

Training Community Corrections Workers to Effectively Case Manage Perpetrators of Domestic Violence – An "In Your Face" Approach

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The only way anyone can continue to sustain abuse and/or a ‘reign of terror’ against someone they purport to love, is if they are disconnected from the impact of their behaviour on those who experience it. Therefore those who work with such abusers in turn need to have a solid connection and understanding of what these effects actually are. Only then are we able to manage offenders effectively towards behaviour change, a reduction in offending behaviour and a resultant contribution to community safety..

The contention of this paper, and of the training we deliver to Corrections staff is that to work effectively in a corrections context with offenders of Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) requires a thorough understanding of the unique experiences of FDV victims. Indeed when confronted by a statement by one corrections officer that “I have been a Community Corrections Officer (CCO) for 6 years and have never thought about the victim” it is clear that something is amiss in the response of the corrections field to Family and Domestic Violence.

The statistics related to FDV in Australia are substantial and while not a focus of this paper, it is suffice to say that the prevalence of FDV is well documented. For example a special survey conducted by the Crime Research Institute (Ferrante 2005) found that every year in Western Australia between 1 and 2% of adult women will suffer an assault of some sort from their partner. Indeed our understanding in WA is that close to half of all offenders supervised in a metropolitan office can be perpetrators of FDV – whether or not their indicated offence is FDV related. In regional areas around WA we are informed that this figure can be as high as 75-90%.

Victims of Family and Domestic Violence are the most re-victimised cohort of victims; this reality is crucial to an understanding of the unique risks offenders of FDV represent. . Generally, domestic violence results in a greater degree of actual injury than violence that is perpetrated by non-familial others. In Western Australia domestic homicides account for 50% of all female homicides in Western Australia. By comparison, only 5.7% of male homicides are the result of domestic violence. The statistics for Indigenous people in WA are even more disturbing; Indigenous women are 33 times more likely to be a victim of FDV than non-Indigenous women.

In Western Australia in 2004 significant changes were made to the *Restraining Orders Act 1997*, the *Criminal Code*, and the *Bail Act 1982* to improve the way Police respond to and report domestic violence. Prior to 2004 domestic assaults comprised around 20% (2,658) of total reported assaults (13,659), but in 2006 it comprised around 44% (8,292) of total reported assaults (19,028)(WA Police, 2007b).

The FDV perpetrator who presents to us will have developed an ability, whether they are aware of it or not, to be largely disconnected from any understanding around the impact of their behaviours on their victims. They will, instead, spend most of their energy focusing on those aspects of their lives and relationships which support them to see themselves, and invite others to see them, as the real victims. This includes the community corrections officer, who will often unknowingly, participate in this process of minimising, justifying, blaming anyone and anything other than the offender. This inability of the offender to think of his victims and the harm he has caused them, is what we need to help him develop to begin to address his offending behaviours.

We all need to be wary of apologies, claims of contrition, protestations he won't do it again and especially assertions that 'we are still together so everything is fine' when it is not accompanied by evidence of a real understanding of the effects of what they have done on all concerned – including children. Lasting change for FDV offenders is far more likely to be a medium to long term process, a reality that does not fit into the usual practice in the justice system, where the tick a box, 'he has completed the program' tends to prevail.

3 DAY TRAINING

Hence, our three day training program on working with the domestically violent client, delivered to all new Community Corrections Officers and Juvenile Justice Officers in Western Australia has been developed with the following core beliefs in mind:

1. Considering adult and child victims and the ongoing impact of domestic violence on them at the physical, emotional, spiritual and practical levels, is the single most helpful frame of reference for effective case management.
2. The most effective powerful way of training CCOs in this, is to give them AN **EXPERIENCE OF THE REALITY OF FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**. This experience is always provided in a safe, supportive environment.
3. If the Corrections worker joins with their client in forgetting, ignoring, putting aside, minimising or not understanding what it might be like to be subjected to an ongoing reign of terrorising behaviours and tactics of control, they become complicit in supporting pro-FDV thinking and behaviour.
AND
4. Considering the adult and child victims of our clients is **not** a part of traditional Corrective Services culture. Hence, actively promoting frameworks of intervention derived from such a position is potentially challenging for the worker at the departmental, team, individual and policy levels.

