

# Working with family violence

*Philippa van Kuilenburg*

The intention in this article is to share my experience of working with people who are in abusive relationships. My work is primarily with women. I work for an organisation called the Inner City Women's Group facilitating an eight-week group focusing on anger management and an eight-week group focusing on self-esteem and assertion. I have also facilitated a sixteen-week group for women who, having been prosecuted for family violence, have been ordered by the Courts to attend the programme. In addition, in 2017 I have facilitated programmes in Auckland Women's Prison. Some of the women have ended up in prison as a result of reacting violently as they retaliated to being abused by their partners. In a large number of these cases they were reported to the Police by their partner who demanded that they be charged. Usually no acknowledgement was given of the partner's own abusive behaviour. My work is to assist the women break the cycle of abuse in their relationships.

The clients I see in my private practice tend to be concerned about their primary intimate relationship, in particular, that they are unable to get their partner to stop their abusive behaviour. As a role trainer working in this field, I apply sociometry, role theory and systems theory to understand the dynamics of family violence and to determine what could be appropriate interventions that will increase a client's role development and expand their progressive functioning so they act less from old limited responses that are overdeveloped. In the following paragraphs, I will describe some of my work and what I have learned.

## **Understanding the system of abuse**

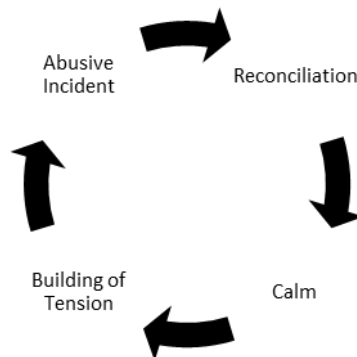
Family violence is a system of abuse in which any one person reacts to another causing harm. A hallmark of a system of abuse is inequality, where power and influence are not shared or exchanged between people. Abuse is a misuse of power that occurs when a person coerces someone into meeting their needs. The abuser in family violence is wilful, actively choosing to gain power over their partner with little regard for the other person or people involved. There are many types of abuse and may be verbal or nonverbal i.e. physical, sexual, psychological, emotional,

financial. Some are easily identifiable acts of violence while others are hidden and harder to detect. Examples include intimidation, threats, economic control, isolation, minimizing, denying and blaming, punishment, using privilege. Whatever the form of abuse, the outcome is always damaging with long lasting reverberations.

Generally, the starting place of violence is within the family with a pattern of responses learned primarily from parents and repeated through generations. There is growing medical evidence produced from brain scans that when a child is exposed to repeated violence of some sort there is increased development in the reptilian (freeze) and mammalian (fight/flight) areas of the brain to the detriment of the frontal lobe areas. The result is the same whether the child is a direct recipient of violence or may experience vicarious trauma through being exposed to violence directed against another person.

A mother who stays in an abusive relationship maintains the belief that the abuse is acceptable and models this to her children. Bancroft (2007) has found that males raised by mothers who put up with abuse, and who did not defend the child by removing them from that environment, are more likely to become abusers themselves. Girls are more likely to accept or look for partners that have similar behaviours to those experienced in their family.

Abuse is cyclic with four recognisable phases.



### ***Abusive incident***

The abuse may be physical, sexual, psychological or emotional. It is common for clients in long term abusive relationships to doubt their own thinking, be concerned that they are going crazy, or believe they are

responsible for their partner's abusive behaviour. This results from the mind games played by the abusive partner, and is referred to in the literature as 'gaslighting'. Gaslighting is a form of manipulation that seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual with the intention of making them question their own memory, perception, and sanity. One of my clients removed keys when they knew their partner was looking for them, then later replaced the keys making out that they had been there all the time.

Another of my clients was visited by a colleague when she was sick and since then her partner accuses her of having an affair with the colleague. In the privacy of their home he calls her a bitch and sexually demeans her through his haranguing. In public, he will quietly whisper in her ear that she is a whore. He texts her every half hour wanting to know where she is and what she is doing.

### ***Reconciliation***

In the reconciliation phase, the abuser apologizes for the harm they've caused, is overly affectionate and caring, or chooses to ignore the incidents of abuse or blame them on their partner in some way. In this phase, the abuser will make it seem as though the violence is finished and give assurances that such incidents will never occur again or that they will change. The abuser often feels overwhelming emotions of sadness and remorse, or at least pretends to. Most abusers shower their partner with love, purchasing them expensive gifts and treating them with extra kindness. Some abusers even threaten suicide to prevent their partner from leaving.

An example was expressed to me while I was working with a couple when the abusive partner told me that he would not do anything that was not okay anymore and promised faithfully he would change. This lasted for a week and then he proceeded to behave as he had always behaved. He then became reluctant to support his wife coming to therapy and she became fearful of what he would say or do after her sessions. His reaction reinforced for me that for couples work to be viable the abuser must have genuinely taken responsibility for their behaviour and be willing to address their functioning.

### ***Calm***

During the calm phase the abuser tries hard to be kind to their partner and does his best to restrain himself from harming them. The relationship

becomes relatively peaceful and calm during this phase which often convinces the victim that the abuser has indeed changed.

