



# **Emerge**

*Counseling and Education to Stop Domestic Violence*

## **E-Mail Newsletter**

***Working to Stop Domestic Violence  
Since 1977***

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### **Welcome!**

This newsletter has a very broad subscriber base. We have domestic violence field advocates and counselors, law enforcement officials including probation officers and judges, as well as researchers and administrators.



Victims of abusive behavior sign up for our newsletter in search of help for themselves or their abuser. Perpetrators of abuse sign up in order to learn more about the program or to get into a program like Emerge in their area.

This month, Susan Cayouette will be writing an article which describes a method of considering the difference between harmful, controlling and abusive behavior. It was created to help counselors identify when behavior reported in a group or individual session reaches the threshold of abuse.

Christopher Hall will be writing an article about how perpetrators of abusive behavior need to be challenged to look at where they may be minimizing their behavior and not listening to their partner's concerns.

## The Continuum of Harmful Behavior

By Susan Cayouette, Emerge Co- Director



Harmful? Controlling? Abusive? Violent? If you've led an abuser education group, you've surely had to decide whether all, none or some of these words describe each group member. In making these judgments, you've engaged in a complex process of assessment which may have become second nature to you. However, in creating our training called "Is This Abuse?," David Adams, Ted German, Laurie Van Loon, and I took on the challenge of creating a visual tool which could distinguish these descriptors of abuse, while also showing where they overlap. We hoped that these tools would be useful to mental health professionals faced with determining whether it was appropriate to continue to see an individual who disclosed abuse, control or violence in his or her relationship.

What we came up with was a "Continuum of Harmful Behavior in Intimate Relationships," which looks at the spectrum of behaviors that are harmful, from those which are insensitive or alienating, to those that are controlling, and finally to those that are abusive either physically or psychologically. We also developed definitions of abusive, controlling, and insensitive or alienating behavior:

### **Abusive Behavior**

*Includes actions that engender fear and intimidation, or undermine the other person's self-determination. Many controlling behaviors may also be abusive within the context of physical or psychological abuse.*

### **Controlling Behavior**

*Includes abusive behaviors but also actions that are undermining of the other person's self-determination or self-esteem. This includes unilateral complaints, controlling the agenda, freedom from accountability to the other person (e.g., coming and going as one pleases). Behavior is nonabusive if it lacks the elements of fear and intimidation.*

### **Insensitive and/or Alienating Behavior**

*Includes all abusive and controlling behaviors listed, but also actions that are self-centered, inconsiderate, selfish, and isolating or withdrawing. Behavior is nonabusive if it lacks the elements of fear, intimidation, and control.*

Using these definitions as guideposts, we mapped a continuum of behaviors which allows therapists to distinguish between behavior that is harmful to the relationship, but does not rise to the level of abuse. So insensitive behavior by one member of a couple, such as ignoring the other person, is harmful to the relationship, but does not meet the definition of abusive because it does not engender fear or intimidation and does not undermine the person's sense of self-esteem or self-determination.

A therapist who is deciding whether or not to send a batterer to group, or whether to (also) see him with his partner in couples counseling, faces a far more complicated determination than our "Continuum of Harmful Behavior" could address in isolation. So we developed another set of questions which can be used to look at behavior, context, and impact. These questions gather more information and further clarify how behavior, context, and impact

help practitioners make a definitive assessment of the specific behavior under scrutiny.

Batterer intervention counselors may need to use these tools to determine the appropriateness of referrals to a batterer intervention group. For instance, some GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender] referrals to abuser education programs may actually be victims, not perpetrators. Used thoughtfully, these tools help distinguish between victims and perpetrators in situations that initially seem quite clear-cut. They also help with GLBT (and heterosexual) referrals when both parties are referred to an abuser group and the initial story is quite muddy.

We have presented our "Is This Abuse?" conference twice in Massachusetts and are now offering it in other states. If you are interested in getting more information about this training, contact [Ted German](#), our Training Director.

## The Continuum of Harmful Behavior

*By Christopher Hall, Emerge Group Leader*

Changing patterns of behavior is long-term, difficult work. There are many things that people put in the way of making changes in their life. Patterns of denial make it easy for people to avoid taking responsibility for abusive actions. And denial can make it easy to avoid noticing the impact and harm behavior is causing. Often people justify their behavior because they think they are "right" in a situation.



At Emerge, we work to teach each participant about the many types of abuse that exist so that they can become more aware of hurtful, controlling and abusive behavior. We look at the effects of their behavior and consider the thoughts behind such behavior.

Many people who come to Emerge compare their behavior to everyone else in the room. They think, "well, I was abusive, but I'll NEVER be as bad as that guy." Or they might think that some of their actions were, "no big deal," or "not as bad as she made it out to be." ***If their goal is to have a better relationship with their family, however, they may be missing the point.***

Placing "most and least harmful" labels on abuse could cause abusers to miss out on having empathy for their families. Many abusers believe they know which behaviors have hurt their partners the most. If the person being victimized identifies different behavior as more hurtful, an abuser may choose to ignore this, so that making amends will be very difficult.

During group sessions, I always encourage every group member to talk about not only their violence and controlling behavior, but ask them to consider any and all behavior which has distanced themselves from their family. Recognizing overall patterns of harmful behavior is one way an abuser can start focusing on more than one or two specific abusive behaviors and start to make positive changes.

We hope these two articles have been thought provoking, whether you are a counselor working with an abuser or are someone who has been abusive to a partner.

We would also like to take a moment to recognize the [Cambridge Police Superior Officers Association](#) for their generous support of Emerge, and their continued efforts to end domestic violence!

If any of the topics we discuss in our newsletter interest you, be sure to visit our website, call us, e-mail us or join our discussion forum. Thank you again for your continued support and interest!

Regards,



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