INTEGRATING YOUNG MEN INTO MEN’S PROGRAMS AIMED AT ENDING ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

This presentation will outline the activities of the Anti-Violence Project of the Men's Resource Centre. This project is based in Lismore, Northern NSW and has been operating for over five years. The AVP uses group processes to engage men in the task of ending their abusive behaviour. The particular focus of this presentation will be the inclusion of young men (16-22) into the group programs that usually attract men in their 30's, 40's or 50's. When young men do participate in the AVP groups there are tremendous gains for everyone involved.

Stuart Anderson has been actively involved in the ‘Men’s Movement’ for over fifteen years. Since 1995 he has co-ordinated the Anti-violence Project which, according to partners, has had a great deal of success in working with men to end violence and abusive behaviour. He believes that offering services to men who are troubled by their behaviour opens life opportunities for these men that they would otherwise be oblivious to.

Stuart has a Masters degree in Social Ecology in which he specialised in working with men and ethics. He has four children and one grandchild and lives an indulgently pleasant lifestyle on the North Coast of NSW.

Introduction

This presentation outlines the activities of the Anti-violence Project of the Men’s Resource Centre. This project, based in Lismore, Northern NSW has been operating 1995. The AVP uses group processes to engage men on the task of ending their abusive behaviour. Often, young men (16-22) take part in the group programs that usually attract men in their 30’s, 40’s or 50’s. When young men do participate in the AVP group, there are tremendous gains for everyone involved.

The AVP’s group program is called MEND for Men Exploring New Directions. Partners or ex-partners are contacted as a condition of a man’s entry to the MEND program and are offered ongoing support by telephone or entry to a women’s support group (WEND).

Four to five groups run per week in four local government areas. These include open groups, closed groups and courses for men mandated through Probation and Parole. One of the open groups is for Aboriginal men, Koori MEND.

In 2001 an average of five men per week out of a population of approximately 60,000 are asking for assistance in addressing their anger, abusive behaviour or violence. The number of men seeking assistance has steadily increased each year. Over 400 men have accessed the project since it began.

The MEND programs have been successful in that a variety of indicators demonstrate significant reduction of violence. A variety of interesting developments have sprung from these groups.
Young men (17 to 22) are coming to the groups. It is heartening to watch the interactions between older men and younger men in an atmosphere of respect and honesty.

The Koori MEND group has provided the impetus for an Aboriginal Families Program called Rekindling the Spirit. This program now employs two full time workers and is funded by three government departments. Koori MEND has also been the seeding ground for the quarterly Koori fathers and sons camps, which attract an average of 15 men with their boys.

Men who have completed the MEND program have initiated their own support group in which to continue their path toward more self-awareness and respectful, loving relationships. Some of these men have received training so that this group can offer support to any man who has been involved with MEND.

The AVP offers training to experienced workers in skills on engaging people to end abusive behaviour. A training course for Aboriginal workers was very successful and courses for community and health workers have been fully subscribed.

The Anti-violence Project has the Goal:

*To end violence and foster fulfilling and respectful relationships.*

The main AVP activity is the groups for men and support for partners, however it also takes part in community prevention programs that are aimed to reduce domestic violence.

The AVP has ongoing funding from NSW Community Services, making it the only such service working with men on their violence to be funded in NSW. It could expand considerably if this funding was increased. The number of men seeking assistance is steadily rising even though no promotion has been undertaken in the past two years. As well as this, men who are active in their own communities have taken part in training in the hope they could set up similar services in their area.

Because men are asking for help in ending their abusive behaviour, because men have more power in society, because men are the predominant perpetrators of domestic violence and because the AVP was a men’s initiative, men are the primary target group for AVP behaviour change groups.

The AVP also provides other violence prevention courses. Casino Probation and Parole, Lismore Head Injuries and other agencies have paid for programs provided by the AVP.

The Koori MEND group is facilitated by an Aboriginal Family worker and an AVP facilitator. The Aboriginal worker comes from Re-kindling the Spirit. The close cooperation and friendship between workers in these services has been a tremendous support and source of learning for all involved.
The women’s support group, WEND, is principally for women partners of the men attending the MEND courses. However, other women experiencing domestic violence are also welcomed into WEND when there are spaces available. When possible, the WEND group is facilitated by one AVP worker (female) and a worker from a women’s service. It is interesting to note that women from WEND, clients of the local Women’s Refuge and women who independently call the AVP do ask for programs to deal with their own abusive behaviour. There are no specific services for women who want to end their own violence.

A key aspect to the AVP approach has been an inclusive style of facilitation and counselling. For example, all facilitators include themselves in the exercises in the groups and will openly discuss the issues they face in maintaining equal, respectful and loving relationships. This ‘walking the talk’ seems to make participants feel safe to disclose their violent behaviour and to encourage them to take responsibility for both their past behaviour and the future they want with their families. It also creates an atmosphere of respect and trust between workers in which positive and critical feedback is welcomed.

