

Dealing with Abusive Couples

Goals in Working with Abusive Couples:

- Once you learn of abuse, you should do an individual session which includes a more in-depth assessment of abuse issues from each person's perspective.
- Discuss and show the couple the connection between abuse and the lack of relationship skills like communication and conflict resolution.
- Help the couple to build a stronger marriage.
- If it is not possible for the couple to maintain a safe and healthy relationship, help them make decisions about how to stay safe in the future.
- If you are not trained or experienced in working with abusive couples, make a referral to persons that specialize in dealing with abuse issues.

If you know or suspect a couple is in a physically abusive relationship, please consider the following:

- Research suggests that perpetrators of abuse can become more violent when they suspect their abusiveness has been reported.
- We recommend these couples not take the assessment at home. Instead, administer the assessment in the controlled environment of your office.

Identifying Abusive Couples:

- Review the Background items on abuse to see if one or both partners are reporting abuse from their partner. Also, review abuse from parents and/or others.
- Based on the Facilitators Report, determine if only one person is abusive or if both are abusive.

Characteristics of Abusive Couples from National Survey with ENRICH:

- National Survey of over 20,000 married couples found Conflicted and Devitalized couples had the highest level of abuse—ranging above 50%.
- Abused couples had lower levels of communication, conflict resolution, couple closeness and flexibility compared to Non-abusing couples.
- Abusing couples had higher levels of alcohol and/or drug abuse.
- On the Relationship Dynamics scale, abusing couples were more often HIGH on Avoidance and Partner Dominance and LOW on Assertiveness and Self Confidence.

Key factors in working with abusive couples:

- Determine the risk level to both partners. Is either person in “imminent” danger of violence or emotional abuse? If so, enlist the help of professionals who are skilled in working with domestic violence.
- As these couples are at greater risk of couple abuse and divorce, share your concerns with them. This may help them be more committed to working on their relationship.
- Research indicates that as the reported level of chemical abuse increases, so too does the risk and incidence of interpersonal violence. Be aware of this potential and explore these issues with couples.

Using the PREPARE/ENRICH Program:

- Abusive couples often have poor patterns of communication. Help the couple see the value of developing good communications skills and teach them *assertiveness and active listening* skills. (Pg. 3& 4 Couple’s Workbook)
- Conflict resolution is typically another weakness for couples that end up emotionally or physically abusing each other. Spend extra time on the *Ten Steps for Resolving Couple Conflict* exercise. (Pg. 9 in the Couple’s Workbook)
- Help abusive couples see how attributes from the Relationship Dynamics scales can contribute to their relationship difficulties. (For example, explain how *avoidance* can lead to increased feelings of *partner dominance* and perpetuate the “negative cycle”).

Additional Resources for Abusive Couples:

- Suggest that the couple purchase and use the **Empowering Couples book** or the **Couple Checkup book** as a self-paced, relationship improvement tool that they can work on together at home.
- Do not recommend that the couple join a couple’s enrichment group until they have resolved some of their relationship issues.

For Clergy—Referral of Distressed Couples to Specialist in Abuse:

- Always consider your limitations in terms of time, experience, and professional expertise when working with abusive couples.
- Consult or refer to other mental health professionals including marriage and family therapists and psychologists trained to work with couples.
- Because of the links between chemical abuse and relationship violence, consider having abusive couples evaluated for chemical abuse or addiction.
- Work with local domestic violence counselors and agencies utilizing their expertise in programming (e.g., anger management) and support groups.

Relevant questions to raise with abusive couples:

- What triggers violence in your relationship?
- Have you ever felt the need to seek shelter away from your household or to get away from your partner?
- If and when things turn abusive or violent in your relationship, who can you turn to for help?

National Domestic Violence Hotline

www.ndvh.org

For more help, referrals, and information on abuse, please visit the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Help is available to callers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Hotline advocates are available for victims and anyone calling on their behalf to provide crisis intervention, safety planning, information and referrals to agencies in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Assistance is available in English and Spanish with access to more than 170 languages through interpreter services. If you or someone you know is frightened about something in your relationship, please call the **National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or TTY 1-800-787-3224.**

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