

**WHAT ABOUT THE MEN?**  
**Finding effective strategies for engaging abusive men and preventing  
the reoccurrence or escalation of violence against women**

Marcie Campbell, M.Ed  
Peter. G. Jaffe, Ph.D., C.Psych  
Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women & Children  
University of Western Ontario  
Tim Kelly, Executive Director Changing Ways

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## Introduction

In 2002, it was reported that victims of family violence made up one-quarter of all victims of violent crimes in Canada. Furthermore, 85% of all victims of family violence were female (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2004). These statistics are not surprising since this has been the common trend for many women across the nation and the world. Some men continue to abuse women and not just women in general but their wives, girlfriends, and life partners. However, society has taken notice and several prevention campaigns and intervention initiatives have been developed to encourage an overall change of the public's response to woman abuse. These campaigns have been targeted to victims of woman abuse in the hopes that these women will find safety for their children and for themselves. In 1991 the White Ribbon Campaign was created, which is one of the first education campaigns that targets men and boys and their role in ending violence against women (White Ribbon Campaign, 2005).

Why is talking to men about woman abuse important? A father's day poll was conducted in the United States that asked men about woman abuse (Family Violence Prevention Fund & Verizon Wireless, 2007). Statistics indicated that over half of the men surveyed felt woman abuse was quite common in the U.S. and that they could make a difference in preventing violence against women and promoting healthy, non-violent relationships. Furthermore, one-quarter of the men surveyed indicated that they knew of a family member, friend, and/or an acquaintance that had experienced woman abuse. The Domestic Violence Death Review Committee of Ontario, Canada, found that out of the 47 domestic homicide cases reviewed, three-quarters had family members who were aware of the abuse that was occurring in the relationship and in just over half of these cases, friends were aware of the abuse that was occurring (DVDRC, 2006). These statistics suggest that men are aware of woman abuse occurring around them and have an opportunity to intervene to prevent further abuse.

Usually when the term "intervening" is used in the context of woman abuse, the intervention involves getting the victim out of the violent situation and providing the victim with safety and counseling for her and her children. What about interventions with the perpetrators? Currently there are over 200 programs for male batterers in Canada (Health Canada, as cited in John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001). However, perpetrators usually attend batterers programs after they have been abusive, charged, and forced by the courts to attend. This means that several men who engage in abusive behaviours and have never been arrested and/or charged are not receiving any treatment or support (Mbilinyi, Zegree, Roffman, Walker, Neighbors, & Edleson, 2008). It is important that people engage with these abusive men to provide them with the appropriate help that they need to stop their abusive behaviours. The Neighbours, Friends, and Family (NFF) campaign addressed this issue (Neighbours, Friends, and Family, 2007). The NFF campaign was created to provide public education to those individuals who are aware of abuse occurring and how to effectively intervene. Although the campaign highlights how to speak to perpetrators of woman abuse, there has been no research that details the most effective way to engage with abusive men outside of a treatment program. Thus, the purpose of this research study was to go directly to the

source (abusive men) and ask how someone can engage and provide support to perpetrators of woman abuse with the hopes of preventing future abuse from occurring.

## Method

Seventy-three men attended an information session at a treatment facility for male batterers and volunteered to participate in the research study. Out of the 73 men that participated, 57 were court-ordered and 16 were considered voluntary.

The men were asked to complete a brief questionnaire during the information session and then participate in a small focus group during their 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> week of their counselling program. All the men completed the questionnaire and 15 men participated in a focus group discussion. The questions asked in the questionnaire and in the focus groups were:

- Did anyone know about the problems going on in your intimate relationships?
- Did you approach anyone for help?
- Who did you approach?
- Did you receive help?
- Was that help useful?
- Who would be the best person to go to and ask for help?
- If someone were to approach you and offer help, who would you like that person to be?
- What would that help sound like?
- What stops you from asking for help?
- Did your partner ask for help regarding the problems in your intimate relationship?
- How did that make you feel? Was that helpful for you?

## Results

Results from the questionnaire were tallied and represented as percentages. Sixty-three percent of the men stated that they asked for help regarding the problems in their intimate relationship with 38% stating they received help and 27% finding the help they received useful and effective. Table 1 indicates who these men went to for help regarding the problems in their intimate relationship. The majority of men sought help from a counsellor, family member, friend, and/or doctor. Less than 10% of these men sought help from a co-worker, neighbour, employer, and/or teacher.

