

## Practitioner Perspective

# Working with Couples in Abusive Relationships: Ethical Considerations

By Brendan O'Shaughnessy



*Domestic violence, incorporating physical and emotional abuse, extends into all corners of society. Lockdown has resulted in a surge of people seeking support from domestic violence services. Working within an ethical framework can help therapists navigate this difficult and complex issue*

## Introduction

Covid-19 lockdown has brought many hardships. Most of us have been affected to some degree by the shutting down of the world – be it facing into endless days of loneliness, the loss of jobs and/or businesses and subsequent financial hardship, an exacerbation of mental health problems, or losing a loved one. To stem the spread of Covid-19 we were told to stay home in order to stay safe. However, for those in abusive relationships, staying home with an abusive partner during lockdown has brought a heightened layer of fear and uncertainty. This

article will examine some of the possible dilemmas that may arise when counselling clients in abusive relationships and provide an ethical framework to work within.

Back in March 2020, CEO of Women's Aid Ireland, Sarah Benson, released the following statement in a press release: "It's true that for many of us home is a place of safety in a time of uncertainty. But for thousands of women and children across Ireland, home is a place of violence and fear. It is important to remember that workplaces and schools often offer sanctuary for victims of domestic violence.

Job losses, remote working, self-isolation, and other measures are already impacting on victims. The reality that the abuser may also be at home more, or all the time, is a very frightening one. Many women and children will spend the next few weeks in suffocating circumstances with their abusers because of the measures to combat Covid-19. There are women trapped inside with their abusers who are using this opportunity to further his control."

At the time of Benson's statement, none of us could have known that the lockdown would continue to varying degrees for at least a year. Her stark warning was echoed in June 2020 when Men's Aid Ireland revealed their helpline had received over 1,000 contacts from men experiencing domestic abuse since the start of the pandemic (Men's Aid, 2020).

The aim of this article is to ask you to consider your attitude when working with couples presenting with domestic violence from an ethical viewpoint. To help with this, I would like to suggest using the five fundamental principles that underpin ethical behaviour: Beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and fidelity (Corey, 1996).

## Beneficence

"Beneficence implies accepting responsibility for promoting what is good for others. In counselling relationships, it refers to doing what enhances the client's well-being. When clients enter a therapeutic venture, they do so with the expectation that they will benefit from the service," (Corey, 1996, p. 54).

Power and control are at the heart of abusive relationships. While there are several definitions of domestic violence referred to within the context of Irish research, a 1997 Government Task Force established to formulate recommendations for future policy relating to the issue defined it as: “The use of physical or emotional force or threat of physical force, including sexual violence, in close adult relationships. This includes violence perpetrated by spouse, partner, son, daughter or any other person who is a close blood relation to the victim,” (Report of the Task Force on Domestic Violence 1997, p. 27).

For the perpetrator of the abuse, the expectation of counselling is that this power will be supported. For the victim of the abuse, the expectation is that they will benefit from the service by seeing an end to their suffering. A clear issue here is that these goals are not compatible. If the power and control continue, so does the abuse, and where does that leave the therapist?

In accepting the responsibility for promoting what is good for others, we may need to consider overriding the expectations of the client and consider the extent of harm that can be caused by not doing so. We need to balance the clients' well-being with their safety. In abusive relationships the harm that can be done to victims and their children is substantial. Therefore, I would suggest that the victim's safety is the key issue rather than the client's expectations of therapy. The key is getting the balance right as shown in Figure 1.

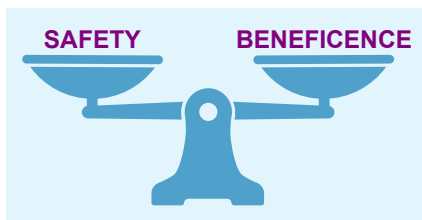


Figure 1: The Balance of Safety and Beneficence

### Nonmaleficence

The principle of nonmaleficence holds that we are obligated to not inflict harm on others. It is often viewed within the context of ‘above all, do no harm’, and is considered by some to be the most critical of all the principles, although theoretically they are all of equal weight, (Kitchener, 2016).

One of the issues with nonmaleficence is not appreciating the unintended consequences of potential benefits. By overrating the positive outcomes of interventions and understating the negatives consequences, we run the risk of serious harm or death to the victim of domestic violence and/or their children.

Abusive partners are manipulative and may use therapy to reinforce the concept that the victim is the cause of issues in the relationship. As Hennessy (2012) points out: “It is difficult to believe that the skilled offender could be so calculating and cunning” (p. 105). Perpetrators will often tell of their difficult childhood and how their partners do not understand or help them enough to overcome their past. By being drawn into this narrative, we run the risk of our empathy for their childhood distress being misinterpreted as excusing their current behaviour before we have a chance to challenge it. Similarly, the extent of the abuse can be minimised by the perpetrator as part of the denial of the victim's experience and by the victim through shame, especially of sexual coercion. As a result, we may miss the seriousness of the abuse inherent in counselling couples in an abusive relationship.

