

# Strength-based approaches with men who use violence: Embracing a new paradigm of practice

Ian DeGeer MSW and Ruth Rigbey MSW., RSW  
Family Counselling Centre, Niagara ON



# Agenda

What to expect:

1. Introductions to our work within PAR in Ontario
2. Review of strength-based practice and assessments
3. Discussion of practice issues re: assaultive men's programs
4. Presentation of our evolving curriculum



## Our road to work with men:

- Ruth's Story
- Ian's Story

Your Road?

What is your experience working with men?

What attracted you to this session?

## Our experiences together...what led us towards change

- For 6 years we have co-facilitated together
- After the first few groups we saw patterns amongst the men
- Men came into group with feelings of shame and embarrassment
- Men expected to experience us as punitive and punishing – an extension of the criminal justice system
- Men were insightful about their lives and wanted to engage in the process of discovery



## Change takes time...the genesis of our model

- In 2007 we attended a day-long seminar with Tod Augusta-Scott and were introduced to narrative methods of working with men
- We set out to re-write how we would deliver the program differently
- We took 2 ½ days to revamp and organize our material
- While we had freedom to explore other approaches our colleagues were resistant to our ideas




## A quick literature review:

Where we have been:

- Abusive men are treated unkind in the literature
- Portrayed generally as pathological, defiant and in a constant state of denial (Lehmann & Simmons, 2009)
- Beliefs regarding entitlement, minimizing their behaviour and power and control are pervasive in the literature (Gondolf, 2002)
- No general agreement regarding the curriculum to be utilized
- Low completion rates for IPV programs
- Recidivism rates are also concerning

# Current Partner Assault Response (PAR) Program

- Government mandated 16 Week psycho-educational program: programs vary across Ontario
- Niagara Region (pop'n 427 000)
- PAR programs are delivered by 2 agencies (FCC & DFNT) – intake is a shared process
- Closed groups begin when 18-20 men have been accepted
- Exclusion criteria: unmedicated mental health issues, uncontrolled addictions, resistance to treatment (high levels of denial)

- 
- Reporting process to probation officers
  - Partner contact process: 3-4 times during the course of the program if partner agrees (3<sup>rd</sup> team member)
  - Completion consists of attendance, completed homework, participation and fees being paid
  - Written letters to probation officers upon completion of the program



## Comparison of two practice styles

Traditional model	Innovations in practice
Standardized assessments	Individualized assessments
Standardized program: psycho-ed and feminist	Inclusion of multiple methods of engagement: Narrative, CBT and others
Strict payment guidelines	Less emphasis on paying by specific date
Early and often confrontation of beliefs that lead to abuse of women	Emphasis on engagement and tactful and timely use of confronting beliefs
Emphasis on hearing every man's story	Emphasis on stories of those who are willing



## Organizational challenges to delivering a standardized program


- 2 agencies has resulted in 2 'different' programs being delivered. No cross-collaboration occurs
- A lack of consistency in the material being delivered in groups
- Waitlists for men to access groups in St. Catharines
- Men felt they were treated differently in groups run by the other agency
- Pressure to accept every referred man regardless of readiness



## Theoretical basis for our curriculum

We integrated a variety of ‘strength-based’ modalities into our work, understanding that there is no one ‘best’ approach. These include;

- CBT
- Solution-focused
- Goal setting
- Narrative
- Some psycho-educational



### 3 Assumptions of Strength-based practices that guide our approach

1. The offending client is not the problem, the behaviour is.
2. Offending clients are experts in their own lives and their behaviours. They are partners in the change in process.
3. Focus is directed towards sharing power between the therapist and the individual. Emphasis is on the development of a positive therapeutic relationship

## Adopting a non-confrontational alliance to address abusive behaviours:

- Due to their experiences, men expect to have to defend themselves
- It is important to listen to past acts as well as encouraging behavioural change
- Intervention is separate from punishment
- The goal is to build a therapeutic alliance, not alienate
- Our role is to assist in the process of discovery for the man and for us
- A joint process allows us to learn and subsequently guide the man to change

(Lehmann & Simmons, 2009)



## Changing abusive behaviours is a process

- Assessment is a continual process (engagement stage), not just an administrative requirement
- We are continually assessing and evaluating the needs of the men



## Group structure and thoughts

- First hour of group is ‘check-in’ based on homework
- 2<sup>nd</sup> hour focuses on therapeutic/educational material
- Use multiple methods of engagement (films, group work, pairs, individualized interaction) to keep men engaged
- In this group setting we try not to lose sight of any individual man



## Important aspects of co-facilitating men's groups

- Matching of co-facilitators is important
- The use of 'we' when talking about concepts and beliefs
- Common ideology regarding violence against women and the change process
- Understanding gender within the group setting
- Modeling a healthy relationship





## Our curriculum - Overview

- Weeks 1-5: Creating space to develop language, examining social expectations of men
- Weeks 6-11: Examining men's narratives about their relationships
- Weeks 12-16: Integration of learning, healing and repairing relationships



## Our evolving curriculum

Week 1: Introductions

Introductions, Group Orientation

Introduction of concrete skill (timeout)

Previous group member talks about his experience


Homework: “More to the Point”

Week2: Challenging male social expectations

How do men talk to each other?

How does this influence their relationships

Introduction of ideas of stress



Week 3: Defining violence against women  
Men work to define various aspects of abuse  
Homework: Relationship Values

Week 4: Gender social expectations  
Taking Responsibility  
Film “It’s not like I hit her...”



Week 5: CBT

Introduction to Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

Week 6: Men's Stories

Men tell their stories in group

Week 7: Examining thought processes

Distracting Ideas/ What is it hard to take responsibility?



Week 8: More work on thought processes  
Cognitive distortions/Unhelpful thinking

Week 9: Empathy  
Focus on Empathy  
Externalized other interview



## Week 10 & 11: Communication

Working on improving communication

Styles of communication, respectful communication

Paired exercise with men to explore communication



Week 12: Resolving conflict in relationships

Conflict resolution/negotiation

How do men communicate respect?

What is assertive communication?

How to navigate conflict in a partnership?

Week 13: Healing and Repairing relationships

Healing the abused child

Repairing the parental relationship



Week 14:

How has abuse moved you away from the relationship you wanted?

What has changed in the way you interact with others?

How would your partner say you have changed?

Week 15: Healthy living

Revisit stress management

Lifestyle choices as influences





Week 16: Ending

When I started group I thought...

During group I learned...

Leaving group I still have to work on...

Men then offer feedback and suggestions about group



## Moving beyond group

- Referrals for men to other programs
- Offer the opportunity for follow up
- Resource list for support services in the community



## Final thoughts

- Groups for men need to be part of community response
- Work with men needs to be individualized beyond the parameters of 16 weeks: individual sessions pre, post & during group
- Increased emphasis on outcome measures: programs of research
- Increased funding and resources for men's programs