

Domestic Violence Intervention Strategies

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Each year, eight million women are subjected to physical and emotional abuse as well as intimidation techniques at the hands of their partners and the people they trust. The psychological and physical traumas of domestic abuse make it one of the most tragic behaviors that social workers must deal with and work to prevent. Domestic violence intervention is often unsuccessful because women are afraid to risk their current life for the lifestyle they desire.

Social workers must carefully evaluate each situation and its risks before selecting an appropriate intervention strategy. This is critical because young children and adolescents are in danger when domestic violence occurs. Over the years, domestic violence has increased, and strategies for combating its occurrence have evolved. Effective domestic violence intervention strategies break cyclic behavior through communication, support and compassion.

Establish Contact

The first step in any domestic violence intervention plan is establishing contact with the victim. Referrals are frequently provided by victims who call domestic abuse hotlines and law enforcement agencies. Information about suspected or confirmed cases of abuse is also provided by schools, substance abuse programs, mental health facilities, hospitals, family and friends. The value of referrals depends on the source of the information and the stage in the domestic violence

cycle. Domestic violence intervention strategies are most successful during the crises stage when there is a heightened awareness of the problem and a reinforced desire for change.

In cases where the referral is completed by a friend or family member, the victim is often ambivalent toward receiving help or confronting the situation. Taking initiative and engaging in corrective action is perceived as a crisis among the nuclear family where the abuse is taking place, but it offers victims the best chance for success. During a crisis, victims are more willing to remove themselves and their children from the situation and to receive assistance from a shelter, a hotline or a domestic violence prevention program. During reconciliation and tension-building phases, women have an increased desire to make things work and to maintain tranquility. Pressure from family members and friends can lead to an ambivalent response. When approached about incidences of domestic violence, responses range from complete denial and ambivalence to a willingness to change and to become a survivor.

Assess the Situation

Before establishing a domestic violence intervention strategy, a crisis assessment must be completed. A thorough assessment should give social workers a view of the entire situation. By completing an assessment, advocates can determine risk levels, what stage in the

violence cycle is occurring and whether there is imminent danger for the victim and the family's children. During this process, minor details must not be overlooked. Hair-trigger abusers see small changes like a new job, going back to school or getting out of the house as major threats that can precipitate abuse.

Social workers can engage law enforcement officers and CPS case workers to assess child safety. It's also important to understand what the motivating factor is for the victim seeking out help. Did they initiate contact? Was it a family member or an adolescent child? Social workers also need to assess the abuser's attitude. It's essential for social workers, law enforcement agents and first responders to protect themselves and to put safety first. Given the violent tendencies of abusers, domestic violence calls are exceptionally dangerous. The risk of physical violence is real because abusers perceive assistance as a threat.



Create an Emergency Plan

Reaching out to abused individuals and showing them a way to create a plan is one of the most effective domestic violence intervention strategies. However, it's up to individuals to determine if they are ready to receive assistance. When victims of domestic violence call hotlines, several important questions are always asked:

- Are your children safe?
- Where is the abuser?
- Would you like me to call the police?
- If you wish to leave, can you do so safely?
- Do you require medical attention?

Following this hierarchy, ensuring the safety of the victim and the victim's children is the first priority. Many intervention and treatment programs follow a process of elimination approach where children are removed from the situation if it is in their best interest or if it is necessary to ensure their safety. The victim may also be removed from the family home if it can be done safely. Social workers should provide information about crisis intervention programs, shelters and round-the-clock domestic violence hotlines that can be used in case of an emergency. Round-the-clock programs and services are ideal because domestic violence often occurs at night, on weekends and on holidays.

Decision-Making Skills

Abused women are intimidated and manipulated, which causes them to lose their decision-making skills. The goal of any domestic violence intervention strategy is helping victims develop coping and decision-making skills that allow them to overcome psychological barriers. While an intervention does not always produce immediate change, it helps victims regain skills and eventually get out of a bad situation of their own volition. Social workers can allay common fears by providing information about separation assistance, job training and financial programs that are available to women who are leaving abusive relationships.

The key to developing an effective intervention strategy is to understand what's preventing the victim from leaving. In addition to making sure the victim has an emergency plan in place, social workers should establish a domestic violence history and inquire whether court actions or protective orders were sought in the past and if the victim followed through with the procedures.

Court Action

If the victim has considered court action but hasn't followed through, it's important to understand why. When advising a victim to file for separation or secure a protective order, social workers should inquire how the extended family will react. There are a variety of risks associated with court actions as intervention strategies. It can help children from the relationship, but it also has the potential of hurting them. Children should never be left with an abuser or put in the

custody of a parent who is struggling with violent tendencies, mental issues and drug or alcohol abuse.



Remove At-Risk Individuals

In many cases, the best intervention strategy for defusing a situation is removing parties that are causing problems or are in danger. Children are at risk whenever domestic violence occurs. Minor children can be protected by removing them from the home and placing them with a family member, a temporary foster home or a crisis nursery. This is advisable if there is a history of child abuse, instances where a parent was hospitalized due to abuse and threats of child abuse or kidnapping. The victim may also benefit from being removed from the situation and placed in a safe environment alone or with their children. Occasionally, abusers are also removed from the situation using a court commitment order for mental health issues. The best course of action can be determined by offering assistance to all family members and discovering who precipitated the current crisis.

Assessing Risks

Any successful domestic violence intervention strategy employs a broad approach that offers something for all family members who are involved in an emotionally difficult situation. All discussions should be conducted in a safe environment where warning signs can be detected. When emotions are running wild, it's important to identify warning signs and imminent threats. If weapons, including knives and guns, are available, the risks are significantly higher. The level of danger also increases if drugs and alcohol are involved and if mental issues, such as depression, prescription medications and suicidal thoughts, are affecting one or both parents.

Communication Techniques

When implementing a domestic violence intervention strategy, social workers and anyone else involved must always put safety first. These communication techniques are highly effective for developing and implementing an agreeable intervention plan.

- **Engage in active listening:** ask descriptive questions to gather information from all parties.
- **Remain non-judgmental:** maintaining a comforting, supportive and empathetic attitude is the key to helping victims open up and accept help.

- **Be a facilitator:** fostering change involves making plans together, weighing advantages and working with ambivalent parties to bring about results.

- **Be an advocate:** many abused individuals feel like no one is on their side. Explain and discuss available services, and use the victim's input to develop an agreeable intervention strategy or emergency plan.

- **Maintain a no-pressure attitude:** once the situation is defused, remind the victim of available options. This no-pressure attitude can alleviate feelings of helplessness and confusion while allowing victims to envision a new future and take action to achieve their goals.

If left unchecked, abuse grows progressively worse. Each relationship requires a unique domestic violence intervention strategy, and it's up to social workers to create a feasible plan that can be completed safely if and when the victim is willing to take initiative. When given resources, assistance and support, many victims can remove themselves and their children from abusive relationships to create the safe, stable environment that is needed.

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