

Emergent or Urgent Situations for the Pastoral Counselor: Mental Health Emergencies and ABC's of What to Do First:

Part 5: Domestic Violence

This segment will address adult domestic violence and homicide risk, which is an area in which few pastors or mental health practitioners have had adequate training. While the general principals described here are probably sound cross-culturally, this article does not address how DV risk and interaction with police authorities takes place outside the U.S. We solicit input from our international friends to round out the picture.

Known Triggers to Escalation of Violence

Most homicidal violence occurs in a domestic context rather than done by strangers. There are certain situations in which the risk of DV rises markedly. When drugs or alcohol are involved, behavioral controls are reduced and less predictable.

In domestic homicides, the single biggest trigger seems to be imminent fear of abandonment, e.g. threat of separation, breaking up, or leaving. Instead of grappling with fear or loss, the perpetrator becomes jealous, enraged, retaliatory, and seeks to subjugate the victim. If you are working with a family where DV has been an issue and one party is contemplating separation, make certain that s/he does not disclose his/her plans to depart in a situation where s/he is alone with the partner.

The next biggest triggers to violence seem to be finding out that the partner is involved with a third party romantically, or actually coming upon/encountering the partner with a third party unexpectedly. Perhaps this will be perceived as a bit of crass advice by some, but it is important: *Don't do it at home*. Advise such parties to be very circumspect if the terminated relationship is still in the throes of anger and has not reached a stage of acceptance and resolution. (And, it should be noted, for some people, this stage is never reached. Particularly, those who have been left may not ever accept that it is over.) In my own experience, while the urge to seek out support in the wake of one's own stress and loss may be strong, one would do well not to become romantically involved with someone else and to avoid the appearance of involvement until the former relationship has been severed and both parties' lives have restabilized.

Steps Toward Separation, Termination of Relationship or Possible Marital Reunification

- If living in the U. S., the abused partner who is leaving should seek temporary restraining orders (TRO) from the local family law court; this will legally require the abuser to stay away from the abused partner, and to prevent or stop his/her harassment. If s/he disobeys the Court Order, then s/he is in Contempt of Court and can be arrested. Find out what the procedures are in your particular county jurisdiction.

We would appreciate comments by those residing outside the U.S. as to what is appropriate action in your own legal jurisdiction.

- In the U.S., a party can go to court without having a lawyer and there is usually a paralegal on site who will assist in the completion of the Petition. If you or one of your parishioners can go with the person, this may assist him/her, especially if s/he does not speak English or s/he speaks English-as-second-language. Simply go to the Court, ask for the necessary paperwork, which may usually be completed in long-hand and does not have to be typed up in "legalese." We should also add that lack of legal residency in the U.S. is not a barrier to seeking such court Order to restrain an abusive spouse. The information is not provided to INS. However, we should also note that if a case ends up in criminal prosecution and there is a criminal conviction, this fact could result in denial of citizenship and lead to deportation. Hence, it is important to intervene earlier rather than later to prevent such outcome. We would also appreciate feedback from those who have dealt with this issue from the perspective of not being U.S. citizens.
- Some pastoral care providers, particularly those who hold more conservative theology about male/female relationships, where they believe the marriage must be preserved at all costs, may unwittingly risk safety in the interest of trying to get couples to stay together no matter what. Their goal is to prevent separation while undergoing marital counseling. Such approach can actually be quite dangerous and most mental health experts would advise against this.
- In such situations, it is not uncommon for the abuser who is usually male, to try to co-opt a male pastoral counselor into religious justification for continued control over the spouse. Pastoral counseling that attempts to avoid a separation after domestic violence has already occurred can pose an increased risk. Pastors need to avoid an unwitting collusion with DV perpetrators.
- Marital separation with a goal of maintaining safety should be encouraged rather than "negotiating" with DV perpetrators which allows them to maintain control. The principle is: ***Their behavioral change must occur first before marital reunification is appropriate.*** Failure to report such domestic violence to the police in the presumed best spiritual interests rarely leads to a successful outcome. Indeed, at least in the U.S., research indicates that the only intervention that seems to make any difference in the behavior of DV perpetrators is arrest, incarceration, and court controls.
- Do not encourage DV victims to give in and have unauthorized contact with abusive spouses once restraining orders have been put in place. The abuser needs to earn trust through respectfully submitting himself/herself to the imposed legal boundary. His/her lack of respect for the partner is displayed by his/her refusal to honor their boundaries and is symptomatic of a core spiritual problem.

