

Domestic Violence Groups for Women

by Joan Daniels and Patricia Smith

Joan Daniels is a therapist and trainer. She is a staff member of the Wellington Psychodrama Training Institute and has completed her practical assessment in psychodrama. Patricia Smith is a therapist, trainer and advanced psychodrama trainee.

Both Joan and Patricia live and work in Palmerston North. They share a common interest in working with trauma in group settings and for the past five years have been running programs for women affected by domestic violence.

The Context

Domestic violence is a major social problem in New Zealand affecting all members of the family group. It is physically and psychologically damaging. The effects can be wide ranging and extend from one generation to the next. It has been described as a 'monstrous dysfunction that tears at the underbelly of our community. (Mahoney 1997). It has a deep affect on our community, striking at the core of the nation's well being.

Domestic violence is certainly not a new phenomenon. What is beginning to shift is society's view, with a growing intolerance towards it. The idea that what goes on in the home is a private affair is slowly being laid to rest.

In New Zealand there have been significant changes in the approach taken by the court, the police and other government departments and ministries. On billboards outside police stations and emblazoned over public transport, is the message in bold letters 'Family Violence is a Crime. Call for Help!'

A great deal of time has been devoted to developing a better understanding of domestic violence. One outcome has been a change in the law. The *Domestic Violence Act 1995* adopts a more systemic approach to domestic violence, redefining 'domestic relationships' to include not only intimate partners and children, but extended family and close personal relationships, including same-sex relationships.

Until recently, the offender involved in domestic violence was the only party to receive assistance. Now there is agreement (at least in principle) that all of those affected by domestic violence should have access to assistance. Provision of service delivery has been widened. Programs designed to assist women and children affected by domestic violence, as well as those provided for the offender, are legislated for and are slowly being adopted. This development widens the range of therapeutic interventions possible. When this opportunity arose we welcomed the chance to be involved as part of a more systemic approach.

The Program

We have designed and conducted a number of group work programs for women who have experienced domestic violence. At an initial assessment interview we determine each woman's readiness and willingness to work in a group. For a small number of women an individual program is indicated. Participants in the group work program attend eight weekly three-hour sessions along with a one-day workshop, incorporating the third and fourth sessions. The one-day workshop assists the group to engage more fully with each other as they are together over a longer period.

Program Philosophy

Our program is based on the following ideas:

- ❖ Social roles are learned. Both women and men experience social and cultural constraints that keep them from developing to their full potential. There can be little doubt that women have been disadvantaged both economically and psychologically by their socialisation and stereotypes associated with the female role (Barnett and La Violette 1993).
- ❖ 'It is only when men's violent behaviour is absolutely framed as within their control and as their responsibility that women become free to commence their own healing and change process' (Shaw and Pye 1993).
- ❖ Women hold within themselves their own power. The program is about assisting them to access this and share it.
- ❖ 'Some of the most important work with battered women is the remaking of their belief systems' (Holimann and Schilit 1991).
- ❖ 'In the history of the collective, as in the history of the individual, everything depends on the development of consciousness' (Jung 1945).
- ❖ People change when they feel accepted. When they experience themselves within a culture of non-condemnation and non-blame, they are able to freely express themselves and move towards their potential.
- ❖ Trauma may trigger physiological changes in the brain which cause either high arousal or dissociative states. Perry (1996) It is vital to create a safe group context with participants in their lowest possible arousal state.
- ❖ Varvaro (1991) lists numerous losses encountered by battered women. These include loss of safety, everyday routine, their spouse, a father for their children, their possessions, trust, hopes and dreams.

Program Goals

It is intended that on completion of the program, participants are able to:

- ❖ Differentiate between violence and anger.
- ❖ Clarify their own socialisation regarding anger and violence.
- ❖ Develop awareness of their own behaviour when they are angry and their behaviour when anger is directed towards them.
- ❖ Understand community sub-groups' attitudes toward violence and where they stand in relation to these.
- ❖ Recognise tactics of power and control including those expressed in their own relationship dynamics.
- ❖ Realise what they are responsible for, what they are not responsible for and what they are able to change.
- ❖ Become aware of the range of coping strategies they have developed in response to abuse.
- ❖ Recognise how their coping behaviours expand and diminish their sense of self – and the effects of this on significant others, children and partners.
- ❖ Experience the grief arising from a number of losses they have had because of the effects of violence on their lives.
- ❖ Have a greater sense of self.
- ❖ Develop roles related to self-valuing, nurturing and protection.
- ❖ Reduce their sense of isolation in the world.

Participants

Women who have experienced domestic violence are typically socially isolated, have low self-esteem and little ability to value and nurture themselves, or to hold a boundary. Often they have lived for years in a state of fear, and are highly traumatised. Participating in a group can be a frightening prospect. Initially we provide a high level of structure as we work to create relationships within the group. This creates a sense of safety and lessens isolation.