The key is weighing potential harm against potential benefits to ensure ‘no harm’ is caused to the client. To do so, we need to be alert to the presence of abuse in relationships and explore the extent of it. When aware of its presence, it is imperative to assess whether further therapy

will cause more danger to the victim in the relationship.

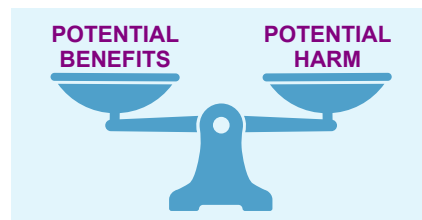


Figure 2: The Balance of Nonmaleficence

### Autonomy

Autonomy is defined as independence or self-directed freedom. According to Houser and Thoma (2013): “There are two elements that constitute autonomy: Freedom to choose a course of action and competence to make an informed choice,” (p. 68). Counsellors and psychotherapists are responsible for working in ways that promote their clients' control over their lives, whilst also respecting their clients' ability to make decisions and change with regards to their personal beliefs and values.

What if the victim wants to stay in an abusive relationship? Should we respect this decision and support the relationship? Victims of domestic abuse have often endured years of brainwashing and believe if they can only try harder, they can save their partners and their relationship. According to Hennessy (2012): “The effects of intimate brainwashing are far more profound. The intimate and detailed knowledge that the abuser gathers from the target woman makes the intensity of his influence far more damaging for the woman than if she was being brainwashed by someone who did not know her intimately,” (p.39).

As a therapist, you may be invited to help in this process. How can we help the victim stop upsetting the perpetrator? Of course, the question is not asked as clearly as this, but the underlying seductiveness of being asked to fix an abusive relationship can feed into our power needs as

therapists. Questions we can ask ourselves to encourage reflection on this dynamic are: 'Whose needs are being met by my interventions?'; 'what are the power imbalances in the clients' relationship?'; and 'what are my needs to rescue and save?' The key is to encourage a balance between the client's autonomy and the counsellor's needs. Is my need to help a client in an abusive relationship likely to make the client more or less safe? If the answer is less safe, it brings up an ethical question for us to address.

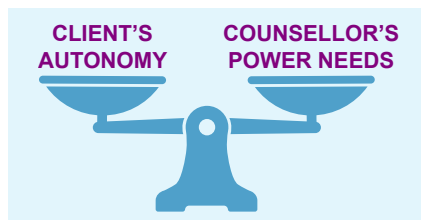


Figure 3: The Balance of Autonomy

### Justice

Justice within a counselling context is defined as the fair and impartial treatment of all clients.

"It directs attention to considering conscientiously any legal requirements and obligations, and remaining alert to potential conflicts between legal and ethical obligations... A commitment to fairness requires the ability to appreciate differences between people and to be committed to equality of opportunity and avoiding discrimination against people or groups contrary to their legitimate personal or social characteristics," (BACP, 2018).

The American Counselling Association is more specific about equal treatment of clients, stating: "Justice does not mean treating all individuals the same. If an individual is to be treated differently, the counsellor needs to be able to offer a rationale that explains the necessity and appropriateness of treating the individual differently," (as cited in Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016, p.2).

Ethical dilemmas that can arise in abusive relationships concerning the principle of justice include: 'Can I really treat a victim and their perpetrator equally?'; and 'If I do treat them differently, can I justify it and, if so, how?' Putting the victim's safety first to ensure we do no further harm would seem to be a key consideration in this dilemma. Indeed, it may be the *only* consideration. Given the volatility of abusive relationships and the increase in violence when the perpetrator's power and control are challenged, we would do well to tread carefully. As Hennessy (2012) highlights: "As soon as women begin to break the secret of their abuse, the risk to them increases" (p. 12). In this case, the potential for death or serious injury is justification for treating the victim and perpetrator differently.



Figure 4: The Balance of Justice

### Fidelity

The notion of fidelity involves the counsellor committing themselves to working with their clients to the best of their ability, and not promising beyond that or giving less than their best to help clients to help themselves. Corey (1996) states: "Fidelity refers to making honest promises and faithfully honouring these commitments to the clients. This involves a counsellor's willingness to do what is necessary to create a trusting and therapeutic climate in which people can search for their own solutions. This principle involves being careful not to deceive or exploit clients," (p. 55).

Can we really hold out hope for change when the relationship is built on power and control? From

my personal experience of working in this area, the prospect of perpetrators giving up the power and control that they have worked so hard to gain is a difficult ask. Maybe with intensive individual work this might be possible, but is this the work of couple counselling? Therefore, we should consider carefully before committing to working with couples in abusive relationships.

