

# NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK

FOR THE ELIMINATION  
OF  
VIOLENCE AGAINST  
WOMEN



## Counseling Battered Women

*Mental health professionals are seeing more and more battered women. They must be able to provide help without falling into the trap of accepting society's myths about the battering situation. This article contains information that will be of use to anyone called on to counsel a battered woman. Geared to the professional counselor, it offers tips for peer counselors as well.*

Counseling the battered woman requires special information, exceptional skill, patience, and sensitivities, given the massive social, legal, economic, and psychological barriers to real change. As her counselor, your ultimate objectives are to help her:

1. Perceive socio-economic and legal alternatives for herself and her children and their psychological and practical ramifications.
2. Increase her self-esteem and sense of control over her life. Deal with the psychological reasons

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for her paralysis and acceptance of abuse, guilt, inferiority feelings, learned helplessness, self-blame.

3. Increase her problem-solving skills, her sense of responsibility towards herself, and her instrumentality.

4. Facilitate her mourning process through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

5. Build a positive body image.

You can inform her of and help her create choices. However, for her to act on these alternatives or to develop a sense of self-esteem, she needs to grieve her losses and to get in touch with her feelings once again. In facilitating her mourning and encouraging her to feel you help her rebuild herself.

The first step is to determine whether or not your client is a battered woman, if she has not already presented this as her reason for coming to

you. Ask specific questions about violence. For example, ask her if she has ever been battered physically or psychologically. Respect her difficulty in reporting details of the battering, but encourage specific reporting. Write down the incidents. Get a history of the abuse, including any physical, psychological, or sexual abuse on a child. Determine if any depression, suicidal behavior, or physical complaints on her part are stress reactions to the battering.

*Secondly*, offer support to women who have been victimized. When a battered woman first contacts you, the first thing to do is determine whether she is in immediate danger. In a crisis situation, determine if killing or being killed are real possibilities. If so, have her leave immediately. (Do not go near the batterer; he is dangerous!) If she is not in danger, she may want to explore the possibility of leaving her situation. She may not be ready to leave yet, but talking to you can be a first step.

Inform her of choices within the legal system and explore the psychological, legal, and financial ramifications of each. Essentially, the choices are six: prosecution of the assailant, divorce, committing the batterer, peace bonds and warning letters (if available), and nothing. You need to know the specific legal definitions of assault and procedures for your state and/or county.

Typically, statutes prohibit wife beating and require prosecution of offenders, but in actual practice few batterers are prosecuted. The many reasons for this are summarized in works by Gelles,<sup>1</sup> Martin<sup>2</sup> and Walker.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, in cases of wife battering, the burden of proof falls on the prosecution and, typically, there are few witnesses to wife abuse. Judges tend to be paternalistic, feeling that they punish the family by depriving it of the man's financial support. Committing the batterer against his will is almost impossible. Divorce does not prevent husbands from beating up former wives. Restraining orders or peace bonds may or may not be available. Even if available, they may not be enforced. Be aware of these and other considerations involved in the successful prosecution of a case. Even a successful prosecution, a divorce, or a restraining order is not a solution to the woman's problems with the batterer.

Be prepared to help the woman with legal and other bureaucracies should she decide to prosecute.

Keep an accurate history of actual or suspected abuse, with clear detail of the victim's emotional and physical state. Do not record the victim's statements of guilt unless you are certain she is as responsible for the incident as she claims and not responding to his brutality. Concise, carefully written notes, free of your hypotheses, are essential in case of court action. Accept the responsibility of testifying to help. The husband can use his violence and his paycheck to maintain his position and keep her with him. Explore economic alternatives with her and be in touch with sources of vocational-educational counseling and assistance.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, in addition to not accepting stereotyped myths about battering relationships, counselors must appreciate, know, and use the natural support systems and resources in the community; be willing to help create new support systems; be willing to cooperate and untangle bureaucracy for unskilled clients; understand how institutions do oppress and reinforce women's victimization; be willing to deal with complicated cases; support the work of non-credentialed paraprofessionals and tolerate horror stories and terrorizing events. When you intervene as her advocate and assume such a responsibility, realize that hours of work and persistence are involved as there are not many resources.<sup>5</sup>

*Thirdly*, facilitate the woman's mourning process. Your fantasy might be that after the battered woman carefully examines her legal and economic alternatives, she assertively acts on them and attempts to improve her life. In reality, counselors



of battered women report frustration in that they often continue to stay with — or return to — the batterer after leaving him.