The first day of our training is designed to assist participants to actively think, feel and **experience** the impact of domestic violence on the adult and child victims. It is our contention that if we can provide a vivid experience of the reality of domestic violence from the viewpoint of victims, then this will work as a powerful counter to the dominant understanding expressed by our clients.

Commencing with a brief build up, we go into a fairly ‘in your face’ role play within which we attempt to act out the reality of the “ongoing intimidatory, threatening, controlling and fear-inducing behaviours’ from the perspectives of the adult and child victims, as well as from the perpetrators viewpoint. We actively encourage participants to stay with the process and any feelings that it invokes within them; knowing that statistically within any group of twenty to forty people there will be several who have had direct experience of the ‘war zone’ of domestic violence, and many others who will know of family or friends with such experiences.

There have been concerns that such an approach unnecessarily gets participants to remember things that they would rather forget, or is gratuitous. We firmly believe, that to avoid the discomfort that role plays and survivors stories will invoke, is far more damaging to both worker and client in the long term. As our facilitators are chosen as much for their skills and experience in understanding and working with FDV trauma as they are for their skills as trainers, our experience of more than three years, has been that the vast majority of participants, including those who are survivors themselves, report that they find the training, powerful, even healing and definitely very useful in their work in corrections. Furthermore, we strongly believe if we are not aware of our own experiences and histories and do not have the opportunity to process them – through conversations with facilitators, fellow group members, supervisors, by (re)engaging in counselling and so on, then we will inevitably bring these unresolved issues into our work with domestic violence perpetrators.

After the role-play we then have an hour-long talk from an invited survivor of domestic violence, wherein she details the process and impact of extreme, ongoing domestic violence that she and her four children were subjected to over many years. She also answers questions and comments from trainees. We take great care in the women we choose to share their story and the support that we provide to ensure they are not re-traumatised by the experience. Survivors continue to report that they are very committed to the training workers in the justice system to get it right.

This combination of role play and the story from a survivor provides the basis of experiential learning for the three days within which we cover such topics as Myths of Domestic Violence, Models of Domestic Violence Reality and Models for Useful Intervention. For instance, rather than attempting to dispel or challenge dominant societal myths about domestic violence through providing statistics or other modes of formal teaching, participants are usually able at the end of the first day to provide their own counter-arguments against the dominant societal myths surrounding domestic violence; myths that we are all exposed to and which will inevitably be reinforced by our clients, for whom these myths serve such a potent disservice. After experiencing both the role play and the survivor’s story dominant myths such as; women invite it, women enjoy it, if they didn’t they would just leave, he can’t help it, she drives him to it, children are not affected by it, begin to lose their credibility.

Significantly most report that they are much less likely than previously to be seduced by their client into seeing him as the victim and her (his adult victim) as the person at the root of the problem; views which can lead to very unhelpful case management practices. Understanding that if their client comes into the waiting area holding hands with his adult victim who expresses her conviction that everything is going to be OK

now (Honeymoon Phase within the Cycle of Violence), that it is useful to see this as a phase within the relationship defined by FDV rather than a 'happy ever after' end point; and to make case-management decisions based on this knowledge.

Day Two and Day Three of our training concentrate on applying this experiential learning in solid client case-management. We will gather better information, make better assessments, write more accurate reports, develop sounder and more useful case-management plans, interact more respectfully and usefully with our clients once we are able to hold the reality of the impact of domestic violence, and where the responsibility lies. We will be more likely to 'see' the children in these situations, rather than missing their existence and the ways in which they are impacted and hence be more likely to make more, and better, use of our reciprocal policies with child protection agencies. We will be less likely to be swayed by the various excuses given as to why our client is unable to go to group tonight, make today's supervision meeting; and more likely to insist that he meet his obligations in these areas. We will hopefully be less likely to be trapped into joining him in blaming her as the person responsible for 'making him' break his Violence Restraining Order (VRO) and be more likely to divert the conversation back to where it is most useful, inviting him to focus on the choices he made, and hence the changes he can make, regarding his own behaviours.

Providing training to Community Corrections Officers where they are exposed to content and processes that can help them develop a true empathic connection regarding what it might really be like to be on the receiving end of the ongoing terrorising tactics utilised by our FDV clients, is, we believe, the key to being able to case manage FDV clients effectively.