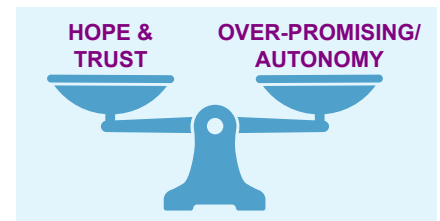


Figure 5: The Balance of Fidelity

### As therapists, what can we do?

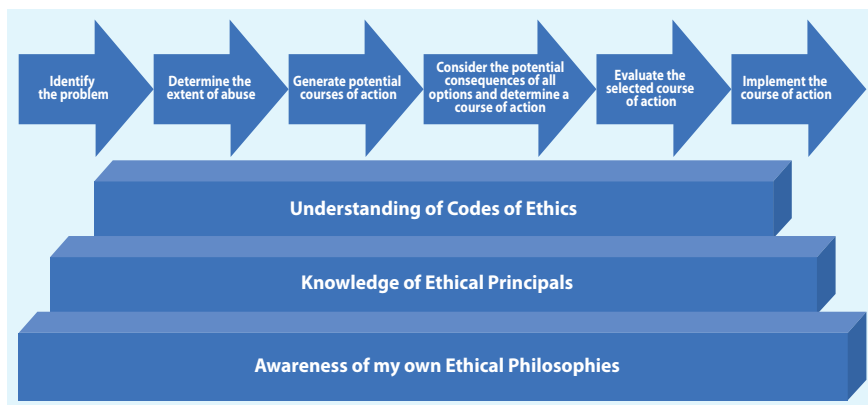
Having outlined above some of the dilemmas and dangers that can arise when counselling clients presenting with domestic violence, the obvious question is 'What can we do to ensure an ethical decision-making process when working with couples in abusive relationships?' To help with this reflection, I would like to propose an ethical decision making process for couples in abusive relationships (Figure 6).

#### 1. Identify the problem

Ensure you explore the possibility of abuse in relationships and do not ignore warning signs. It may be useful to have a specific question on your intake sheet to ask couples if there have been past incidents of violence and or abuse.

#### 2. Determine the nature and extent of the abuse

This may necessitate individual session(s) with each partner. It may also be useful to have a questionnaire to assess the extent of the power imbalance/abuse. When Where, What, How of the abuse can be an insight for the



**Figure 6:** Ethical Decision Making Process for Couples in Abusive Relationships

client as well as the counsellor.

### 3. Generate potential courses of action

Ask yourself ‘Can I work with this couple?’ If not, can I state that I will not work with them as a couple as this would be inappropriate and unethical for myself? If yes, can I treat them equally?

### 4. Consider the potential consequences of all options and determine a course of action

If I do work with them, am I risking making the situation worse? If I choose not to work with them, do I refer them individually for support?

### 5. Evaluate the selected course of action

Will any of these actions put the victim in more danger?

### 6. Implement the course of action

Strengthen your resolve to allow you to carry out your plan. Just because

it is the right decision does not mean it will be easy to implement; taking the appropriate action in an ethical dilemma is often difficult. Having taken the time to reflect, implement your actions from a place of strength.

Crucially, the ‘Awareness’, ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Understanding’ bars in Figure 6 must underpin all actions we take. Without these we are, at best, naïve, and at worst, dangerous. As with all ethical issues, it is our responsibility to educate ourselves before acting. Of note, the IACP has introduced an ethical advisor pilot service that is currently available to members as an additional member benefit. For further information email: [ethicaladvisor@iacp.ie](mailto:ethicaladvisor@iacp.ie)

### Conclusion

There is a part of me that believes Covid-19 lockdowns have provided couples and families with the time and space to reassess what is important in life and have been

an enriching experience; the opportunity to live life differently and determine how we would like to do so in the future is a rare one. My hope is that many couples will take this opportunity and be closer and happier as a result. Unfortunately, with regards to abusive relationships, which are based on power and control, this will not be the case.

When we as therapists are confronted with domestic violence in couples presenting to us, I hope that going through this process of reflection on your attitude to domestic abuse and its ethical implications will give you a solid basis from which to work. From that foundation, you will be able to communicate confidently the seriousness of the situation to couples who present in future with this issue. ☺

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Brendan O’Shaughnessy is an IACP-accredited counsellor/ psychotherapist and supervisor working in private practice. He worked part-time with the Cork Marriage Counselling Centre for 28 years and has a higher diploma in Counselling from UCC. Brendan has been on the board of various charities, including the National Domestic Violence Agency, and can be contacted at [brendanoshaughnessy@hotmail.com](mailto:brendanoshaughnessy@hotmail.com)

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