

Reaching past violence

A client's experience of domestic violence can often have detrimental and devastating effects on drug and alcohol treatment, argues Michelle Newcomb of the Stella Project.

We've all heard the same stories:

'No, he's the one who always scores, I just earn the money.'

'If I leave, he's going to let social services know...'

'Sorry I'm late, can I still get an appointment? She didn't tell me the new time.'

'He's not usually like this, he was just off his head and lost his temper.'

➤ In a setting where a sense of crisis or complexity often looms, it's easy to hear these statements without giving them much thought. But step back and look harder, what are they really saying? As your client walks out the door, many are walking into coercive, abusive and violent situations, not just on the street, but often within their own homes.

The Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy states that up to 30 per cent of men who physically abuse their partners do so under the influence of alcohol. Meanwhile in 2002, the Home Office report *Women drug users and drug service provision* stated that 50 to 90 per cent of women in treatment were survivors of violence. It therefore seems inevitable that many of our service users are experiencing domestic violence. It is, however, important to remember that few are likely to disclose without direct questioning, due to the stigma and shame associated with the issue.

When talking about domestic violence and substance use a crucial point must be raised: drugs or alcohol do not cause domestic violence. Many people happily misuse substances without ever being violent to their family or partner. Most perpetrators are abusive, with or without drugs or alcohol. Substances, especially alcohol, can however act as a powerful disinhibitor, allowing the user to feel it is appropriate to engage in violent behaviour.

Historically the drug, alcohol and domestic violence sectors have generally chosen to work apart. This is often based not on client need, but on fear of each others' issues. In recent years domestic violence refuges have been particularly criticised for not opening their doors to using women. But perhaps we should also ask if drug and alcohol services are truly accessible to women in abusive situations. Most services have no child care facilities, inflexible opening times and limited gender

specific spaces which allow for safe discussions about violence and abuse.


Yet some services are rising to the challenge, making great strides to fill gaps in service provision. Specialist domestic violence workers are now based in treatment services in Islington, Haringey, Newham and Neath. Drug and Alcohol Services for London (DASL) has been doing this work for around three years, alongside training and assessing for domestic violence as clients enter treatment. Refuges throughout the country are attempting to work in partnership with drug and alcohol services to provide satellite or gender specific services. This model has worked successfully in both Nottinghamshire and Hackney, proving women with drug and alcohol problems can be safely housed by refuges. Local authorities are devising specific forums or posts to develop guidelines and training programmes for both sectors. Tower Hamlets in particular has been leading the way, providing specialist support to local domestic violence, drug and alcohol agencies.

There are many options for working together; most do not require enormous resources or time. What they do require is a belief and commitment that domestic violence is preventable and unacceptable, even for those of us who misuse drugs or alcohol.

Michelle Newcomb works for the Stella Project, a partnership between the Greater London Domestic Violence Project and the Greater London Alcohol and Drug Alliance. They are holding a conference on domestic violence and substance misuse on 27-28 October. The Stella Project has also produced practical guidance for agencies working with these issues. All can be found at: www.gldvp.org.uk

Domestic Violence Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Respect perpetrator's phone line: 0845 122 8609



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Key indicators that a client maybe experiencing domestic violence in a treatment setting

- A partner acting as the sole source of supply of substances, making it difficult for a victim to access substances or money elsewhere.
- Forcing a partner to use. This can also manifest in the abusive partner forcing poly or injecting drug use.
- Threats to disclose. This is particularly common if children are involved.
- Limiting access to information or treatment. For instance only allowing someone to attend treatment at set times or with their presence.
- Sabotaging treatment. Constantly calling a client in rehab or attempting to encourage relapse.
- Using the non abusive partner's earnings to buy substances.
- Taking out frustrations during detox or withdrawal on the victim. Remember there is no excuse for domestic violence, regardless of the perpetrator's state of mind.