

A Policy Statement on Domestic Violence Couples Counseling

Couple counseling is not a viable therapeutic tool for use in violent family relationships. We define a violent family relationship as one in which physical or sexual assaults occur, threats of violence occur, and/or woman lives in an environment of fear caused by her partner. Couple counseling remains inappropriate even when both parties request it and/or want to maintain the couple relationship.

Couple counseling is beneficial to work on marital problems. Wife battering, however, is a violent criminal act, not a marital problem. It is illegal. It is a behavior that is solely the responsibility of the violent person, is chosen by him, and he alone is capable of changing it. This is true regardless of the alleged provocation, since the behavior of one family member cannot compel another family member to be violent. Violent behavior must be addressed and stopped *before* couple counseling takes place.

Volunteer Counseling Services will not utilize couple counseling in violent relationships. Treating a couple together, before violence is addressed and stopped, could:

1. Endanger the battered woman who may face violence or threats of violence for revealing information during therapy which is disapproved by her partner;
2. Lend credence to the common misunderstanding that battered women are responsible for the violence inflicted upon them;
3. Ignore the denial, minimization and deception about the violence that occurs when the focus of counseling is on the couple's interaction.
4. Indicate that the therapist condones violence or that violence is acceptable or not important;
5. Reinforce stereotypic sex roles, thereby ignoring the battered woman's right and responsibility to choose whether or not to save the relationship;
6. Increase the battered woman's sense of isolation, as she may prevaricate about the violence of fear to speak, even in therapy. This can have the effect of discouraging her from taking any other positive action to eliminate the violence inflicted upon her; and
7. Imply that the battered woman has responsibility for seeing that the batterer gets help. Therapists need to be particularly wary of the manipulation inherent in a batterer's refusal of anything other than couple treatment.

VCS will recommend referral to a community's domestic violence services (shelters, safe-homes, support groups, advocacy services, and batterer's rehabilitation programs), to provide safety, legal assistance, and expertise in dealing with violence. Battered women should be encouraged to utilize these services. VCS further recommends that services be mandated for batterers. Should one or both partners receive individual counseling as a result, it is vital that the therapist be knowledgeable about the issue of domestic violence and therapeutic implications for treating battered women and batterers. This includes that therapists not assume that equal power exists in male/female relationships or that each partner is able to talk openly about violence. Therapists should directly and separately interview each partner to assess the incidence and current extent of the violence occurring in the relationship.

Ending violence in the relationship is dependent solely on the batterer's motivation and commitment to do so. This will not always happen and, if it does, it may not occur overnight. It is possible only if the batterer seeks help, gets help and keeps working at it. Many men will drop out of treatment along the way. However, even continued participation by a batterer in a program is no guarantee that he will change. If battering continues, a woman may eventually need to ask herself, "Am I willing to stay in a violent relationship?" The answer to that must be arrived at by each individual woman.

If the batterer does change and the relationship is intact, couple counseling becomes a viable modality—but only for nonviolent couples in which both partners separately request couple counseling. A former violent man can be redefined as nonviolent if:

- The former batterer participates in some form of ongoing treatment (educational workshop, support groups, individual counseling, etc.) to consolidate his behavioral change and to prove his commitment to work on ending his violence.
- The former batterer acknowledges his responsibility for his violent actions; he recognizes his ability to control and stop his violence toward his partner; he further states clearly that he will not be violent towards her; she validates, in a separate session, not only that he has not been violent, but that he has affirmed to her his commitment never to be so again;
- A significant period of time passes during which his treatment continues and there is no further violence (approximately one year from onset treatment).

The batterer and the battered woman have two different problems. His problem is his violent behavior. Hers is that she is coupled with a batterer. These two distinct issues are safely and effectively dealt with in separate counseling.

*This policy statement on couples counseling appears in *Confronting the Batterer*, written by Phyllis B. Frank, MA, and Beverly D. Houghton, PhD, for the Volunteer for Counseling Service of Rockland Co., Inc. It is reprinted here with the permission of Phyllis B. Frank.*