Clients tell me that life is generally good at this stage. There are no arguments, put downs and generally the partner is nice and often loving towards them. They begin to believe that perhaps the partner may be changing for the better. Those who have experienced this cycle several times recognise it for what it is and use the time as respite. They also fear it as they know what is going to come next.

### ***Building of tension***

After a period of calm, arguments arise and poor communication escalates conflict. The victim often fears angering her partner so she becomes vigilant and changes her behaviour to prevent triggering her partner. However, for some of the women in prison I discovered that they took the opposite approach. By escalating the situation, they would induce their partner's violent outburst. They told me that they felt they had some control over the situation and once the violence occurred they would be back into the calm period again. The violence would be shorter and they hoped easier to manage.

You might wonder why someone would stay in an abusive relationship. From the outside, it is easy to say just leave or get out but those who are inside these relationships say that it is not that easy. There are individuals who are persuaded to stay because of financial constraints. For example, she is unable to get money, money has been restricted or leaving would mean that the children would have to go without basic necessities. Leaving the home means starting again, moving away from familiar environments and friends. In some cases, isolation and loneliness are drivers for going back to the abusive relationship as the memory of the love and good times experienced during the reconciliation and calm phases is enticing.

There is general acceptance by those working in this field that it may take up to seven attempts before the abused individual finally and permanently walks away from the relationship. However, physically leaving an abusive relationship does not necessarily mean that the abuse stops. The abusing partner may continue the abuse via the children using them as a tool to control the other parent, for example, over custody and access, creating mistrust or turning the children against the other parent by making derogatory comments about them to the children. Events where both parents are required to be involved, e.g. clothing, health,

education, sporting activities etc., all become possible means by which to cause difficulty. If there are no children involved, other approaches might be sought, e.g. stalking, taking or killing pets, creating property disputes, denying access to money. For a considerable percentage of women, the only escape from the abuse comes through illness, imprisonment or even death.

## **Roles typically present in abusive relationships**

I have observed that there are a number of roles that appear common in abusive relationships. In the abuser, these are:

- Cunning Controller
- Defensive Self-protector
- Secretive Deceiver
- Possessive Lover
- Coercive Manipulator
- Self-righteous Narcissist

It is possible that these roles are present in non-abusive relationships but I am making a distinction that in situations of family violence we are working with extremes where the abuser deliberately intends their actions to be harmful.

In the victim, I have observed roles of:

- Self-doubter
- Self-critic
- Fearful, Vigilant Ameliorator
- Ineffective Self-expresser
- Isolated Self-defender

However, change is possible. Role training is necessary for both parties but to work effectively clients must be ready and willing to address their functioning. Often I experience a high degree of resistance with abusers who flatly deny that they are abusive. Often too my clients who are victims of abuse tend to minimise the severity of their situation or are overwhelmed by shame and are reluctant to open up. My observation is that change does not occur quickly and only occurs once the client accepts that they need to change their beliefs, thinking and behaviour. Once this occurs change is possible. As the person experiments and tries out new behaviours their spontaneity increases and their role repertoire expands.

In the following section, I describe interventions with some of my clients.



'The long path' by Philippa van Kuilenburg, a pencil drawing used with permission of the current owners.

## **My work with clients**

Many of my clients have tolerated and have even come to accept being in an abusive relationship. There are significant gaps in their functioning and most survive by coping. There are a number of things I do to assist the development of progressive functioning. A primary approach I take is to model being respectful. I always check the client's willingness and receptivity, making a point of establishing agreements for learning prior to taking action. I am sensitive to the power dynamic between us ensuring that the client makes decisions about what they will do. I teach them *I'm ok - you're ok* (Harris, 1969).

Firstly, I focus on doubling the client. I acknowledge their situation and experience. They feel seen and heard. In this way, I am able to build our relationship, to develop trust and convey that I respect them.

Working in a group is valuable in that it brings the clients out of isolation and helps correct the skew in their perception. As group members share their stories, they hear others describing situations that are recognisable and they realise that they are not alone. They get a new

perspective on what is considered abusive, e.g., blaming, name calling. Some women are surprised that legally there can be rape within a marriage and that they are allowed to say no. They also realise that they are not the cause of the abuse and that to bring about a change in the relationship they can change their own functioning.

Often my clients are dominated by feelings of inadequacy, shame, hurt and fear. In the face of abuse they fragment, losing awareness of themselves as well as the reality of their situation. They lack discernment and are unable to make accurate observations or decisions based on sound assessments. This is natural given the nature of family violence and the impulse for self-preservation. My work is to increase their awareness of their responses, help develop their conceptual understanding of what is going on so they are better able to make sense of their experience and to increase their spontaneity so they have more options than simply being reactive.

As part of the role development, I teach a couple of techniques, one taken from the Alexander Technique called “walking into your spine.” Usually when faced with abuse the client freezes but this technique involves getting them to take a step back. The physical act of stepping back mobilises them unfreezing them and creates space literally giving them room to breathe. Once they have stepped back, I get them to take a minimum of three deep breaths. This activates their parasympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system plays a vital part in maintaining both mental and physical health by helping the body to calm down from stress reactions that elevate blood pressure, dilate the pupils, and divert energy from other body processes into fighting or fleeing. They become aware of themselves and their bodily experience. They can begin to think again. Another technique I use is from Brain Gym using crossovers putting the left arm over the right and, without moving the head, move the eyes left to right, and breathe. Kinesiology helps activate both the left and right side of the brain connecting the body and mind.

