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Violence in gay relationships

by Bob Weinreich

Attitudes regarding violence in domestic relationships have undergone a dramatic change in the last decade. Ten years ago, a man who beat his wife would most likely have gone unnoticed or been excused by the police, the criminal justice system, the church, the neighbors, relatives, nearly everyone outside the immediate family. If the woman sought help or got any attention at all she was frequently blamed for "provoking" her husband and not playing an appropriately submissive role. Today, while much of family violence remains private and hidden, there is greater awareness that the violence men use to control their wives, girlfriends, and children stems from sexism and sex-role training, that violence in the home is criminal behavior requiring legal consequences, and that in order for change to occur, help from qualified professionals is necessary. There are now treatment programs across the nation to help men break their cycle of violence, express anger constructively, and establish relationships based on equality. This work is just beginning and has a long way to go toward ending sexism and violence against women and children. It is, however, an important beginning.

After specializing for several years in helping heterosexual men with problems in anger control and domestic violence, I am now seeing an increasing number of gay men and lesbians with similar problems. This in itself is a critically important development. Breaking the barrier of silence and refusing to continue to deny or keep secret the fact that violence is occurring in the gay and lesbian community is the first step toward ending it.

By turning our attention inward and looking honestly at ourselves and our relationships we run the risk of exposing parts of our lives which others might use against us. Eager to dispel the negative stereotypes concerning gay relationships (for example, "they don't last," or, "we all play *butch* and *femme* roles"), we are reluctant to provide any information that may taint the picture of healthy gay lifestyles. Yet as we know from all too painful personal experience, secrecy and hiding can be our worst enemies. We must speak out on both our successes and failures, our contributions and our problems; without honesty we soon become trapped in our own hiding places.

The disclosure of violence in a gay relationship is often a multi-leveled coming-out process. As with AIDS, for example, the revelation of an important and painful aspect of one's life often necessitates coming out as gay to persons one otherwise would not

choose, or without adequate preparation. In the case of violence, gay identity may become known to family members, neighbors, employers and co-workers, police, judges and probation officers, and counselors. When homophobia is present in others, or as is often the case in violent couples where self-esteem is low, it may be especially difficult to seek help. As with the majority of heterosexual men who come for anger control counseling, most lesbians and gay men arrive initially under external pressure, either from their partner who is threatening to leave, or by court order. Some couples come to counseling complaining of "communication problems" and only later will reveal the extent of violence in their relationship.

Regardless of how one arrives for therapy, it is the "coming out" or acknowledgement to oneself of one's own violent behavior that is essential for change to occur. Initial self-acceptance of responsibility for violence is often the most difficult step in the entire course of counseling. Denial and minimization of destructive behavior and blaming one's partner for "provoking" are common methods of shielding oneself from the painful reality of loss of self-control. Accepting responsibility will initially produce shame and guilt which are appropriate feelings that eventually subside as constructive alternatives to violence are learned.

Understanding the full range of violent behavior in one's love relationship is also essential for changing these behaviors. Many people think only of obvious physical acts when considering violence in an intimate relationship. In order to truly approach a nonviolent existence, I ask my clients to consider the following four types of violence and the degree to which they have participated in each:

1. **Physical Violence:** Including hitting, shoving, biting, slapping, grabbing, pushing, kicking, choking, throwing, scratching, punching, pulling hair, knocking down, use of a weapon or object against another. Any intensity of physical force to make a person do (or stop doing) something, say (or not say) something, go (or not go) somewhere against that person's will is violence.
2. **Sexual Violence:** Any forced sexual activity, that is, behavior which the partner does not fully agree to or may not freely stop or withdraw from at any time. While research has shown the prevalence of sexual abuse in heterosexual relationships (as many as 50% of domestic violence cases include sexual violence), little is known about the degree to which this occurs in lesbian and gay intimate relationships. It is important to distinguish sexual violence, or forced sexual activity, from S & M behavior and role-playing in which partners preserve freedom of choice and the right to withdraw.
3. **Destruction of Property and Pets:** Throwing objects; breaking dishes, glasses, etc.; kicking in doors; pounding fists into walls; ripping furniture; dumping or soiling possessions; destroying personal items (e.g., photos, souvenirs) that are meaningful to one's partner; neglecting, abusing or killing a pet.
4. **Psychological Violence:** Sometimes difficult to identify yet the most frequent and widespread of the four types of violence. Control over another person's thinking and behavior through humiliation and intimidation. When used intensely over a prolonged period, psychological violence may produce a "hostage syndrome" where the "captive" or abused partner becomes so emotionally dependent on the "captor" or abuser that he or she feels unable to survive without the other

person.

Violence in intimate relationships tends to be cyclical in nature. It is self-reinforcing because it does momentarily release tension. Over time the violence usually increases in frequency and intensity, sometimes resulting in severe injury and death. The cycle of violence is difficult to stop without outside help.

The high rate of alcohol and drug abuse in the gay community is related to violence between couples; however, alcohol and drugs do not "cause" the violence. While alcohol and other drugs may act to lower inhibitions, it has been shown that stopping drinking or drugs alone will not stop violence. Specialized counseling for alcohol/drug abuse is necessary when a person is unable to stop on his or her own.

Once people fully identify and accept responsibility for their violent behaviors, they are ready to immediately practice methods for preventing further instances of violence. After an assurance of safety is established in the relationship, work focuses in several key areas: learning to identify when one is feeling angry, expressing anger constructively, communicating without intimidating, assertiveness, reducing and managing stress, and problem-solving skills.

The value of anger as a motivating force is well known to lesbians and gay men. It is with anger that we challenge the injustices, the homophobia and the discrimination we have been subjected to. On a personal level, anger can also be an important aspect of a healthy gay identity. Turning anger outward is often an essential personality development for lesbians and gay men.

Recognizing and expressing anger constructively is, however, a difficult process for most people. As children, most of us learn that it was not OK to feel, much less express, anger. We learned a particular set of rules for handling anger (based) on our gender and the behavior of our parents and available role-models.

Even in gay relationships, sexism may contribute to problems with anger and violence. Gay men who adhere to a rigid definition of masculinity may feel threatened, defensive and angered when confronted by emotion and behaviors in others or themselves which they view as weak or "unmanly." Anger is often a mask for other emotions found difficult to express, such as hurt or sadness. Suppressing these feelings can lead to a build-up of tension and frustration resulting in an explosive outburst and a repetition of the cycle of violence. Some lesbians who reject a stereotyped female role may adopt negative aspects of the masculine model, including the use of violence in their intimate relationships. Whether lesbian, gay male, or heterosexual, violence in relationships always signifies an unhealthy dependency between partners and problems in self-esteem. Persons who use violence inevitably feel badly about themselves and their destructive attempts at controlling a source of love (their partner) which they fear losing.

Counseling, in addition to finding non-violent methods of expressing anger, builds self-esteem and a positive identity so that the individual is not dependent on his or her partner for feeling good about him/herself. As this self-confidence increases, the need to control one's partner is reduced, and produces greater acceptance and appreciation of differences in the relationship. Self-confidence will also produce the increased closeness that comes with building trust through risking one's emotions and not each other's safety. Alternatively, greater distance and separation may result if the differences prove to be irreconcilable. In either case partners learn to recognize and reject the cycle of violence and choose healthier patterns of communication, a benefit for all personal relationships, and our community as well.

Bob Weinreich is a psychologist in practice at the Men's Resource Center.

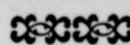


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