Typically, the battered woman is passive, unassertive, and frightened. When you watch her remain in — or return to — a situation which you judge to be the vestibule of hell, you need to review all you have learned about being nonjudgmental and allowing people to make choices.<sup>6</sup>

A related issue is permitting her to express any love feelings for her man. One battered woman explains:

It was easy to tell the counselor about what a brute he was. But I also wanted to talk about how wonderful he was when he was wonderful and about how much I loved him and still do love him. I thought the counselor would think I was really crazy for loving him.

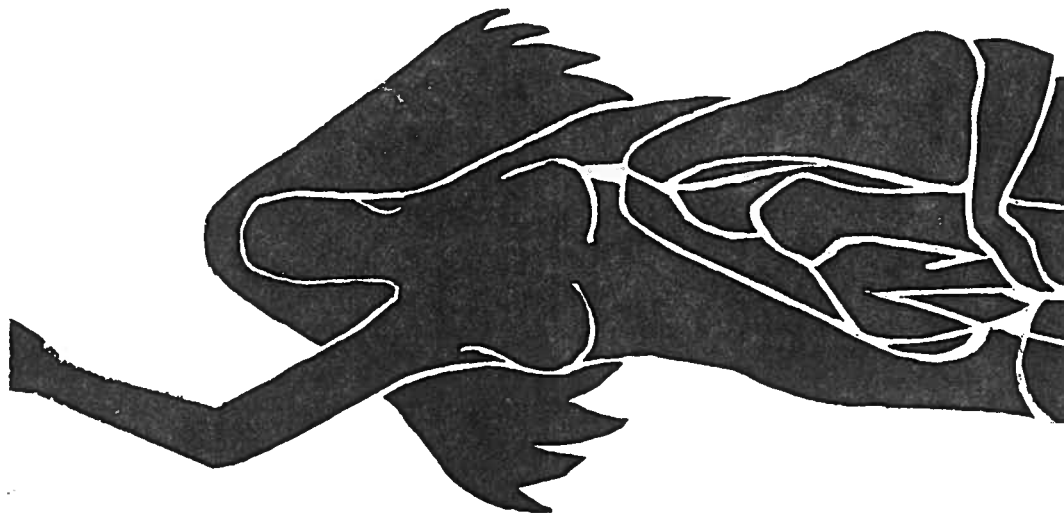
*Fourthly*, counselors need to be aware (a) of their values, attitudes and feelings regarding women, marriage, violence, and various racial and ethnic experiences; and (b) of their own mourning: i.e., tolerating their own helplessness, frustrations and anger.

Working with battered women is a personal and professional challenge. It's quite painful to truly confront violence and victims. In her paper, "Psychic Battering" (1978), Susan Schechter documents her work with hundreds of battered women in Chicago and New York who sought help from counseling and social service agencies. These women met frustrations and obstacles in obtaining legal, financial, and other assistance. In addition, the abused woman confronted responses that further batter, i.e., responses that are either hostile or indifferent, responses that blame her, that reinforce her sense of helplessness, that sanction the violence and that send her directly back to abusive situations. Schechter concludes that as a result, a woman in this situation may manifest some symptoms of psychological impairment and feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and of "going crazy." A counselor may inadvertently feed into the problem by expecting her to change her life both drastically and suddenly.

