. It would be highly inappropriate within a counselling setting for the counsellor to consider the information not true, without further evidence. And so the counsellor may begin considering the abuser's partner as mentally unstable, as hurtful, or perhaps even as the "actual" abuser within the relationship.

All work to address domestic abuse should be focussed on the safety and wellbeing of the person who is suffering abuse. Counselling can only do that if the counsellor is a) trained and b) working with the person suffering the abuse and \*not\* working with the abuser.

#### **5. Abuse is not about feelings, it's about beliefs**

Abuse is fundamentally about intention. The intention to have power and control over another person. It is rooted in beliefs of ownership "I own my partner" and entitlement "I have a right to do what I want". Any feelings an abuser has will be shaped by those beliefs, and it is working to change those beliefs that will ultimately change his behaviour and his feelings.

Only about 15% of abusers are violent to people other than their partners (and children). Abusers are not "out of control". They are permanently in control, of their partner and any children and of people's perceptions of them.

Counselling is fundamentally about feelings. Dealing with them, processing them, working to address the parts of life that are causing them. An abuser accessing counselling is like a person with heart failure being advised to exercise more, when what they really need is a heart transplant. Not only would that advice undermine the seriousness of their condition, the exercise



could actually kill them.

In counselling it's not an abuser who will die, but his partner or children may be killed, seriously harmed or deeply and emotionally damaged.

## **6. What interventions will help perpetrators?**

I can hear you all asking, so what will help perpetrators to change?

An accredited perpetrator programme is the answer! Research by Project Mirabel recently evidenced the difference that good quality intervention with perpetrators can make. You can read the Full Report [HERE](#) and the Executive Summary [HERE](#):

I spend a few months last year co-facilitating a Respect accredited perpetrator programme and the difference that it made to men's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours was incredible. The programme was voluntary and so the men who attended were choosing to be there. I found that a space in which men were challenged by people they grew to respect made a massive difference. For a lot of abusive men, no one has ever challenged them, except perhaps a current or ex-partner.

Within a group setting men can begin challenging each other, and when it is a rolling programme, men who have made changes sit beside men who are on the first or second week. Groups are co-run by female and male facilitators, modelling positive interactions between men and women and encouraging men to respect women.

You can contact Respect to find out about accredited perpetrator programmes near you. They also offer a telephone advice service for men who are concerned about their behaviour. The Phonline can also be used by practitioners, friends and family of men who are behaving abusively, to gain advice on how to help them.

Respect Details:

Website: <http://respect.uk.net>

Phonline: 0808 802 4040

## **7. British vs. North American language**

There seems to be some challenges between the UK and the US (and possibly other countries) around the term "counsellor" (or counselor according to US spelling). Within the UK, this term refers to a qualified therapist who works within a therapeutic context, whereas within the US it seems the term refers to many people who offer help, e.g. a Summer Camp counsellor, may be a young adult who supports and mentors people younger than themselves. Merium Webster <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counselor> defines a "counselor" as "a person who provides advice as a job: a person who counsels people", which is a much wider definition than within the UK.



Within the US it seems that perpetrator programme facilitators are often referred to as “counselors” and so the context suggests more complexity around what it means for a someone to accessing counselling. My points remain the same however, if someone is a counsellor or therapist offering to help people process their feelings, if they have not had extensive training on understanding domestic abuse and working with perpetrators and if they are not part of a wider domestic abuse service which includes a women’s safety service, then they should NOT be working with perpetrators. At all. Period.