

SPEAQ

Services and Practitioners for the Elimination of Abuse Queensland
Working with Men and their Families to End Domestic and Family Violence

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Concerns about the Anger Management program offered by Transformations Programs Australia

Overview

Transformations Programs Australia is offering a 3 session, 4.5 hour program called “Anger Management and Conflict Resolution”, commencing 7th July 2016 at Surfers Paradise. The program is being marketed as suitable for people on violence-related charges, as well as to respondents in domestic violence orders, and domestic violence offenders. It is claimed to be addressing a service gap. Its structure and content draw heavily on interventions for alcohol and other drug use and mental health issues. While these two issues are often co-occurring with domestic violence, such interventions do not effectively address domestic violence by themselves and cannot simply be transferred for use in preventing domestic violence perpetration. This paper addresses many serious concerns identified by SPEAQ members in relation to its use with domestic violence respondents and offenders. We make no comment in relation to its use for other forms of violence.

Brief Interventions

Brief program interventions for domestic violence are an untested model – we have not identified similar interventions anywhere else in Australia or internationally. Research and clinical experience show that domestic and family violence behaviour change takes a significant commitment over time, with specialised professional support over that period. Typical program length is from 3 months to 2 years. Even if the intention behind this program is to be a first step in a longer process, there are serious safety issues that need to be managed in the provision of any domestic violence intervention program which this program fails to acknowledge or address.

If brief interventions were to be introduced to address a perceived gap in services for domestic violence, an ethical and professional response would be based firstly on principles of victim safety and perpetrator accountability; informed by existing knowledge about effective interventions to address domestic violence and compliant with relevant state and national standards. This includes being connected with existing services as part of an integrated response and delivered by appropriately qualified facilitators. If indeed a brief intervention could be designed that satisfied all of these criteria, it should be carried out initially as a properly evaluated trial. The Transformations program meets none of these criteria!

Standards

For nearly 20 years, Queensland has had Professional Practice Standards designed to guide safe and effective professional practice in working with men who perpetrate Domestic and family violence. The program appears to ignore the current Professional Practice Principles¹ and Standards² in every key area: Staff qualifications and experience; program principles, content and structure; support for partners; safety and risk assessment; program accountability; integration with systems. Further, there appears nothing in the way this program is framed which aligns with the National Outcome Standards for Perpetrator Interventions³.

Anger Management inappropriate to address Power and Control

Domestic violence is about the misuse of power – it is not primarily an anger issue. A recent State of Knowledge paper from Australia’s National Research Centre for Women’s Safety states “It is widely accepted in the literature that anger management is ineffective and unsuitable as a sole intervention for men who use family/ domestic violence”⁴. Anger management does nothing to address the sense of entitlement, justifications, distorted perceptions, and belief systems that underlie coercive control, a feature of much domestic violence which includes a range of abusive and controlling behaviours.

The complete absence of any reference to power and control in any available documentation relating to this program shows a major flaw in its conceptualisation for use in responding to domestic violence, and renders it unsuitable for addressing domestic violence perpetration. Many power-based behaviours are enacted without the context of anger - such as financial control, enacting male privilege, sexual coercion and sexual abuse of women within relationships - so anger management will have no impact on these behaviours. In other situations, anger is an effective tool in exercising power over and control of another person, and until the desire for control is addressed, attempts to resolve apparent anger problems will fail.

Specialist domestic violence intervention programs use elements of an anger management approach only when embedded as a relatively small component in programs which address underlying beliefs and attitudes, and the use of power and control, among many other things.

Of further concern is that no recognition is given to the fact that some respondents in domestic violence matters may be women who have used violence as a form of ‘violent resistance’ to the experience of having been subjected to violence and controlling behaviour, sometimes over a long period of time. Their intervention needs are very different again – yet this program appears to operate in complete ignorance of this fact.

¹ Professional Practice Principles: Working with men who perpetrate domestic and family violence. Qld Department of Communities, 2007.