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**Table 1: Percentage of men that sought help regarding problems in their intimate relationship from a particular source**

| Source for help  | Percentages % (n=73) |
|------------------|----------------------|
| Counsellor       | 30                   |
| Family Member    | 25                   |
| Friend           | 25                   |
| Doctor           | 23                   |
| Religious Leader | 14                   |
| Other            | 10                   |
| Co-worker        | 7                    |
| Neighbour        | 4                    |
| Employer         | 4                    |
| Teacher          | 1                    |

Table 2 indicates that over half of the men asked felt that the best person to go to for help regarding the problems in their intimate relationship was a counsellor, followed by a physician, a family member, and a friend. Fewer than 10% of these men felt that it would be best to ask an employer, teacher, co-worker, or neighbour for help. When asked about whom they would like to approach them and offer help, the majority of these men wanted a counsellor to offer help, followed by a friend or family member, doctor, and religious leader. Ten percent or less felt that they would like an employer, co-worker, teacher, or neighbour to approach them and offer help (see Table 3).

**Table 2: Ratings by male batterers on the best source for help when dealing with problems in an intimate relationship**

| Best Source for help | Percentages % (n=73) |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| Counsellor           | 52                   |
| Doctor               | 37                   |
| Family Member        | 36                   |
| Friend               | 33                   |
| Religious Leader     | 23                   |
| Other                | 11                   |
| Employer             | 8                    |
| Teacher              | 6                    |
| Co-worker            | 6                    |
| Neighbour            | 1                    |

**Table 3: Ratings by male batterers on the best source to offer help when dealing with problems in an intimate relationship**

| Best Source to Offer Help | Percentages % (n=73) |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Counsellor                | 60                   |
| Friend                    | 49                   |
| Family Member             | 49                   |
| Doctor                    | 33                   |
| Religious Leader          | 22                   |
| Other                     | 10                   |
| Co-worker                 | 10                   |
| Employer                  | 10                   |
| Teacher                   | 7                    |
| Neighbour                 | 4                    |

When these men were asked what stopped them from asking for help, the majority felt uncertain of whom they could ask. Moreover, 38% of these men stated that they were too embarrassed (see Table 4). Yet, some of these men identified that their partners went to someone and asked for help about the problems in their intimate relationship (see Table 5) and when asked how they felt about that, one-quarter of the men stated that it didn't bother them (see Table 6).

**Table 4: Ratings by male batterers on the reasons they did not ask for help**

| Reasons for not asking For help               | Percentages % (n=73) |
|---|----------------------|
| Not sure who to ask                           | 41                   |
| Embarrassed                                   | 38                   |
| Didn't want anyone to know                    | 22                   |
| No one knows how to help me                   | 18                   |
| I didn't do anything wrong                    | 11                   |
| Other   | 11                   |
| My partner and I don't have any real problems | 6                    |

**Table 5: Ratings by male batterers on the sources their intimate partners went to for help**

| Source Intimate Partners went to for help | Percentages % (n=73) |
|---|----------------------|
| Counsellor                                | 22                   |
| Friend                                    | 22                   |
| Family Member                             | 21                   |
| Doctor                                    | 11                   |
| Religious Leader                          | 10                   |
| Teacher                                   | 3                    |
| Co-worker                                 | 3                    |
| Employer                                  | 1                    |
| Neighbour                                 | 1                    |

**Table 6: Ratings by male batterers on their response to their partners asking for help**

| Response to partner asking for help | Percentages % (n=73) |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| It didn't bother me                 | 25                   |
| Ashamed                             | 22                   |
| Embarrassed                         | 18                   |
| Glad                                | 16                   |
| Worried                             | 15                   |
| Angry                               | 10                   |
| Confused                            | 1                    |
| Happy                               | 1                    |
| Judged                              | 1                    |

When reviewing the focus group transcripts, there appeared to be several themes that surfaced. First, these men felt that people did know about the problems going on in their relationship but that they did not want to deal with it or didn't know how. Some men spoke about family and friends being aware of the issues but offered support that was neither effective nor appropriate. For example, one man spoke about how he asked his father-in-law for help regarding the problems in his intimate relationship and his father-in-law gave advice that was less than helpful, *"When I approached my father-in-law, he said something that just floored me...he said life's a bitch and sometimes you marry one. So needless to say I don't think that was very helpful."*

