



Tip Sheet 7

Responding to the perpetrators of Domestic and Family Violence

How should churches respond to perpetrators of domestic and family violence? While our first duty is to care and protect the victim, churches also have a responsibility to address perpetrators. Perpetrators are likely to have been abused themselves in the past, or to have had a difficult family background. This does not excuse their behaviour- but can assist those who are helping them to understand the intergenerational nature of abuse.

1. Is change possible?

Throughout the literature on this topic and within community agencies, there is a consensus that it is possible to prevent domestic violence.

According to a 2002 WHO (World Health Organisation) Report;

“Violence can be prevented, and its impact reduced, in the same way that public health efforts have prevented and reduced pregnancy-related complications, workplace injuries, infectious diseases, and illness resulting from contaminated food and water in many parts of the world.” (WHO, 2002, ch.1, p.3).

2. Change is difficult.

However, change is a difficult process and research reports that 1 in 3 men who pledge to change (and even go on to complete change programs) - continue to be perpetrators of domestic and family violence. Indeed, we see that making promises to reform is part of the domestic violence cycle for perpetrators (see Tip Sheet 6).

Ironically, perpetrators usually recognise as a general principle that violence is ‘wrong’ though they tend to justify it to themselves when they practise it in their own home. For perpetrators, domestic and family violence is a pattern of behaviour. It is a way to control their environment and the people around them. Behaviour change is hard. Patterns of violence and control will take time and professional help to address.

3. The need for wise discernment.

Given this information, it is imperative that ministers, leaders and friends of perpetrators be perceptive and wise. Jesus commands us to be discerning in Matthew 10:16.

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Thus, we need to be aware that perpetrators are often very good at appearing as though they are charming and respectable. They may look like sheep, but actually be wolves. They will often target leaders, or other key people in a congregation to win them over and to validate their image as a “model Christian”.

As wise Christians then, we need to be astute and look for genuine signs of repentance.



4. Is there genuine repentance?

When considering repentance, knowledge of the domestic violence cycle is paramount. (See Tip Sheet 6.) The cycle of violence has stages where the perpetrator is sorry for his actions (remorse and pursuit phase) and makes promises never to repeat past behaviour. Therefore, those helping perpetrators must be aware of these stages, as the perpetrator may be genuinely sorry in the moment, but regress towards violence at a latter stage in the cycle. That is not to say that there can't be genuine repentance and change, but there needs to be awareness and discernment about what this genuine change looks like in practice.

Where there is no repentance, (or where repentance does not seem genuine) please refer to usual church discipline strategies, whilst continuing to support and uphold the safety of the victim and their family.

5. Signs of change.

As Christians we are in the "change" business. We desire change – we know that change is possible with the help of the Holy Spirit. As Ephesians 4:22-24 teaches us;

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

But we are also taught through the scriptures not just to rely on people's words but to look to their actions. As we see in 1 John 3:18;

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

And in Titus 1;16;

They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him.

So, when working with perpetrators it is imperative to look past words, and to seek change and action.

6. What changes in actions should we look for?

- A repentant and broken heart, one that is willing to admit sin and seek forgiveness.
- Acknowledgment of their sin, and the specific damage they have caused their partners and children.
- Taking responsibility and not blaming the victim or others for choosing to use violence or abuse.
- Not making excuses for behaviour or blaming other factors such as loss of employment or financial pressures etc.
- Communicating openly and honestly about their behaviour.
- Seeing the victim as a person.
- Supporting their partner's goals and aspirations.
- Respecting their partner's right to their own feelings, friends, activities and opinions.
- Valuing their partner's opinions.
- Not pressuring their partner to make decisions quickly, or to try and get back together quickly.
- A willingness to accept support in order to change and grow - both from within the church and outside it (e.g. a men's program or DV support group).
- A willingness to be questioned about their behaviour, and to be accountable to others.
- Sustained effort over time to continue practicing non – controlling behaviour and actions.



The role of shame

No one wants to admit to being controlling and violent. Both perpetrators (and sometimes victims - when caught in the cycle - see Tip Sheet 6) want to pretend it's not happening. Over time, many families and victims become skilled at hiding the perpetrator's violence in order to avoid shame.

This is especially true in churches where people wish to appear "godly" and "Christian". Shame often stops perpetrators and victims from coming forward. But as Christians, it is important that we realise our God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins (1 John 1:7-9).

- It is important that repentant perpetrators know that forgiveness is offered, that our God is gracious and that His church is willing to support change.

A note on Men's groups and Domestic Violence programs

While the church should support perpetrators attending groups to facilitate change -It is important to note that attendance at a DV program or men's *group does not guarantee the safety of his partner or children*. A safety plan should be developed by a trained counsellor and this should be adhered to by the perpetrator. The victim needs ongoing support both from a counsellor and from those within the church.

Responding to the Perpetrator must do three things;

1. Keep the victim safe
2. Hold the perpetrator accountable and support him **where repentance is genuine**.
3. Hold the truth of the Bible and the gospel as the compass (for further info see Tip Sheet 1).

If you are aware of perpetrators or victims in your congregation this behaviour must be reported to the CPU (**Conduct Protocol Unit of the Presbyterian Church of NSW**).

Conduct Protocol Unit (CPU), Presbyterian Church of NSW

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www.breakingthesilence.org.au

Should you be aware of perpetrators that require support please see the following contacts. The Presbyterian Church of NSW also has counselling services. For assistance and Christian counselling please contact;

Jericho Road

Justine Jenner

Phone: **1800 818 133**

Email: jjenner@jerichoroad.org.au

<https://jerichoroad.org.au/counselling>



Further contacts:

Mensline

A 24-hour counselling service that assists with domestic and family violence.
Visit the website at <https://mensline.org.au> or call **1300 789 978**

No to Violence: Mens Referral Service

Telephone counselling information and referrals.
Phone: **1300 766 491**
<https://www.ntv.org.au>

Baptist Care

Offers counselling for men in and around Sydney.
For more information call **1300 275 227**

Relationships Australia

Offers courses to reduce violence
Phone: **1300 364 277**

Reach out

Help for young men struggling with violence.
Reachout website: <https://au.reachout.com/tough-times/abuse-and-violence>

N.B. Throughout this tip sheet we refer to the perpetrators as men. We do this for simplicity and because the majority of victims are women, and the majority of perpetrators are men. However, we acknowledge that perpetrators can be women and victims can be men.