Before you lose patience, remember that the battered woman is often literally "beaten," both emotionally and physically.

damaged her body but in the process has discounted her feelings and eroded her self-respect. She has learned to assume the position of helpless victim and to abuse herself. By the time she seeks help, years of conditioning have acted on her, bringing her to her present position.

No matter how she appears to you personally, remember that she is a victim of violence and deserves respectful treatment and the acknowledgment of her pain. Nothing justifies being beaten and being beaten in her case is even more difficult



because it is from the hands of a man she loves or has loved. Hence, normal feelings of fear, guilt, depression and ambivalence and the isolation common to all victims is heightened.<sup>7</sup>

### THE GRIEVING PROCESS

The battered woman needs to grieve her losses of love, marriage, and self-respect. Her mourning includes the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the denial phase, she "forgets" or denies that the batterings occur. For example, a year after leaving her abusive husband, a woman commented:

One day I remembered how he used to wake me up sometimes in the middle of the night and push me out of bed and call me names and threaten me. I'd beg him to let me back in bed. I shared this memory with a good friend who commented: "Sometimes! All the time! You used to tell me about him pushing you out of bed almost once a month or more for over three years! Did you forget? I realized then how I'd forget his abuses after one or two days. Denying them made it possible for me to survive.

Encourage her to describe the beatings in detail. Ask her, "What happened? How long did it last? How did it feel?" Let her know you will truly listen to her stories. Be prepared to listen past the usual counseling hour — since once a woman begins to recount these incidences she may need to "tell it all." You may be one of the few people with whom she can share her painful story.

In the anger phase the woman may be motivated to change her situation. Empathize with her and allow her anger. Let her know you can tolerate her rage, but emphasize alternatives to her. Refrain from playing "Ain't it awful" with her. If you merely agree with her that her situation is indeed oppressive, you forego the opportunity to help her see her choices and the possibility of actually changing her life. Do not be shocked or feel rejected if, when her anger cools down, she slips back into denial. She may make several attempts to leave before the final decision and will need your continued help.

When the battered woman realizes that neither denial nor anger will help, she begins to bargain to get others to take care of her, but out of a sense of

guilt and self-abasement rather than of manipulativeness. Feeling that her beatings are deserved, she bargains with herself ("If I were a better wife, mother, person, then he would stop.") or with him ("If I am good, will you stop?"). Watch for "if" and "only" statements.<sup>4</sup> Once again: You are most effectively helpful if you do not rescue her or blame her or help her bargain, but help her work through her guilt. Ask, for example: "You sound as if you feel you deserve the beatings. What have you done that is so bad?"

My counselor always focused on having me accept responsibility for myself, all of me, my conscious and unconscious feelings. But sometimes she would guilt-trip me, without knowing it. Like we would talk about my unconscious actions that may have provoked his physical and verbal abuses. Maybe she was trying to help me figure out what I could change about me to stop the abuse from him, but I just ended up feeling guiltier and guiltier.

All this introspection damaged me. I wish she had focused more on *his* inappropriate-ness. I remember how worthless and guilty I felt when she'd ask, "What did you do to provoke him?" But a few times she asked "What is *he* mad about again?" implying that *he* was unreasonable. I felt relief that she saw that he was to blame.

The last time he beat me he wanted to make love in the process of the battering. When I told this to my counselor, she asked if — on an unconscious level — I wanted to make love to him also and if I signaled this to him in some manner. For the life of me I thought she was crazy for asking such a question. I had no sexual feelings at all. I was just frightened for my life. But I took her question seriously and then I started feeling crazy in looking for some Freudian motive in myself.

I guess it's tricky — trying to know yourself down deep and be responsible to yourself and not blame the other person for your problems. But when someone is beating on your brains and body, it's time to blame *them*. I wanted my counselor to support me, not start all this analysis. I was just trying to survive. Maybe now that I am on my feet again, I could stand the analysis parts of counseling.



In the depression state, she needs concrete information about the outside world. Her batterer believes that she is incompetent and crazy. He will often try to declare her unfit and if they are married and have children, may obtain custody of the children in case of divorce. A battered woman who has children needs concrete information on custody laws.