Methods

Court funding requires that the program be educational. We believe that all learning occurs within relationship, so each session has components of experiential learning, direct teaching and facilitated group work. Facilitated group work and sociometry are our primary methods for building relationships within the group.

We use role theory to conceptualise both the sociodramatic and the psychodramatic aspects of domestic violence. Mirroring, doubling, concretisation, sociograms and vignettes all assist us to work with women's individual role systems, their family relationships and their relationships within the community and society.

As in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecology model, we focus on the developing person, their internal system, their family relationships, the community and the culture, and the evolving interaction between these linked systems. This is conceived as a nest of structures, each inside the next like a set of Russian dolls.

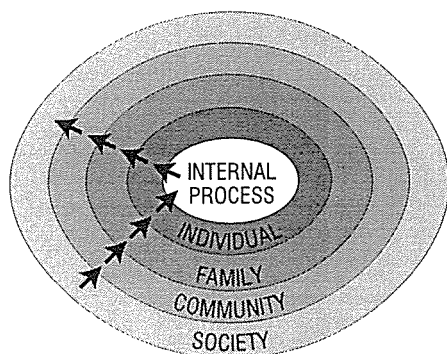


FIGURE 1: THE NEST OF STRUCTURES



Case Study One: Janine

Janine's mother, who was herself beaten both as a child and as an adult by her partner, was very violent to Janine. In her own relationship with her partner Janine was very verbally abusive, becoming helplessly raging and chaotically confused in her thinking. At other times she was a passive mouse and an icy distancer. She also had well-developed coping roles of self-effacing martyr and invisible mute.

Janine responds well to action methods. Concretising and role reversing within her family system enables her to be clear-thinking and understand the role relationships she has learned. When her experiences and those of her partner and children are concretised and mirrored to her, she understands for the first time the meanings she has made of the abuse she suffered in her childhood.

She has believed she is a bad person and that it is dangerous for her to express herself. Only able to do this when out of control, acting from her affect without thinking, Janine has been very abusive herself. Chaos has come to be seen as normal in a life where nothing can be trusted, including herself.

From this point Janine is able to begin developing a relationship with her self that is accepting and appreciative of her choices. She is now able to use roles she previously accessed only in relationship to others – her friends and children – in the service of her self. She begins to develop a self protector, a self valuer, a boundary keeper and a clear focuser. She begins to like and value her self.

Case Study Two: Teresa

Some of the traits most valued in women in their family and the wider culture, such as commitment and tolerance, may work against women in abusive relationships. Many battered women who remain with their partners develop 'learned hopefulness'. The role of wishful dreamer becomes overdeveloped. They believe that if they only do this, or that, or just wait long enough, then everything will be alright. This behaviour and thinking protects them from both despair and fear of isolation.

Teresa is a Pacific Islands woman, reared in the Islands by her maternal grandparents. At age thirteen she was sent to New Zealand to

live with her mother who enslaved her and sadistically violently abused her. Teresa ran away when she was sixteen and met her partner soon after this. She was determined it would be different for her children. Her family would stay together.

Adherence to this belief system kept her in an extremely abusive marriage for ten years. It also kept her from despair. She isolated herself, never mentioning to friends her own situation, while listening and advising her friends who were being beaten. She never acknowledged the number of times she spent in a Women's Refuge herself, physically and emotionally battered. Teresa believed she could make it work.

When she witnesses herself operating from this learned hopefulness in a non-judgemental group enactment, she is able to reach out and forgive herself. She is able to value something previously so shameful that she had cut it from her consciousness. Like Janine she begins to develop a cluster of roles associated with loving herself. She begins to adjust her belief system to accommodate forgiveness and compassion towards herself.

*she isolated herself, never
mentioning to friends her own
situation, while listening and
advising her friends who were
being beaten*



References

- Barnett, O. W. and LaViolette, A. D., (1993), *It Could Happen to Anyone*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park.
- Bronfenbrenner, Urie, (1979), in *Ecological Research with Children and Families*, from *Concepts to Methodology* Edited by Alan R. Pence Teachers' College Press, Columbia University, New York, 1988.
- Holimann, M.J. and Schilit, R., (1991), Aftercare for Battered Women: How to encourage the maintenance of change *Psychotherapy*, 28, 345–353.
- Jung, C.J., (1945), *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, London.
- Mahoney, P. L., (1997), The Domestic Violence Act: An Outcome of a New Beginning, in *The 1997 Family Violence Symposium Manawatu Men Against Violence*.
- Perry, B. D. and Pate, J. E., (1996), Neurodevelopment and the Psychobiological Roots of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in *The Neuropsychology of Mental Disorders: A Practical Guide*, Eds Koziol, L. F., Stout, C. E., Charles C., Thomas, Springfield, USA.
- Shaw E. and Pye S., (1995), Towards Balancing Power in Domestic Violence Relationships, *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 16: 3, 179–180.
- Varvaro F. F., (1991), Using a Grief Response Assessment Questionnaire in a Support Group to Assist Battered Women in their Recovery, *Response*, 13:4, 17–20.