



Emergence

Counseling and Education to Stop Domestic Violence

E-mail Newsletter: Volume 1, Issue 11

Working to Stop Domestic Violence Since 1977

Season's Greetings!

As we get closer to the holidays, stress rises. Along with all the headaches of the season itself, domestic violence rears its ugly head in many different ways.

This month, Laurie VanLoon, a part of the "Is It Abuse?" training team, is addressing the topic of abusive behavior and the holidays.



Harmful Behavior During the Holidays: Examining Domestic Violence During Stressful Times


by Laurie VanLoon, LICSW

Happy holidays! So many expectations, so little time. So many hopes. So many opportunities for misunderstanding and disappointment. Screaming commercialism superimposed on supposed joy and peace: Crazy-making!

Abuse perpetrators are buffeted by holiday forces as much as any of us. But because of certain attitudes and beliefs, abusers can permit themselves to respond with extra- heightened irritability. Abusive acting out is more common during the holidays, making them an especially anxious period for survivors and children. Statistics validate their fears.

Even among previously abusive people who are sincere about change, recidivism is common at this time of year. When stress is high, abusers





tend to feel their abuse is excusable, and established coping strategies may fray or disappear. In both abuser education and in therapy, it is important to inform clients that they'll experience extra challenges in the coming weeks, and assist them in developing a concrete plan that respects their families and keeps everyone safe.

Among the many factors underlying abuse, this article picks three clusters that often go hand in hand and can lead to unpleasant, controlling, or abusive behavior.

(1) Self-centeredness, entitlement, and refusal to negotiate:

These tendencies can turn holiday decision making into a disaster.

John is a pretty nice guy when things are going his way, but he's worried about not getting his Christmas bonus. Jane wants her parents to visit this Christmas, after three years of going four hours away to his family's. She says she'd like to start alternating years of being home and being away. John angrily yells about what a pain her mother is, and how much work it would be to get the house ready. Jane says she'll deal with her mother, and take full responsibility for the house. This doesn't placate John. His language escalates into full-scale verbal abuse, with contempt and sarcasm about how she's lying about what she will really do. She tries to answer logically, but he storms out of the house, slamming the door and peeling out of the driveway. The kids are scared, and now the word "Christmas" and Daddy's rage are intertwined for them. Jane becomes highly alert, wondering if, when, and how he will return, and whether she should give in to keep the peace.

(2) Rejection of responsibility, displacement, and projection:

Taking responsibility for negative behavior and admitting mistakes is hard for most of us. Abusers seem particularly prone to putting the responsibility on others—not just for their own errors, but for associated uncomfortable feelings, such as sudden emotional flooding. They then use these awkward feelings as justifications for blame and behaving badly. And they get a pay-off for their abuse: striking back when partners point out errors can lead to their partner's future silence.

Alice asks Emily to go holiday shopping with her so they can get gifts for Alice's relatives, who are difficult people. Alice can't find her car keys, and asks Emily for her set. Emily can't find hers either, but starts looking. Alice becomes more and more agitated, throwing things and stomping around, and calls Emily disorganized and irresponsible. She expands her criticisms to other ways she feels Emily has wronged her by being stupid and clueless. Finally, Emily finds her own keys and silently hands them to Alice, who snatches them away and says she's going shopping by herself. Emily says softly, "Alice, you never found your own set. Please make sure I get these back." Alice swears and flings open the door, which hits Emily hard on the shoulder. Emily crumples and weeps. Alice leaves.

(3) Competition and self-victimization:

Abusive people often perceive family relationships in terms of who gets the most attention. When feeling one-down, jealousy for attention leads to nursing a victimized point of view, which in turn supports acting out. Partners' perspectives are not admitted into consciousness, and children



can be seen as competitors.

Jim and Mary have lived together for three years. She has two children from a previous partner, now out of the picture. She'd hoped Jim could step in as a father figure. But as the holidays approach, he is out of the house because Mary took out a restraining order after he had gotten drunk, smashed some of the children's toys-screaming that they had too much stuff lying around-then shifted abruptly to try to coerce her upstairs to have sex, all in front of the kids. This is the third scene this year, all starting with his feeling ignored. Last Christmas he was also out of the house with a restraining order, and he's never accepted it was legitimate. Now he has a tornado of feelings: anger, remorse, and abandonment. At the moments he feels scared she will leave him-which she has said she might. He breaks the RO in repeated phone calls, begging her to take him back and "not do this to the kids at Christmastime."

At this time of year abuser education group leaders and therapists can assist abusive clients and their families by being proactive, in three phases: identification, review, and planning.