In reality, she may have some deficiencies which the batterer can use against her in court to obtain child custody. Abuse can result in physical as well as psychological disturbances which impair the woman's ability to obtain or maintain employment or otherwise care for her children. Any dysfunction on her part — regardless of its origin, can be used against her in court.

An anonymous professional woman tells her story:

In reviewing the first court hearing, my lawyer told me that my best future defense

hearing I seemed anxious and unorganized and that in the future I would have to appear more strong and stable. Of course, that first hearing was a few days after he had battered me. My arms were still black and blue but, more importantly, my spirit was broken. I could *not* impress the court that I was a 'take charge' superefficient and emotionally stable mother because I was *not* . . . then. I had lots of professional degrees and a lot of strength in me, but I was psychologically beaten down. At the first hearing, my husband's lawyers' accusations made me cringe and feel guilty. Disbelief and pain overwhelmed me when he said I had not cooked for the children — or bathed them — in years. Would the court believe me that I use to have to fight with him to be with the children? My witnesses testified that I could cook and related to the children. My response to the other side's lies was panic that I would lose the chil-

not defend myself properly.

Now, many, many months later, I know I am okay. Any future attacks at court may sting me but not devastate me. I can impress any judge now, but I have to counter the court's lingering image of me as an inadequate, incompetent mother, an image which has served my husband well in some court decisions regarding visitation and money issues.

In the acceptance stage, the woman has worked through many of her feelings and accepts the reality of the batterings. Most importantly, she has learned that despite the batterings, she is still an "okay" person. You can help build and reinforce this positive self-image, for example, by encouraging her sense of mastery over her life and body. Some counselors have suggested enrollment in assertiveness training, self-defense, physical exercise or meditation programs.

Encouraging her to grieve, to express her hurt, sorrow, and anger, in a culture where she has been told to keep a stiff upper lip, is essential. While her feelings may not progress in cookbook fashion from step one to step five and she may go back and forth between stages or be at several stages simultaneously, she needs to complete the grieving process before she can go to something new. The counselor's challenge is to let her hurt without trying to rescue her, and to foster a sense of responsibility without perpetuating her tendency to blame herself.

Ideally, you are patient and practical, accepting the woman's feelings — from love, hate, and anger towards herself and the batterer, to her sense of humiliation and worthlessness. You resist the three temptations of rescuing her, judging her, or pushing her too fast. Yet, the distinction between "rescuing" and helping is often unclear. For example, should you make her phone calls and do some necessary work for her — realizing that she does not have the skills to do so or cannot change that fast psychologically — and run the risk of "rescuing" her? On the other hand, if you wait for her to learn independence, self-sufficiency and interpersonal skills, she may not acquire the financial, legal,

your anger and frustration so that you can maintain faith in the usefulness of your intervention and in the capacity of people to change and grow. Other informed, caring counselors can help you ignore the masochism myths, overcome the discomfort of working with discouraged clients who lack readily available alternatives and protection, and help you focus on the strength and persistence of battered women in surviving and in trying to cope with many humiliating, terrifying, and degrading experiences both in and outside the home.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Gelles, *The Violent Home*. Sage Press, Beverly Hills, 1972.
2. Del Martin, "Battered Women: Society's Problem." In *The Victimization of Women*, ed. Jane R. Chapman and Margaret Gatos, Sage Yearbook, Vol. III, 1979.
3. Leonore Walker, *Battered Women*, Harper and Row, New York, 1979.
4. Leonore Walker, "Psychotherapy and Counseling with Battered Women." Div. 17 of the American Psychological Assoc. The Minimal Competency in Counseling and Psychotherapy Project, College Park, Md. 1978.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Elizabeth Null and Rene Lubowich, "Training Manual for Battered Women Program." Open Door Crisis Intervention Center, Lansing, Michigan, 1978.
7. Susan Schechter, "Psychic Battering." Unpublished paper, 1978.