

# TECHNIQUES: Counseling veterans who batter

by Aphrodite Matsakis

Counseling veterans who batter, regardless of which category they fall into, requires exceptional sensitivity, patience, and forthrightness. Since few men are willing to admit they batter,<sup>1</sup> it is imperative for counselors to inquire about any violence in the home and to treat the violence as an important issue in itself, separate from other problems.

Along with treating PTSD, drug addiction or mid-life crisis, active violence must be addressed. Once violence begins, it permeates all aspects of family life, creating new problems and compounding existing ones. Domestic violence is not a side issue that will automatically take care of itself once other issues are resolved. Treatment must always include education and behavior modification designed specifically at ending the battering.

## Overcoming denial

Usually, great shame and guilt attend battering behavior. Abusers, like their victims, tend to deny the violence and discount its effects. Until the client gains trust in the counselor, often it is difficult for the client to disclose the full extent of the battering. While counselors may lose clients if they probe too hard for the truth, counselors can make it clear they are willing to tolerate horror stories and that it is in the client's best interest to be as honest as possible.

Counselors can introduce the subject gently by asking the veteran if he has ever thought about or felt like striking his wife, then pointing out that if he has, he is not alone. Violence may affect 30-50 percent of American homes.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, our society is so pressure-filled that even the most principled of men sometimes resort to wife abuse as a means of alleviating tensions.

Self-disclosure can be facilitated by assuring the client that his behavior is not a sign that he is a psychopath, a sadist, or crazy. Rather, it is a signal that he is unfulfilled, frustrated, angry and feeling powerless. Happy, satisfied men do not batter. Counselors are there to help clients uncover the reasons for their abusiveness and to help develop more constructive ways of venting anger and utilizing energy. Unless the veteran is abusing his children as well as his mate, counselors can not report him to authorities. Only his wife or girlfriend can do that.

## A non-judgmental attitude

Judgmental attitudes alienate clients. They may never return and all hopes for change will be lost. At all times, counselors should distinguish between the client as a worthy individual with much potential, and his problem behavior, a limited aspect of himself which can be changed.

Empathy is more effective than preaching. As Ritter points out, "If we can't love or care for people. . . who have been violent. . . then it

would seem appropriate for us to think again about our motives for being there in the first place. . ."<sup>3</sup>

## Information giving

All batterers must be advised of the legal consequences of their crime which can include heavy fines, arrest, banishment from the home, loss of custody and visitation rights and, ultimately, incarceration. Local battered women's shelters, courthouses or police stations are the best sources of information on exactly what constitutes battering in a particular county and the range of legal consequences for the various types of assault.

Printed fact sheets on domestic violence often are useful to emphasize the seriousness of the injuries and the addictive nature of battering. Reviewing the fact sheet with the client not only helps reinforce the idea that woman battering is a potentially lethal crime, but also a very common one. This helps the client feel less alone with the problem.

Such fact sheets are available from: Center for Women Policy Studies, Suite 508; 2000 "P" St. N.W.; Washington, DC 20036; and the Southern California Coalition on Battered Women; P.O. Box 5036; Santa Monica, CA 90405.

## Exploding destructive myths

These fact sheets also can be used to explode common myths about wife abuse, e.g., that battered women are masochists who secretly like abuse and are sexually aroused by it, that women provoke and hence deserve abuse, and that battering holds the family together and is therefore good.

Available evidence indicates that most abused women hate the abuse, that abuse is more a function of the man's internal dynamics than the woman's behavior, and that battering destroys not only love relationships, but the psychological health of any children who might be involved.<sup>4</sup>

Everyone deserves to live in safety, even a cold and naggy wife. If the wife strikes the first blow, the veteran should call the police, not strike back.

## Anger management

Veterans who batter need to be taught impulse control and safe ways of diffusing their anger, e.g., speaking it, writing it, or acting it out non-destructively through sports for example.

Anger has a physical component: the anger often can be discharged effectively through physical activity, for example punching a pillow rather than a wife. In one instance, a safe room was established in the home. Whenever the veteran felt like hitting his wife, he would scream and kick in the safe room.

## Cueing, communication skills and time-outs

Research has found that abusers tend to be non-assertive individuals who hold back their

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feelings until they reach the bursting point.<sup>5</sup> Most spouse abuser programs train participants in both assertiveness skills and communication skills, recognizing that abusers are less likely to batter if they learn to ask for what they need effectively.

Abusers also need to identify their own personal cues for knowing their anger or tension level is rising--muscle tension, headaches, stammering, sweating--and subsequently give themselves permission to take a time-out. Time-outs permit the client to take control of a situation rather than to let the situation control him. Meditation, relaxation and regular exercise are also standard to most spouse abuser programs.

## Examining role expectations

As Ritter points out, role expectations need to be examined, e.g., warrior, fighter, protector, physically possessive, always right, fearless, non-communicative. A man might think he is acting macho when he hits his wife, but wife abuse is an act of cowardice, not courage.

## Stroke analysis

The client is asked to list his sources of emotional support and other strokes. How much actual recognition is he receiving for his efforts at home, on the job, from friends? Is his life stroke-deprived, i.e., devoid of positive reinforcement? If so, how might he increase his positive reinforcers on a daily basis? Are there ways he can reward or nurture himself rather than depending on others to do so?

## Self care

Proper nutrition, sleep and exercise help reduce the high stress levels which can lead to battering.<sup>10</sup>

Qualified therapists can treat veterans who batter at their office; other counselors with less experience may wish to refer them to a local batterer's program. Unfortunately, few programs for batterers exist. Local courts and/or battered women's shelters are the best sources of information about abuser programs. A state-by-state listing of programs for men who batter is available from the Resource Center on Family Violence; Center for Women Policy Studies, Suite 50; 2000 "P" St. N.W.; Washington, DC 20036.

Three recent books also are available:

1. **The Abusive Partner: An Analysis of Domestic Battering**, by Maria Roy (available from AWAIC, GPO, 1699, New York, NY 10016); 2. **The Hitting Habit: Anger Control for Battering Couples**, by J. P. Deschner (available from the Free Press, 866 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022); and 3. **Help for the Battered Woman**, by L. Savina (available from Bridge Publishing, Inc., 2500 Hamilton Blvd., South Plainfield, NJ 07080).

A packet of materials for veterans who batter and for counselors of veterans who batter is available from the author, c/o VA Medical Center; Psychology Service (116B); 50 Irving St. N.W.; Washington, DC 20422. □

## REFERENCES

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3. Ritter, R., "Bringing War Home: Vets Who Have Battered," unpublished manuscript, Vet Center, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1984, p. 21.
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7. Purdy, F., and Nickle, N., "Practice Principles for Helping Men Who Batter," unpublished manuscript, Washington State Shelter Network, 1063 South Capital Way, Olympia, WA 98501.
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10. Purdy and Nickle, op cit.

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