The AVP draws on a number of models and approaches that have been developed in Australia and overseas. The principle approach used is derived from Narrative Therapy and is named ‘Invitations to Responsibility’ after the book by Alan Jenkins. A wide definition of violence includes emotional, psychological, physical and verbal abuse. Control and domination is seen as the basis for abusive behaviour.

Work with people who use violence is in its infancy in Australia and internationally. One perennial difficulty that workers face is how to work respectfully with people who have hurt those who they are supposed to love and care for. The tendency is to distance oneself by putting oneself in a different category; “worker” verses “client”, “respectful person” verses “perpetrator”. This distancing can flaw from the start an attempt to respectfully engage with a man on ending his violence. Below is a table in which different ways of labelling men are named or categorised. This is an attempt to illustrate the subtle ways in which language can create a barrier to collaboration in ending violence.
**NAMES USED TO LABEL MEN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Who tends to use it</th>
<th>Effect of this naming</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perpetrator Batterer</strong></td>
<td>Criminal justice system and Women’s DV services</td>
<td>This man is a problem to all society. He is fixed in this mould and, besides punishing him for being bad, there’s little that can change. He becomes a thing to be reviled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hot-head,</strong></td>
<td>The man himself</td>
<td>Excuses violence by naming it as ‘just an angry outburst’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bastard,</strong></td>
<td>Victims, others who have been hurt or offended by the abusive behaviour</td>
<td>Turns the person into a bad thing, then it is OK to be abusive toward ‘it’ in return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man who chooses to use violence</strong></td>
<td>‘No To Violence’ – Victorian Standards Organisation and other programs</td>
<td>Attempt to get away from the labelling and to separate the problem from the behaviour. Also underscores that there is a choice in behaviour. Still a sense that this man is a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man who is struggling with his tendency to use violence</strong></td>
<td>Anti-violence Project of the Mens Resource Centre</td>
<td>Focuses on a man’s efforts to be respectful and to avoid violence. Honours the effort a man is already making to change his behaviour and builds on this.</td>
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The AVP’s assumption is that every man will have a history of efforts to cease his own abuse. Even the secrecy around abusive behaviour is a demonstration that a man knows violence is not acceptable; the conflict in him around this can be built on. When the emphasis is put on a man’s own endeavours this honours his best intentions. This approach is respectful whilst focus concentrates on ending violence.

Contacting the partners or ex-partners of men who apply to join the MEND program is an integral part of the AVP activities. This contact is made to discuss safety, to offer support and to ask for feedback on the amount of change a man may make.

A letter is sent out to (ex)partners after the man has completed the first Intake interview. This is followed up by a phone call from the AVP Women’s Contact worker. The woman is invited to join the WEND support group and the frequency of contact by phone is negotiated. Usually this is on a one call per month basis, however during a crisis a partner may be called daily. Most women are grateful for the contact and many of who do not want to be called regularly. On the other hand some women weep with gratitude, the call has broken the isolation and sense of overwhelm that has been the result of the violence she has experienced.

This model of pro-active contact of victims is being considered by the Lismore DV agencies as a response to the need for more coordination of services to victims of DV.
Two major evaluations and many ongoing feedback mechanisms indicate that the MEND groups are having success in ending and reducing violence. Another indicator of success is that men constantly report talking to mates, sons, fathers, etc about the impact of abuse and violence and how to stop it. Over fifteen percent of men come through the recommendation of friends.

The most recent evaluation of the project was completed in early 2000. Thirty eight partners were willing to undertake phone interviews. These interviews revealed that one half of these women consider that all physical, verbal and emotional violence or abuse has ceased. One quarter of partners claimed that the man’s violence had reduced considerably while a further quarter said that there had been no changes in the man’s behaviour. Women who have lived with violence often state that they love their partner and want to continue living with him, they just want the violence to stop. The AVP offers this possibility.

Recently Caroline, a student on placement with the AVP interviewed several women whose men had been attending MEND. In one interview she paraphrased the interview:

She and ‘Jim’ are getting along well and she emphasised several times her thanks and gratitude to us for the change in him and for all the support

Other women who were interviewed said:

“(Since going to MEND) he stops, listens and thinks about what he is doing.”

“(He) done extremely well with men’s group (MEND), I cannot believe the change it has made to our relationship”.

“It should be compulsory for men to attend”

It should be noted that while most men manage to significantly change their controlling behaviour, some just switch to less visible forms of control, and others do not change at all.

“We are a lot happier though he manipulates me in a more subtle way.”

Younger men attend MEND for a variety of reasons. While their anger and abuse may be directed at a girlfriend, it is just as likely to be ‘street’ violence or abuse of other family members.

