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Social Work in Canada

An introduction
Fourth edition

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Stories from the Field

Stopping Violence against Women

Social work with men who use violence against women

Part of addressing intimate partner violence involves working with men who perpetrate the abuse. There are different approaches to working with men who use violence against women. One approach is restorative justice, in which a woman who has experienced abuse is invited to define what justice means to her, in this context. The rehabilitation process, therefore, is largely guided by the needs and perspectives of the person (or persons) affected by the partner's abusive behaviour. The process also involves the partner and the wider community in addressing these actions to restore the woman's sense of safety, respect, and integrity. The restorative justice process may or may not involve either restoring intimate relationships or arranging a face-to-face meeting with a woman and a partner.

The Bridges Institute in Nova Scotia is an organization that works with men and their families to stop abuse and build respectful relationships. Bridges integrates narrative therapy and restorative justice. Tod Augusta-Scott, a social worker and the executive director of the Bridges Institute, has identified several components in the therapeutic process whereby men take responsibility for the violence they have used against their female partners:

- **Exploring values and ethics:** Exploring the values and ethics that men deem important includes identifying what men perceive as important in relationships and in how they conduct their lives: respect, trust, safety, equality, taking responsibility, and accountability.
- **Studying the abuse:** Men study their own escalation and warning signs, and learn how doing so might prevent violence from happening in the future.
- **Studying the full effects of the abuse:** The goal is to prevent abuse from happening again.
- **Healing and repair:** Men come to understand how to heal and repair the effects of their abuse on their female partners, their children, and the wider community.

How the Restorative Justice Process Unfolds

Restorative justice does not involve a predictable approach but is based, rather, on the unique circumstances of each case. All men and women begin the process by meeting first with their own social worker, largely to determine issues of safety. A woman may choose to have no further contact with her partner. Many women, however, want to see clear evidence that the men who hurt them are learning to become accountable for their actions. Even women who wish to separate from their partners often want to see these men accept responsibility for their behaviour. Many of these women still have contact with their former partners because they live in the same community, have children together, or simply do not want their former partners to hurt other women. Women who do not wish further contact but who are invested in their former partner taking responsibility can still communicate what they want through counsellors or video-conferencing. Some women choose to speak with their partners or former partners directly in the controlled setting of a counselling office. These conjoint conversations hinge on issues of safety as assessed by the woman herself and by the social workers involved. The man is also offered an opportunity to take responsibility for his behaviour by attending group, family, and conjoint sessions if all involved decide that the conditions are safe.

Reflecting on Wade's Story

1. Discuss the factors in this story that are associated with restorative justice.
2. When might using a restorative justice approach not be appropriate?
3. What measures might be taken to help ensure that a man who has used violence against a female partner remains accountable for his actions in future?

Wade's Story... A restorative justice approach

A couple damaged by the man's violence is guided by social workers in a restorative justice process to help regain dignity, equality, respect, and harmony in the relationship.

Susan and Wade have been yelling and swearing at each other in front of their children. When Wade pushed Susan, she called 911. The police arrived, charged Wade with assault, and removed him from the home. Child Protection Services became involved and insisted that Wade not return home. Wade and Susan are referred to the Bridges Institute, an organization that works with men and their families to stop abuse and build respectful relationships. Wade is mandated to attend counselling, while Susan's involvement is voluntary.

Susan and Wade each see their own social worker. With the couple's permission, the two social workers maintain contact with each other to monitor safety. The social worker who is seeing Susan adopts a therapeutic stance rather than making assumptions about her. Using a restorative justice approach, the social worker invites Susan to define what "justice" means to her. Susan defines both the effects of the abuse and what she wants from Wade and others so that she can start healing from the effects of domestic violence.

Susan reports that she loves Wade and wants to stay with him. She says that justice will be served when Wade stops his abuse and repairs the harm he has done. She wants Wade to treat her and the children with respect, and she wishes to feel safe. She would like Wade to repair the holes in the walls that he made when he lost his temper. She wants him to apologize to her parents for hurting their daughter and grandchildren. And she wants him to tell the children that inflicting violence on others is wrong.

Besides seeing a social worker on her own, Susan states that she wants to join a support group for women as well as attend counselling sessions with Wade. Susan says she wants the counsellor's support to tell Wade what the effects of the abuse have been and what she thinks he can do about repairing the damage. The social worker asks whether Susan would feel safe speaking freely with Wade in the room. Susan replies that she would feel safe. The social worker assesses the possible influence of dominant gender expectations on Susan, and considers whether Susan is prioritizing her own safety over comforting Wade. The social worker decides that Susan seems empowered and clear enough about her decision to recommend it as a possibility to the social worker who is working with Wade.

In a meeting with Wade, the social worker does not assume that Wade wants only power and control in his relationship with Susan. The worker is open to the possibility that Wade may also want mutual love, trust, respect, and safety in his family. The social worker engages Wade collaboratively by asking him to define his values and the type of relationship he wishes to have. The worker and Wade discuss values such as mutual respect, equality, safety, and responsibility. The social worker assesses whether Wade is willing to take responsibility for stopping his abuse by studying past incidents. By doing this, Wade can begin to spot the warning signs that precede his abusive outbursts and identify how he can prevent the escalation of violence by reminding himself of his values. The social worker invites Wade to consider the benefits of studying the effects of his abuse and how it might help him heal and repair those effects.

After several sessions together, Wade and his social worker determine that he is ready to take responsibility for his abusive behaviour in the next counselling session. Wade begins the process of openly studying and acknowledging his escalation toward violence. During a joint counselling session with Susan, Susan observes Wade becoming more accountable to her, and she witnesses his commitment to stop his abusive behaviour. Because she sees him taking the issue seriously, he begins to regain her trust. She decides that she wants to tell him the warning signs she notices that precede his abusive behaviour. She tells him how the abuse has affected her and what she wants him to do to address these effects. After three sessions over a five-week period, Susan reports that she feels more acknowledged, respected, and secure in Wade's commitment to repairing their relationship. The couple decide that they also want to focus on repairing the effects that Wade's abuse have had on Susan's parents. And finally, Wade decides that he wants to join a men's group to support the changes he is making.

A restorative justice approach with men who use violence against women can help men create safety, respect, and equality for women.