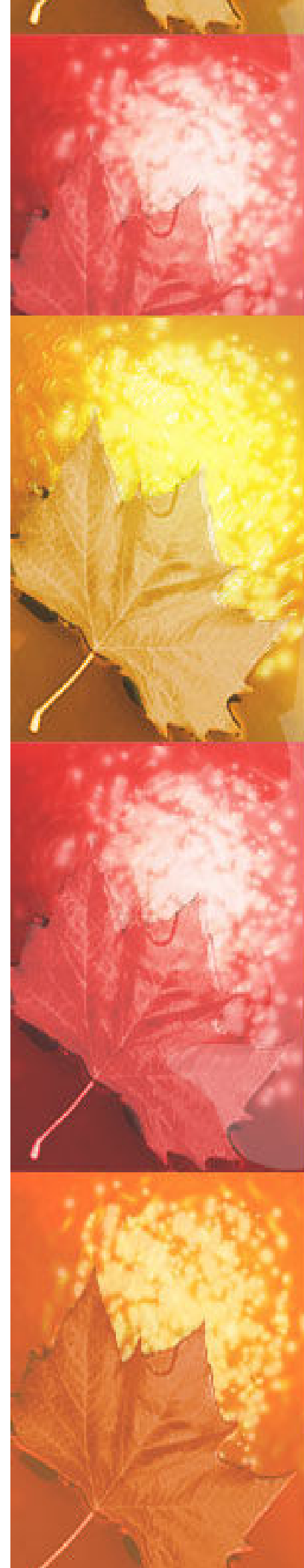
Identification involves data-gathering: asking about thoughts and emotions, past events, wishes, and feelings-both now and in their families of origin-focusing especially on behavioral responses. Checklists can be helpful. Identification also means questioning clients about their partners' and children's behaviors and feelings, and re-directing them when self-centeredness blocks this work.

Review means exploring the data. It searches for risky areas in thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. It also helps discover resources-ways in which the client has been respectful even when stress was high. And it means looking at sequences and patterns, justifications, and impact on partners and children. Group members can help each other zero in on shaky ground, suggest behaviors that could recur, and predict their short and long-term effects. Examples like those above, as well as videos and role-play scripts, can provoke discussion in a less personal way as a prelude to the more individual work.

Planning helps clients develop non-abusive options to manage stress and prevent acting out. Strategies from anger management and stress reduction programs are helpful, but not enough. We must help clients keep other family members' needs "in the room," as well as address the specific dynamics of family violence that tend to make it more self-justified, more private, and more reinforcing (at least in the short term), than behavior toward non-intimates.

When planning for safety, we can engage clients' narcissism: What kinds of attention and care do they want from partners and children? How do they want to be regarded? What kinds of memories do they want their children to have of them from holiday times? What attitudes and behavior on their parts are most likely to create these? And we can engage clients' value systems: what kind of partners or parents are they choosing to be?

Yes, Christmas is coming, and Hanukkah and Kwanza. Excitement and anticipation! And fear and hurt. We who work with abuse perpetrators



sense a special urgency at this time of year. We can offer frameworks and techniques to help build a peace-filled holiday.

 [Discuss this article on our Discussion Forum...](#)

Domestic Violence & Abuser Education Links

- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline**
<http://www.thehotline.org/>
- **The Super Bowl Myth**
<http://www.endabuse.org/content/features/detail/1004/>
- **Tips During the Holidays for Survivors**
<http://login.npwebsiteservices.com/barrierfreeliving/BREAKINGBARRIERSDEC2010.asp>
- **RAINN: Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network**
<http://www.rainn.org>
- **An Article from Idaho on Increased DV Calls During the Holidays (PDF)**
<http://pnhendrix.asp.radford.edu/CRJU380/Readings/Domestic%20Violence/vanquez%20stohr%20purkin%20intimate%20partner%20violence.pdf>
- **The Silicone Valley Domestic Violence Project - Multiple Links by Topic**
http://www.growing.com/nonviolent/research/dvl_disp.htm
- **The Clothesline Project**
<http://www.clotheslineproject.org/>
- **Hands and Words are Not for Hurting**
<http://handsproject.org/>
- **Men's Initiative for Jane Doe Inc. - Encouraging Men to Stand Out Against DV**
<http://www.mijd.org/>
- **The Catalogue for Philanthropy**
http://www.catalogueforphilanthropy.org/ma/1999/emerge_218.htm

Emerge Website Links:

<http://www.emergedv.com/index.php/links/>

We hope you all have a happy and safe holiday season! In December we will be doing an "end of the year review." If you have any thoughts about what you've read so far in our newsletter,



please e-mail us or post your opinion on the forums. See you next month!

Best Regards,

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