It is a heartening experience to observe young men interacting with older men in the MEND groups. Young men are generally fairly quiet during a MEND session, but when they do speak it is evident that they are absorbing every nuance of the conversations.
Daniel (17) said; *It’s good, it helps me deal with things. They listen; they give advice and try to help out. I can get things off my chest a lot easier. It’s good to hear about what they’ve (the older men) been through. That way you don’t make the same mistakes.*

It is an intense experience to listen to men talking openly about their shame and hurt. Young men often find it overwhelming. Daniel was asked what was it like to go the group at first:

*It was difficult; I was bewildered because I thought it would be different. None of the men looked like agro people. That showed me that everyone’s got problems.*

Ryan (18) came to the AVP because his Mum and Dad were very upset by his abusive behaviour. This abuse was mainly directed at his younger brother but sometimes also to his parents.

Ryan, like others before, felt pretty apprehensive about coming to the MEND group. However, the older men in the group encouraged him from the very beginning. He became more aware of his levels of anger and of the ideas and attitudes that were underlying his abusive outbursts. Ryan stayed for three months and then took his leave as his HSC exams were imminent.

Daniel was asked what he thought of the MEND group:

*I would definitely recommend MEND to other young blokes. I reckon they’d get a lot out of it. To hear what others have been through and get advice off everyone else.*

He was asked what changed for him as a result of going to MEND:

*My attitude has changed a lot, I’ve started to knuckle down and do stuff. I’m trying to get work, maybe the men in MEND will be a connection for this.*

AVP workers believe that the interactions between older and young men serve to increase each one’s motivation and sense of direction. Young men gain from hearing older men speak of their shame and distress at the mess they have made of the close relationships in their life. They also gain from experiencing the open, honest and vulnerable conversations. It is rare for most men to find situations in which they can let their guard down and share personal and difficult stories.

When speaking to young men, older men seem to realise that they have a great deal to offer the younger generation. Men these days can feel very confused as to what they can offer to others. The exchanges in the MEND group give men a sense of purpose and a feeling that they are offering a gift to the younger men coming to the group.

The following points summarise this paper:
1. Men of all walks of life come to MEND groups to deal with their abusive behaviour and anger.
2. According to these men’s partners there is a high rate of success in ending violence.
3. Counsellors who work with people to end violence must work with respect. This may involve counsellors taking stock of their own behaviour and making changes.
4. When a team is conscious of controlling/abusive behaviour, a tremendous sense of trust and cooperation develops.
5. Young men can benefit tremendously by inclusion in a group of older men who are speaking vulnerably, honestly and openly.
6. Older men also benefit by having younger men actively participating in group sessions.
7. There is a great advantage in combining the usual characteristics of a men’s group; camaraderie, support, care and understanding, with the extra dimensions of a group dedicated to end violence; an understanding of collusion, blaming and what it is to take responsibility.
8. If young men are to be encouraged into participating in these groups much support in the form of a trusted mentor is advised, this will take some sort of voluntary or funding commitment.

Domestic violence will cease when everyone in the community takes a stand against it. The AVP programs contribute toward this goal.
Addendum since the Men and Boys Health Conference.

When I joined the conference I noticed a ‘cool’ attitude toward ‘violence work’. As I introduced myself to one man he immediately labelled the program as ‘Feminist’. I assumed that meant that I was ‘on the other side’. The work with men on ending violence seems to receive suspicion by a significant portion of the ‘Men’s Movement’. Interestingly some active Feminists also are wary and sometimes obstructive toward programs like the AVP.

I believe that the AVP offers tremendous gains to both camps.

Active Feminists have been campaigning for recognition of domestic violence. They have been working for decisive policies and practices to offer services to victims and to re-shape the criminal justice system to properly convict perpetrators. Their goal is for the violence to stop.

Men have been confused in their individual and collective response to the emancipation of women. While few men lament women’s increased freedom and earning capacity, most feel a degree of bewilderment in adjusting to a world in which traditional men’s roles are rapidly disappearing. Some feel very hurt by how their partner has left them, by the break-up of their family and, perhaps, by the difficulties in being heard by Family Court processes. In this context, they perceive that targeting men’s violence further blames men. This seems like rubbing salt into gaping wounds.

The attachment to particular gendered positions on both sides is a foundation for the resistance to programs that offer men a chance to stop their use of violence.

The arguments and resistance from some Feminists is stalling development of programs that can and do considerably reduce domestic violence.

Men’s DV programs expose men to a range of men’s activities and issues that they would rarely encounter or consider, thus meeting broad Mens Movement goals of reaching more men and encouraging them to be active in their communities.

Men from all walks of life, from all over Australia are picking up the phone asking for information on services that may assist them in stopping their abusive behaviour. In Lismore NSW about five men per week call the Anti-violence Project. I believe that neglecting the cries for assistance to end violence borders on criminal neglect. This is a huge opportunity for Australia to reduce domestic violence and to engage men in becoming advocates for men’s health and community wellbeing.
Stuart Anderson has been actively involved in the ‘Men’s Movement’ for over sixteen years. Since 1995 he has coordinated the Anti-violence Project which, according to partners, has had a great deal of success in working with men to end violence and abusive behaviour. He believes that offering services to men who are troubled by their behaviour opens life opportunities for these men that they would otherwise be oblivious to. Stuart has a Masters in Social Ecology in which he specialised in working with men and ethics.

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