² Professional Practice Standards: Working with men who perpetrate domestic and family violence. Qld Department of Communities, 2007

³ National Outcome Standards for Perpetrator Interventions, Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services), 2015.

⁴ Perpetrator interventions in Australia: State of knowledge paper. Mackay et al, ANROWS, 2015.

Risk Assessment and Risk Management

Those who perpetrate domestic violence, predominantly men, include many who are at elevated or high risk of further violence of several forms: further violence towards partners and other family members; violence that impacts directly or indirectly on children; suicidality, and a small but very dangerous number who may have homicidal intent. The absence of individual assessments in this program ensures that these risks cannot be effectively monitored, let alone managed.

Further, interventions such as this are not risk-neutral. Poorly conceived and poorly targeted interventions can increase any of the above risks. The conflict resolution and communication components of this program are a case in point. They are designed without any acknowledgement of the impacts of coercive control dynamics and the potential for misuse by participants with an unaddressed control agenda. These comments are based on the clinical experience frequently reported by domestic violence practitioners, with clients who have had difficulties arising from non-dv-specialist interventions.

False hope and danger for partners, eroding trust in the service system

Poorly conceived programs such as this provide false hope for victims who need their partners to make real and sustained life changes – in fact it can endanger them because with the hope or appearance of change, abused partners often become emboldened to speak up about long-suppressed issues, or alter established safety plans. Without the support and guidance of a victim advocate, and without the perpetrator having undergone a robust change process, the risk of further violence is heightened because the person cannot yet be relied upon to act safely and respectfully.

Rather than being a doorway to more substantial interventions, when participants attend a brief intervention and find that it doesn't effectively help them change, their faith in interventions of any kind can be eroded and they will be much less likely to seek help in the future.

Further, when abused partners experience further abuse as a result of poorly designed interventions such as this, they may lose faith in the domestic violence service system as a whole, and lose trust in the safety supports available to them. This reinforces barriers to access to the service system.

In some quarters, negative perceptions about domestic violence perpetrator interventions generally still exist, and work against the much needed expansion of this part of the service sector. Inappropriate and potentially dangerous interventions such as this are not the solution to a service gap, and potentially tarnish the reputation of perpetrator interventions generally, setting back the development of the sector.

Safety and Accountability

It is naïve to think that offering brief psychoeducation about anger management and conflict resolution will create safety for those affected by domestic and family violence. Suggesting that such a brief and inappropriate program can be used as the basis for altering domestic violence order conditions or sentencing provisions gives unrealistic expectations to those who have committed the violence, but more importantly shows no regard for the safety

needs of those affected by the violence. A completion certificate is no guarantee of behaviour change, even for intervention programs of much longer duration. Promotional material along with the content of the article that appeared in the Sunday Mail recently⁵ suggest that the possibility for mitigation of adverse court rulings for a respondent/offender is a key piece of the marketing strategy for this program.

Order conditions and sentencing provisions are not just impositions on the domestic violence respondent /offender, they are provisions for increasing the safety of those impacted by the violence. This program therefore appears to be offered in a way that directly contradicts the first of the National Outcome Standards for Perpetrator Interventions: “Women and their children’s safety is the core priority of all perpetrator interventions”. It also undermines one of the objects of the Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012 (the Act) – to increase the safety of those affected by the violence⁶.

We note the inclusion of a discussion about “Defences available” within the section of the program dealing with legal issues, along with the high profile of lawyers as course sponsors and co-presenters. This raises the question as to whether this program is geared to supporting domestic violence respondents’/offenders’ desire to optimise legal outcomes in their favour - i.e. as far as possible to avoid consequences for their actions. While every person is entitled to legal advice and representation, doing so outside the context of an integrated service response and without being informed by key principles of domestic violence prevention means it is likely to work counter to the aim of accountability for those who are perpetrating domestic violence, and will undermine efforts to secure safety for those subjected to the violence and abuse – largely women and children. We note that the word ‘accountability’ appears nowhere in the available documentation promoting or describing the program. Again, this program appears to be offered in a way that is counter to the principle of perpetrator accountability which is a key feature of Qld and national standards, the Act, and the sixth outcome of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children⁷.

