

Working with the Perpetrator of Domestic Violence

by Colm Kiely

When asked to write this article about my work with perpetrators of domestic violence I soon became aware of how few therapists actually work in this field. My passion for my work in this field has been greatly enhanced by my work in the field of addiction, mainly dealing with sexual, love, romance and relationship addiction along with working with alcohol and drug addiction.

My first encounter into the world of the perpetrator came nearly twenty years ago when I was asked to facilitate a programme for a group of men who had come to a place of admittance and acknowledgement of their abusive behaviour and physically violent outbursts towards their spouses or partners. This meeting was held in a family resource centre in Darndale, Co. Dublin and what I experienced that night at the meeting was to change my concept of how I as a man interacted and communicated my beliefs and needs to those closest to me. Within the confines of a small room there were five highly emotionally charged men who were being asked to change their belief systems around how they perceived themselves as men, and to challenge their old belief systems within the context of a 13 step programme. This programme was brought to Ireland by its originators, a psychotherapist called Tony Waring and a builder's labourer called Tony Wilson, who had been physically, verbally and emotionally violent all of his life. These people had formed a group in England called M.O.V.E. (men overcoming violence)

There are a number of assumptions M.O.V.E. has about violence:

1. Violence is Learned Behaviour:

The perpetrator has learned that violence generally gets them what they want or feel they need. These habits have to be replaced by habits which improve the quality of life for everybody concerned.

2. Violence is supported by our culture

It does this through the traditional male role of 'The Hard Man' incorporating chauvinistic attitudes towards the female gender, seeing their spouses as their properties and chattels. Such cultural ideas have to be challenged and replaced by a co-operative view of life with others.

3. Violence comes from our own beliefs

Such as the belief that they own the other person in some way, that she has to be controlled or she will run off with someone else, or that she actually likes being violated and that she will admire his strength. These beliefs are demeaning to the partner and need to be challenged before their relationship can be put on a better footing.

4. Violence is due to a decision of the person to attack

Yes, it is true that people can provoke you into an angry state, but it is you that makes the decision to attack and violate the other person. Again, excuses like, over indulgence in alcohol. "Alcohol makes me violent!" – alcohol does not make you violent, you make the decision to violate or attack, you choose to make that decision.

I have found these assumptions invaluable to my work with perpetrators of domestic violence, for it is in this work I need to constantly confront and challenge their irrational thinking and behaviour in order to formulate the characteristics of the perpetrator. The defence mechanisms of the violent man are predominantly that of denial and minimisation of their acting out. They will constantly blame the other person for their actions if their belief system has been offended, and this needs to be corrected. This pattern emerges from a strong belief system in which the man assumes he has total authority over the people in his household and that he alone knows what is right. He believes that he has the right to make his family conform to his way of thinking and if challenged around his belief he will find justification for violating and making statements like 'Now you see what you made me do!' I have found that a lot of perpetrators of domestic violence have come from a background of violence in their own homes and on the streets. This finding is not to take away or dilute the responsibility of the individual for their behaviour or actions, it is just a fact. So, they accept it as normal; that's what happened in my home, so it must be alright.

When I first started working with perpetrators I was overwhelmed by how emotionally isolated they were, disclosing to me their belief that, if they discussed their fears, anxieties and sadness they felt over their violent actions, they believed that others would see them as weak and think less of them. The isolated individual having no one with whom to share his feelings

or problems would resort to stifling those feelings, allowing the emotional feelings come to the boil and explode into an act of violence. The cycle of desperation formulates itself again. Again, what comes very clearly to me in my work is the distortion of reality in these men's lives. This is fuelled by irrational thinking and irrational behaviour. They are emotionally disconnected from themselves and have no concept of their core self. I do believe that, within the cycle of violence, there is great shame for the individual who chooses to perpetrate that violence, and that like the spiral of addiction to alcohol or drugs, it becomes increasingly more difficult to stop acting out of abusive behaviour. Part of my work with perpetrators of domestic violence is to make them fully aware of the fact that it is their decision whether they choose to act out nor not. What I am offering them is the challenge to stop their abusive behaviour and cease the cycle of violence.

In order for their process to be effective, it is important that a non-judgmental environment is offered to the client where they can explore and confront the belief systems that are so deeply ingrained in them. Initially we introduce the business of watching for their own anger signals and to look at some of the basic ideas as to why they get angry. The concept of exploring their anger signals is that they formulate a pattern for them to access what they perceive to be happening and slowly proceed into negotiating the situation in a non-threatening fashion. Another technique we ask the client to consider is the concept of taking time out, where they remove themselves from the conflict in a non-aggressive and non-abusive way until such time as they have formulated their process of feelings. I have found these two techniques to be invaluable in the deconstruction of the cycle of violence. As I said earlier on, in the world of the perpetrator there are very distorted concepts of the reality of their lives, so I would ask the client to examine why and for what reasons they want to resume a relationship with their spouses after a battering incident. What are their expectations? What are their hopes? And how real do they perceive these to be?

Because of the distortion of reality and the disconnection from self, the perpetrator will minimise to a great extent. Part of my work is to allow the client to verbally process some of the violent incidents. This shows him that at any given stage of the dispute, he could have chosen to withdraw from being physically violent or verbally abusive. The concept of this process is

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to allow the client to see that it was his choice to attack, and that the decision came from him, not because he was provoked into becoming violent. With my clients I like to examine and explore the beliefs they have which they claim make them angry, and to show them how these beliefs can be challenged and replaced by beliefs which are less threatening to themselves and their families. Many of these destructive and demeaning beliefs are formulated in the interpretation and integration of how the individual experiences their relationships with their primary carers. Part of that integration was what the individual experienced visually within the compounds of their family home, which to some degree may have traumatised them into psychologically splitting and retreating to a place of isolation and alienation.