Another common theme found through the focus group discussions was the notion that men never ask for help because it makes them look weak and fragile. This mind-set is not new to men. Research studies have examined the impact of traditional male gender role attitudes on men and their help-seeking behaviours and found that men who support traditional attitudes about the male role in society, such as the attitude that men should never express emotion or show concern for other men, were less likely to seek out psychological help (Good, Dell, & Mintz, 1989; Blazina & Watkins, Jr., 1996). Thus, this current study revealed that traditional male gender role attitudes still exist in our society and that this is a deterrent for men seeking help regarding their abusive behaviours. Additionally, this study indicated that men who are abusive to their partners are embarrassed and ashamed to ask for help. Almost 40% of the men questioned stated that they did not ask for help because they were embarrassed (see Table 4) and approximately 20% of the men felt ashamed and embarrassed when their partners asked for help (see Table 6). One man stated in the focus group discussion, *"I was embarrassed, too damn proud. You know, this is something I thought all these years I can handle, I can get a hold of, just like I got over my drinking and that didn't work out either...I never discussed it with anyone."*

Although a common theme found in the focus group discussions was that men rarely ask for help, the participants did discuss what they would need in terms of help if

they did approach someone or if someone approached them. A major theme that stemmed from this discussion was the idea of absolute trust and confidentiality. Specifically, these men stated that they would only approach someone that they could trust and that they knew would hold what they said in confidence. This theme also appeared in the responses on the questionnaire. When the men were asked who the best person was to approach for support, the majority said a counsellor; followed by a friend; family member; doctor; and religious leader (see Table 3). In terms of trust and confidence, this selection of support sources makes sense. It is understood that a counsellor, doctor, and religious leader are sources of support that are bound by a counsellor-patient confidentiality. As well it is assumed that one can trust more a close friend or family member? Trust and confidentiality are factors in deciding who these men will talk to about their abusive behaviours.

Additionally, many men spoke about approaching someone for help that had an understanding and knowledge of the dynamics of an intimate relationship. For example, these men would feel more comfortable talking with a friend that has been through a similar experience, or a counsellor that has been trained in dealing with woman abuse. However, these men felt very strongly that they wanted the help they received to be non-judgmental and knowledgeable. One man stated, *“I want somebody to say, okay you’ve got a problem, we got to help you with it, and it’s something not to be ashamed of but we can deal with it. We can get you out of this grasp of where you are in, this trap you are in you know, but I didn’t know where to go.”* This statement illustrates the final theme discussed in the focus groups.

Many of the men in the focus groups discussed the need to approach someone that was trustworthy, confidential, knowledgeable, and non-judgmental to receive help for their abusive behaviours. Unfortunately, these men felt that they did not know where to go to receive this kind of support. Table 4 indicates that 41% of men who were asked what stopped them from finding help for their abusive behaviours felt that they didn’t know who to ask. Many men felt that when they went looking for help, the only help available was for women experiencing abuse and that there was nothing out there for men who were being abusive. Furthermore, these men felt that it was important for someone to be able to recognize when someone was asking for help to make it easier to ask. One man in a focus group discussion stated, *“I’ve actually offered, because I am a smoker and that’s where most of the bitching gets done...now that I have a lot of the tools, I do share it with them when I hear their problems. They are obviously reaching out and most of the time you just don’t notice that they are reaching out, maybe they are just bitching about the old lady. But now I realized they are really maybe asking for something.”*

## **Conclusion**

This study illustrated several points that need to be considered when trying to engage and help men who are abusive to their partners. First, it needs to be recognized that most men will not seek out help due to their male gender role attitudes and their lack of knowledge on where to find help. Secondly, men who engage in abusive behaviours

would only feel comfortable talking with someone who is trustworthy, knowledgeable, and able to hold what is said in confidence. Furthermore, these men are looking for help that is non-judgmental and informative. The statistics indicate that male batterers would be open to receiving help from some people (e.g., counsellor, family, friends, doctor, and religious leader). Therefore it is important that we prepare these people with the awareness and appropriate tools to effectively engage with these men. Future goals stemming from this research are to develop public education campaigns that reach out to abusive men, friends and family of abusive men, and frontline professionals (e.g. counsellors, religious leaders, doctors) to educate them on how to encourage men to talk about violence and seek help for their abusive behaviours. Public education campaigns need to reach out to men to help them recognize their problems in regards to abusive behavior as well as their support systems to provide the appropriate directions with these concerns.

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