Inappropriate marketing - trivialisation and the promotion of misconceptions

Domestic violence is a very serious issue, yet this program’s use of a humorous image from the movie “Anger Management” trivialises the issue – and implies that anger and conflict between equals – two men – is in some way representative of domestic violence which is largely from men to women and where there may be huge differences in power. People suffer deeply, live in fear, are physically injured, and lives are destroyed by domestic violence – 23 people die in Qld on average each year, the great majority of whom are women and children. A program that is promoted and delivered without regard for this reality is trivialising this deep social concern.

Two commonly held misconceptions about domestic violence are: 1. that it is simply an anger issue, and 2. that it is merely a form of conflict. By offering this program which is entirely framed around and named with these two ideas, as a domestic violence

⁵ “Program helps men manage anger” Sunday Mail, p24, 26/6/2016.

⁶ Qld Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012, s3(1), p 14.

⁷ National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010 - 2022, Council of Australian Governments, 2011.

intervention, it reinforces these misconceptions and undermines work on community education about domestic violence.

Domestic Violence Reform

The “Not Now Not Ever” report⁸ from the recent Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, affirms many of the points made above. In respect of programs, it highlights the importance of safety and accountability protocols; professional practice standards; the need for perpetrator intervention programs to be delivered in conjunction with an integrated response; and the need to change community attitudes and misconceptions. In failing to respond to so many of these points, the Transformations Anger Management and Conflict Resolution program is operating at odds with the Qld reform agenda for domestic violence prevention. It should not be marketed or used for this purpose. In light of the above, the program should be actively screening out domestic violence respondents and offenders.

Summary

The Transformations Anger Management and Conflict Resolution program is being promoted and used in a way that undermines the key principles of efforts by both Qld and federal governments to reduce domestic and family violence – efforts which are being backed by investments of hundreds millions of dollars and tens of thousands of hours of work; numerous studies, enquiries, taskforces, reports; and efforts of all kinds across government, business and community. It reinforces myths and misperceptions prevalent in the community, which so many people are working to dismantle. As a domestic violence intervention, it is ill-informed and ill-considered, should cease being used for this purpose, and should actively screen out domestic violence respondents and offenders.

Paul Monsour, SPEAQ Secretary
on behalf of the SPEAQ network
July 2016

Persons seeking assistance in dealing with domestic violence should contact DVConnect Mensline (1800 600 636), Womensline (1800 811 811) or their regional domestic violence prevention service for appropriate referrals.

⁸ Not now, not ever: putting an end to domestic and family violence in Queensland, Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, 2015.

Who is SPEAQ?

SPEAQ (Services and Practitioners for the Elimination of Abuse Qld) is a network of practitioners and services who work with men who have perpetrated domestic and family violence. The network has been operating in Queensland for over 20 years, with a permanent part-time secretariat established in 2009.

We have been liaising with the Qld Government for a number of years in relation to Intervention Programs (also known as Men's Domestic Violence Behaviour Change Programs), and played a key role in the development of the Department of Communities' Professional Practice Standards for Working with Men who Perpetrate D&FV, published in 2007.

We have made a number of submissions to the Qld government on domestic violence matters over the last few years, in response to the following:

- Consultation Paper - Queensland Whole of Government Strategy to Target Domestic and Family Violence (2008);
- Review of the Qld Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 1989 (2010);
- Consultation Draft - Domestic and Family Violence Protection Bill 2011 (2011).
- Inquiry on strategies to prevent and reduce criminal activity in Queensland (2014)
- Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence (2014)
- Review of the Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012 (2016)

Membership of the network currently includes most of the services currently funded by the Department of Communities to provide men's Domestic Violence Intervention Programs in Qld. We also welcome the participation of a number of other individuals and organisations with an interest in the field. We are the only collective voice representing practitioners and services in this field in Qld. The SPEAQ secretariat is funded solely from membership subscriptions and the proceeds of annual professional development events, and is supported by a large component of voluntary unpaid time.