People sometimes find it difficult to comprehend why a perpetrator of domestic violence needs to be taught assertion. It is their inability to assert themselves that the real frustration initially formulates. Most perpetrators I have worked with believe that being aggressive physically and verbally is the only way their needs can be met. Again, this work is about changing the belief systems of the individual and showing them that by asking for their needs to be heard, and by expressing their needs in a positive fashion, they can enter into negotiations with mutual respect for their partners and themselves. This part of the therapeutic relationship can be very difficult for the client as it is asking them to be open and vulnerable with the psychotherapist, who previous to therapy was seen as a threat to the whole concept of their belief system. It is difficult for them to comprehend that their needs will not be met and part of their resistance towards being open and vulnerable with their partners is that they will have to question the old belief system if their needs are not met. This is a very slow time in the therapeutic process. It is at this stage that the clients' awareness of the conflict and confusion they are experiencing within themselves in not being able to justify the old abusive behaviour, leads them into being anxious and fearful about moving forward into a more positive negotiable situation.

When one is dealing with an individual who uses violence as a form of control, one has to be aware of the profile of the individual. That profile is of having no understanding of a relational relationship. They integrate socially through a shame-based interpretation and have little or no self-

esteem or self-worth. They perceive their partners as the enemy and find them threatening towards their patriarchal concepts of life. They fear any form of authority for instance, police, bank managers or anybody who is seen to be an authority on any subject. In order for them not to completely deplete themselves they will isolate and alienate themselves from those closest to them. In some cases they will totally cut off contact with their family of origin.

What I try to work with when I am with a man who has a desire to change his belief system is the area of building with him a positive self regard. This is in order for him to nurture himself and confirm his new found identity without having to shout other people down in order to be sure of himself. Sometimes the changes are minute, and other times they appear to be major leaps of progress.

My observations of working in the field of domestic violence are that it can escalate to the point where all the family members become involved and affected to a greater or lesser degree. The most frequent sociological example is that of a man who feels undermined and frustrated and acts out against his wife. As a result their children are at the mercy of his violent acts and in turn become terrified by the fear of the parent's eventual death at the hands of the partner. When he goes to work, the father or stepfather leaves behind a pained and battered wife, who is now in control of the domestic sphere. Although her domestic duties may afford her no small amount of power and responsibility, it is often an unsatisfying power, aligned as it is to isolation from outside society and dependence on the husband. It is often then that the woman identifies with the aggressor and works out her own aggression against her child. In turn, this child becomes the weak family member and the 'appropriate' target for the expression of hostility, aggression and sometimes sexual violence. (Welldom 2002: 45)

When a child is injured by their own caregivers as is overwhelmingly often the case, danger is delivered to the child by the very persons that they depend and rely on for protection. This tragic dilemma sets up an excruciating bind that lies at the heart of the child's trauma experience; the desperate need to re-establish a loving connection to his /her own abuse (Reel 1997:106).

Experience of working

My experience of working with the families and children who are survivors of domestic abuse has had an enormous impact upon me. To experience these people sharing what it was like living in a tyranny of abuse and violence is a sobering experience. What constantly runs through each person's story is the fact that the worst abuse of all is verbal abuse. Each person who shared his or her own personal experience of verbal abuse speaks of how it eats away at their core self, leaving them devoid of self worth, self esteem or self respect. In some cases people shared that they were not able to get out of bed, look after their children, take care of their own personal hygiene. They lived in a state of depression and apathy, constantly in fear of the perpetrator. To a large degree the adult survivors of domestic abuse in time can, I hope, find a voice within themselves to channel the hurt and pain that has been put upon them. In time they can re-establish a life force within themselves that will bring peace, contentment and safety to their lives and the lives of their children.

I have found working with perpetrators of domestic violence to be extremely challenging and at times very difficult. It is hard to break down the walls of psychological patriarchy that have been infused into our male society by a history both politically and socially that condones 'men throughout history to claim rights for themselves that they have in most cultures been loath to grant to women' (Reel 2002:73). I am left with a hunger in me as a psychotherapist to eliminate the conspiracy of emotional silence that men choose to cultivate within their relationships in order to facilitate the unspeakable pain of collusion. How complex it is – that inner voice that urges us not to speak of our feelings and emotions which are encased in patriarchal belief systems and has such a need to breathe freely. My belief is that the men and women who choose to violate their partners by physical, emotional, verbal, financial and sexual abuse are the assassins of healthy loving relationships and their need for control, revenge and resignation of their partner's emotional stability is paramount to them. My personal belief is that the perpetrator too has a voice that needs to be heard, a voice that is lost in their own silence. It is a voice that may be crippled with pain and trauma of perhaps a childhood of abuse and violence.

Is there a place that these people can come to, where they can start to unravel the sordid enmeshment of their own painful life? Can we as humanistic and integrative psychotherapists provide this place or an environment for them? Can we as psychotherapists put aside our personal prejudices, our socially uncomfortable interpretations of abuse, and create an environment that will be humanistic, non judgmental, congruent and safe for the perpetrator to remove his cloak of abuse and shame? I believe it is possible.

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