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Position Statement

Couple's counseling or marriage counseling is never an appropriate strategy to address abusive behavior; especially domestic violence. A Certified Batterers Intervention Program (BIP) such as Nonviolent Alternatives is the appropriate intervention.

As unbelievable as it may seem, in the State of Indiana, there is no requirement for Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFT) to have education, training, or experience in domestic violence. Thus, many couples counselors have absolutely no training or knowledge in this area. If they did have proper training, they would never agree to couple counseling without first screening each partner privately for domestic abuse.

Resolving the kind of conflicts between people for which couple counseling is intended will not stop one person from abusing the other. Conflict is a pretext for abuse, not a cause of it. While conflict happens between people, abuse is something one person does to another, and abusers seldom change their behavior in response to changes made by their victims.

Couple counseling (like family therapy and mediation) is often both dangerous and ineffective in domestic violence cases, and should be avoided. Many abusers skillfully use the treatment process to manipulate their partners, avoid having to change their own behavior, and keep counselors from seeing them accurately.

No victim should have to attend therapy with someone who has criminally abused them, just because that person is their partner. It's unfair to ask a victim to "meet her partner halfway" by giving up her legitimate needs or changing her own behavior in return for an end to violence. When clinicians take this approach, victims feel re-victimized.

In couples counseling, victims often take responsibility for instigating the violence or participating in activities that supposedly precipitate the violence. They do it because couples counselors often assume a family-systems interpretation of abuse in which the victim acts to provoke the anger. One of the first steps then is to identify a hierarchy of provocations, which in the case of wife abuse includes annoying behaviors of the wife or lover. Such an assumption wrongly implies that the wife is an accomplice in the abuse, and should in some way change her behavior in order to reduce the abuse. Accountability is shifted from the batterer's criminal behavior to the victim thus sending or reinforcing messages that the victim shares responsibility for the violence, and the batterer is justified in the violence.

Couples counseling depends upon an open dialogue between partners. It cannot work without the presence of openness, flexibility, and the willingness to listen to one another. These traits are not possible when one person is emotionally or physically abusive to another. People who are being hit, intimidated, or controlled through threats or other coercive means by their partners are not free to engage in an open dialogue. If placed in couples counseling, a person would be encouraged to speak openly about their partner's behavior and address problems in the relationship in the presence of an abusive partner. People who do so are often at risk of retaliatory tactics from the abuser, thereby jeopardizing their safety.

The justice system should never order or encourage couples counseling in cases where there is an indication that a party is committing physical abuse or employing non-physical coercive or controlling tactics. If the system were to do so, it could be placing victims at risk of experiencing additional abuse and/or control.

Suggestions for couple's counselors:

- 1) Never agree to couple counseling without making a thorough assessment that includes a private interview with each partner in which you screen for domestic abuse. Do not ask about it in a joint session!
- 2) Do not offer couple counseling if there is ongoing violence or intimidation.
- 3) Make sure the victim understands that couple counseling can endanger her and keep her blaming herself for her partner's behavior.
- 4) Do not mention her disclosure to her partner unless he brings it up. Find some other basis for refusing couple counseling.
- 5) If both partners disclose past domestic violence (many months or years ago, not just a few weeks ago), it is still better to refuse to see them together if:
 - a) There is an ongoing custody or visitation case.
 - b) There is an active order of protection or the victim is still afraid of their partner.
 - c) The abusive person has ever committed felony-level assaults on their partner.
 - d) You see evidence that the abusive person does not take full responsibility – going way beyond lip service – for his behavior.

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