- You should also be aware that domestic violence is not limited to married couples. Indeed, in any cases, DV begins even before couples are living together. They may only be dating. Such young couples need immediate help. ***The individual who is dating someone who is already paranoid, controlling, and even physically abusive needs to be counseled out of that relationship***, because any existing constraints that are present will disappear once s/he feels s/he “owns” him/her.
- DV is also not limited to heterosexual couples. Gay and lesbian couples also have their share of domestic violence episodes. Men who are victims of DV in either heterosexual or homosexual relationships are very often reluctant to come forward, so we need to stay attentive to them. Sometimes they are severely injured or killed, although the majority of DV victims are women. You should also be aware that DV and child abuse may occur in the same families. Even if the children are not directly abused, witnessing parental abuse can also be horribly traumatic and I have seen some children or adolescents commit murder of a parent as a result.
- A rising area of risk of homicide and suicide is in the elderly population where one or both parties may be chronically ill or suffering pain, suffering from the effects of dementia, or an inadequate support system. Pay special attention to these individuals, especially when it becomes apparent that physical altercations have already occurred. Such families are at very high risk for fatal incidents.

If you are working with a DV family or if you would like to learn more about DV and dealing with its victims and perpetrators, there are some excellent sources on the internet where you can receive training. See, for example,

www.dhs.state.OR.US/training/dv/tools.htm

or

www.dhs.state.OR.US/caf/dv/tools.htm

The State of Oregon has a great website with many articles and tools that will help you understand how to deal with DV, including issues of economic problems for survivors. Some of the articles are more technical and intended for their social workers but most are quite helpful for the pastoral or lay counselor.

What to Do in Urgent Situations

- If you receive an urgent call about an issue involving domestic violence taking place in the home, and you have any doubts as to your immediate safety or that of others and your ability to defuse the situation, call the police and ask for a well-being check at the residence of the family. Handle the contact only by phone until you determine appropriate steps.

Situations in Which Police Intervention Should be Sought

- Find out from the reporting party if there have been prior incidents and whether police have been previously involved in prior incidents. Also find out if the family is currently or if they have previously been under supervision of Social Services. If there has previously been police intervention, this is a situation where you should not attempt to intervene on your own, but you can take preliminary steps to assure safety for all family members.
- If it is alleged that one party has previously threatened to kill, DO NOT take this on.
- If one or both parties is under the influence of alcohol or drugs do not attempt to handle it by yourself.
- Find out if there are weapons in the house such as guns and ammunition. If such items are on the premises, call the police and inform them of the address and locations of weapons.

How to Achieve Cooperation so that Intervention Can Occur

- In general, if you are not known by both parties, outside intervention may be preferable, because the party that does not know you may expect or presume that you will "take sides" in the conflict. Some individuals will tell you to "butt out."
- Talk by phone with both parties separately if at all possible. If you've been invited to participate by one party to assist, let the other person know your intended role. *Establish yourself as not taking sides* but simply to ensure safety and well-being of everyone.
- If a conflict is going on at the moment, tell them that one party needs to leave temporarily. Do not assign blame in your attempts to separate them. The parties should not be allowed to assign blame to one another as a way of deciding who gets to stay home or who has to leave. Simply say that everyone needs a cooling down period. Move the more cooperative or pliant party.
- Handle your initial contacts by phone. Ask both parties if they will temporarily leave the residence. Then assist at least one of them to vacate. Help each of them find someone where they can spend the afternoon or evening, to cool down.
- Is there someone that they both trust to work with them? If possible, ask both of them.
- When one party is temporarily relocated, instruct the friends or neighbors with whom s/he is staying not to assign blame or "take sides" in the conflict.

- Tell the parents that children need to be temporarily moved to a neighbor's house, friend, or church member's home for their own safety and so they do not witness a parental dispute. I have been involved in several cases where children witnessed the murder of a parent, so it is critical to secure their safety and to make sure they are not witnesses to arguments, disputes, or worse.
- If you are dealing with the elderly or a disabled or mentally handicapped person, where a partner or perhaps a care provider or adult son or daughter has become abusive or neglectful, this is a situation that requires Social Services intervention. And there should be frequent and continued checks on their well-being. This is as necessary as what you would do in the case of a child.

We solicit responses to this article from those of you from different cultural perspectives or those living in other countries. How would these situations be handled in your locale? We also solicit responses from anyone who has been involved in or dealt with DV, either professionally or personally. What was most helpful in your case? What was done that was less helpful or even harmful?

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