A central role I focus on developing in clients is that of the assertive communicator. My aim is that the client will be able to stand up for themselves by not accepting their partner’s abusive behaviour whilst at the same time remaining respectful and safe. I find it helpful to consider a cluster of roles, including: truth speaker, active listener, naive enquirer, problem solver, strategic thinker, confident negotiator, loving non-judgmental self-observer, effective boundary setter, trust builder, loving compassionate heart and bullshit detector. There is a wide range of

thoughts, beliefs, feelings and behaviours to look for during this development so there is both ability and congruence in the enactment of these roles. Modelling from group members assists as does coaching and teaching from myself.

There is hope where individuals are willing to reflect on their own behaviour, to take responsibility for it and accept it when it is inappropriate. In the groups I work in, I see a lot of women who shamefully acknowledge that they themselves tend to be abusive. These women are eager to develop alternative responses, to understand their triggers and learn strategies to become more effective in communicating their needs. In the groups, we explore what anger is, developing an understanding that it is a biological response to danger, and that it can be controlled.

It is important to create an open and friendly climate in the groups, as this assists individuals to be courageous explorers and curious scientists, experimenting with what will make a difference for them. I encourage group members to be compassionate self-observers so that they can see and accept what they were taught and had modelled to them as children. To help them differentiate, whenever they are behaving like their parents I get them to stop, think and consciously choose how they want to respond. I use a lot of mirroring, and modelling to assist the women to develop new responses. This enables them to experience what would work and to then have different experiences to draw upon.

I have found that counselling couples is contraindicated where abuse is present as the abusing partner typically will use the session to their own advantage and perpetuate the abuse. For example, as an opportunity to denigrate their partner or to present themselves as the victim. Abused women have reported situations when they have told the counsellor in the counselling session what has been going on and later they have been punished by their partner for exposing their behaviour.

I look for the ability to role reverse as an indicator of readiness to do the work. A couple self-referred who wanted to change the dynamic in their relationship. She felt he was being abusive and described what had been happening. While she presented her story, I worked with his response. He acknowledged what happened and apologised. I ascertain the degree of commitment to working with the issue by asking if they are interested in finding out what happened, if they are willing to work on the issue, asking if they would consider various options, and getting agreement to work together. I also observe their responses when I declare



when there are behaviours that are classed as abusive. Often if there are objections, complaints or promises made I will seek verification from other sources to confirm what is actually happening in the family. Sometimes this is possible as I work with the children or other members of the family.

In conclusion, although the work is demanding, it is also rewarding and I am motivated to continue as New Zealand has the highest rate of family violence in the developed world. Responding to family violence accounts for 41% of a frontline Police Officer's time, two-thirds of these incidents involve children (it has been shown that the intergenerational effects are significant), and 55% of women report having experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime. A new Family Violence Act was introduced in April this year offering increased recognition of abuse and protection to the victims but even with this much-needed change in the legislation, psychodrama has much to offer to address these terrible statistics.

## References

- Bancroft, L. (2007). *Checklist for assessing change in men who abuse women*. Retrieved from <http://lundybancroft.com/articles/checklist-for-assessing-change-in-men-who-abuse-women/>
- Harris, T.A. (1969). *I'm OK - You're OK*. NY: Harper & Row.

## Resources

The following resources are helpful for working in family violence:

*www.lundybancroft.com* has a number of resources, including assessing programmes for men.

*Men's change scale battered women's justice project* retrieved from [www.bwjp.org](http://www.bwjp.org). This New Zealand resource offers a scale of change that can be used in working with clients.

*Duluth model domestic abuse intervention project* retrieved from [www.library.nzfv.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-search.pl?q=an:2626](http://www.library.nzfv.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-search.pl?q=an:2626). The document was designed by the Duluth Company to work with men. Hundreds of women were interviewed to identify behaviours that were used to control them.

*Trauma, healing and the brain: Community learning event* retrieved from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYvxlkCGmbQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYvxlkCGmbQ). In an educative focus,

Dr Mate talks about the impact of abuse on the development of the learner and what has to be repaired.

White, D. (2016). *Family violence: Lifting New Zealand's dark cloud*. NZ: Renaissance. Offers insights on the hidden systemic nature of abuse.



### ***Philippa van Kuilenburg***

*I am a mother of three children with grandchildren on both sides of the Tasman Sea and married for forty-nine years. I have had a range of jobs that assists me relating to clients especially when working in Employment Assistance Counselling. This work has expanded into the area of becoming a Critical Incident Responder this past year working with vicarious trauma within the workplace. I have found my training as a Role Trainer particularly useful working with individuals to activate their progressive role functioning so that counselling is not required as a result of the traumatic incident. I have been expanding my skill level as an artist over the last few years and enjoy working in a variety of mediums.*