



Counseling and Education to Stop Domestic Violence

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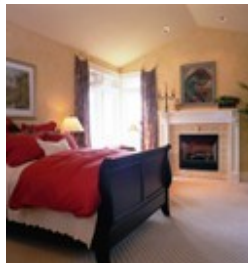
Greetings!

Emerge works to educate abusers about how they have been harmful toward their partner and family. Discussing sexual harms can sometimes be a tricky category, and one that some group leaders are uncomfortable discussing. Jim Morin's article below discusses this topic and ways that EmERGE addresses sexual abuse and respect during group sessions.

Discussing Sex in EmERGE Groups

by Jim Morin, LMHC
EmERGE Group Leader

Most EmERGE clients complete an activity as a part of the Second Stage (sessions 9-40) where they answer 14 questions about each of their significant relationships. This is called a "Relationship History," and one of the questions that is included is "When did you first have sex with your partner?" The question itself is one particular gauge of intimacy in the various relationships the client reports. The assumption is that "having sex" signals a change in the boundaries between individuals in a relationship. We examine not only how soon into a relationship sexual relations began, but whether or not there was pressure for sex, whether overtly through the application of force, or covertly through substance intoxication. This is one aspect of a relationship history that most clients have little difficulty acknowledging with a high level of recall and certainty. Rather than inquire about other possible indicators of intimate encounter such as "When was the first time



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you told your partner a secret you were fearful of revealing?" or "When did you first risk expressing desire to your partner?" our focus on the beginning of a sexual dimension to the relationship assumes that sex makes things different in a way that other types of self exposure may express less definitively. Protestations by some politicians notwithstanding, most people are able to notice when a relationship becomes sexual. In the male heterosexual groups that I lead, important attitudes about the meaning of sex in relationships are often in evidence.

Recently a male client, call him Mo, was describing one of his relationships, and in answer to the question of when did he first have sex with his partner answered, "On the second day after I met her." Spontaneously a low chorus of admiring and congratulatory hoots was voiced by a number of other men in the group. "All right!" "Hey, a player!" "Way to go!" "He works fast." A certain kind of competence, skill and achievement was being acknowledged here. My co-leader and I looked at each other, and it was clear we were going to stop and take a closer look at what just happened. I asked one of the guys, Daniel, who had expressed admiration with his encouraging and praising "All right!" what he meant.

Daniel seemed a little surprised by my question. "I didn't mean anything," Daniel said. "I was just reacting to a guy who got lucky right away. What's wrong with that? Mo didn't do anything wrong. He didn't force her to have sex. Hell, looks like she wanted it real bad." I mentioned that the reactions of some of the guys in the group sounded like they were watching a basketball game and had just witnessed a dramatic spin move and follow up slam dunk over a vanquished opponent. "Is there something about having sex with a woman," I wondered, "that makes it a game where someone wins and someone loses?"

Another group member, Eddie, came to Daniel's aid and offered, "What are you saying, that there's some sort of problem when a woman gives it up on the first or second date?" "Now that's an interesting phrase," I said, "what does it mean when a woman has sex and gives it up? Does a man give it up when he has sex, or is that something only a woman does?" There followed some general discussion where it was clear that men don't give it up, instead they get it. They score. They get lucky. They get what they're looking for.

My co-leader then wondered what the difference would be between a woman who liked to have sex a lot, and a man who also liked sex. "What do you call a man who has many sex partners," she asked? "A player", "a stud," "a typical guy" were some of the replies. "Well, how about a woman who really likes sex, and who has sex early and often with multiple partners?" she offered by way of comparison. Responses were immediate and consistent: "Whore" "Slut" "Easy" There was no doubt among the men. Men can have sex and are praised and valued by other men for their conquests. Women who "give it up" too easily or early are not praised, rather they are shunned. Drawing apparently on his own personal preferences, Daniel offered, "If a woman has sex with me on the first date, I know I'm not going to have anything to do with her. She's too easy. She's trash." These contrasting evaluations of "having sex" were now available for discussion.

Some of the men were left wondering what the point was of this difference. Daniel turned to me and said, "I want to ask you a question.



Now, what would you do if some woman wanted to have sex with you on the first date? You'd go along, wouldn't you? It's natural. That's just the way men are." As I thought of how to answer, I could tell I was being asked this question by someone who couldn't conceive of an alternative to a man jumping at the chance to take advantage of a sexual offer. I saw my job as modeling some alternatives to the absolute stance Daniel had constructed. I began by listing some conditions I would want to consider, conditions that reflect my own values regarding the place of sex in relationship. "You might not believe this, but I probably wouldn't be having sex on a first date. For me, there would be a lot I want to know before sex. First, was I looking for an intimate relationship, or was I otherwise committed? Were there other qualities about this person that I found attractive? Was this an equal match - in values, vision, compatibility? Was sex something I wanted and expected on a first date, was I prepared for it, or was I feeling pressured? Intimidated? Challenged in a way I didn't want to be? If it wasn't a good match, or didn't feel right, I would decline." I had introduced a lot of conditions and made having sex more a part of a larger picture than the dominating prize it seemed to be for Daniel. I said it depends. A pretty vague answer, but clearly different from what Daniel might have been expecting. He was expecting me to say, "Of course, who wouldn't?" I instead questioned the assumption that an opportunity for sex would be "automatically" accepted, no further discussion necessary. To hear another man say, "It depends..." introduced a dissonant chord, something to mull over and consider, something that didn't make sense. An alternative way of looking at things.

These are certainly not new or very startling insights into the attitudes some men hold about sex. But when we see them expressed in our groups they can be used as an opportunity to explore the meaning and consequences of these unexamined assumptions on the group member and on the person chosen as his partner. We might also then question the gender roles and expectations that further define relationships. One function of our counseling and education groups at Emerge is to bring to awareness the assumptions and beliefs that underlie controlling and abusive behavior. In this brief exchange around a reaction during a Relationship History, a very powerful inequality about how men differentiate their own identities as "winners" of sex from their assumption of women as "losers" of sex was made available for examination. Over time we will return to the assumptions the men in this group bring to encounters with women. We will try to help them see, hopefully from a different perspective, what these assumptions may mean to the women they meet, as well as to their own expectations of an intimate partner. One of our goals at Emerge is to promote respectful relationships. Examining expectations about sex in relationship is an important aspect of that work.

On the positive side, some group members have been sensitized to the many aspects of sexual pressure and will ask the man who is doing a relationship history more specific questions about this such as, "Did you use alcohol or drugs?", or "Did you try to make her feel guilty when she said no"? It is gratifying to see these instances in which men are helping each other to move beyond coercive and immature attitudes toward sex.

[The Massachusetts Department of Public Health developed a sexual assault curriculum in 2004 through a partnership with rape crisis centers, certified batterer intervention programs, and the executive office of public safety. To view this curriculum, click on this link.](#)



Thank you for your interest in Emerge! For those of you who are interested, Emerge has started a [MySpace page](#) that includes a Public Service Announcement. Additional information will be added as the site develops, but anyone who is interested in adding Emerge as a friend would be more than welcome to do so!

Sincerely,

Emerge: Counseling & Education to Stop Domestic Violence

