

The Barriers Model

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The Barriers Model of psychological treatment for survivors of domestic violence places the locus of analysis on society and context rather than on the individual. It recognizes that symptoms present in clients who are victims of domestic violence are often the result of victims colliding with socially imposed barriers to safety and security rather than of individually rooted pathology.

The Barriers Model proposes three layers of barriers to the psychological well-being of a survivor of domestic violence. These barriers must be addressed in order, with barriers in the first layer (the environment) being addressed first, in order to provide for the victim's immediate safety needs. After the first layer of barriers has been resolved, the second layer (socialization) and third layer (psychological consequences) may be addressed by the therapist. Therapy focused around the second and third layers before addressing the first layer may be ineffective and could contribute to a victim's isolation and self-blame.

Layer 1: Barriers in the Environment

- Information/Misinformation
 - Because of the social isolation battered women experience:
 - They often have little access to information about the dynamics of abuse, and
 - Don't know where they can go to find community resources and legal options.
- Abuser
 - Trained therapists often become so focused on what is going on in the victim's psyche that they often forget tangible, even physical barriers to her leaving.
 - Therapists need to explore what tactics the abusive partner has employed to keep the victim from leaving.
- Money
 - Therapists need to understand the financial means their clients have, to actually make a transition to independence from the abuser, and be familiar with community resources to which they can link clients for financial assistance.
- Transportation
 - Many victims lack transportation to get to safe shelter, and subsequently to appointments for themselves and their children (e.g. medical, legal, looking for housing, welfare).
- Police Assistance
 - For any battered woman, involving outsiders, especially powerful entities like the police, is a risky venture. Some questions to ask before involving the police are:
 - What policies do the police have in your community regarding arrest?
 - Will the victim be required to cooperate with criminal prosecution to get the abuser arrested?
 - Will anyone be there to explain what that means to the victim and assist her through the difficult prosecution process?
 - Do police enforce violation of protection orders with arrest?
- Criminal Justice System
 - Therapists need to explore what the likely response is from prosecutors, pretrial evaluators, judges and probation officers in their own cities.
- Attorneys
 - Therapists need to know how clients can retain affordable legal counsel in their community and help clients access these services.

- Religious Counseling/Guidance
 - Many victims hear that the abuse is their fault, God's will and within their power and control if they are only more obedient partners.
 - Therapists working with battered women who require a spiritual component to their process are encourage to locate religious guidance that will prioritize safety first.
- Mental Health System
 - The inaccessibility of long-term therapy is a barrier to both safety and recovery.
- Physical and Cultural Accessibility to Shelters/Services
 - Accessibility, while potentially a barrier to all victims, is a larger concern for marginalized groups.
 - Discrimination
 - Many battered women are being arrested for self-defense.
 - Language
 - Therapists working with clients who face language barriers need to become familiar with translator resources and the dynamics of using them in these cases.
 - Physical barriers
 - Culture
 - Most domestic violence programs center around counseling (usually with a person from the majority culture), support groups (where the battered woman of color may be the only person of her ethnicity) and legal services.
 - Many victims of color find their mistrust of the police not understood by shelter workers who see protection orders as the foundation of safety.
 - Immigration
 - Affordable housing

Layer 2: Barriers Due to Family/Socialization/Role Expectations

- Female socialization in patriarchal culture, individual and societal values and attitudes, personal identity, religious beliefs and rules learned within one's family of origin.
- Values/Beliefs about Relationships
 - How women's relationships, behaviors, attitude and beliefs are shaped by the demands and threats of the dominant patriarchy in which women live
 - Identity
 - Isolation often forces them out of the workplace, out of old friendships and away from alternate sources of support. As a result, the victim's relationship with the abuser may be the only significant relationship in her life.
 - Questions:
 - What does this client believe about living without a partner?
 - What does she believe she can accomplish on her own?
 - What does she believe about putting herself first, before her abuser and children?
 - Who does she believe she is, or can be, if she is not in this relationship?
- Values/Beliefs about Abuse
 - One result of socialization into American society is desensitization to violence.
 - Questions:
 - What does this woman believe about violence?
 - Does she perceive it to be a normal part of a relationship?
 - Is it acceptable as long as her mate does less damage to her than her father did to her mother?
 - Is jealousy from a mate validation that she is loved or a sign of danger?
 - Is divorce wrong?
 - Are children better off with any father, even a violent father, rather than no father?

- Religious Values/Beliefs
 - Patriarchal beliefs are often reinforced in religious institutions that tell women to obey their husbands as their husbands obey God.
 - Questions:
 - Is it ever acceptable within this woman's faith to end a marriage?
 - Does she believe God expects her to love, honor, and obey her mate despite the violence?
 - Does she believe God wouldn't give her more to deal with than she could take?
- Family of Origin Values/Beliefs
 - It is important to consider the rules learned in the battered woman's family of origin.
 - Questions:
 - What rules from her upbringing will she be breaking if she leaves this partner?
 - What will the consequences be from her family of origin if she prioritizes her safety above her marriage?

Layer 3: Barriers from Psychological Consequences of Violence

- Defense Mechanisms
- Physical/Somatic Results
 - Victims often report sleep deprivation resulting from the abuser keeping them up all night with assaults and arguing, or from ongoing vigilance on the victim's part in preparation for anticipated assaults.
- Psychological Consequences
 - Anxiety, depression, self-doubt and self-blame, eroded self-esteem, memory impairment.
 - Victims also report feeling crazy as a result of mixed messages from helping professionals.
- Isolation
 - Sometimes, the people who care about her do not understand why she is with the abuser or they are afraid of him.
 - Or, the abuser is so charismatic that they do not believe her.
- Brainwashing
 - Common tactics: humiliation/degradation, trivial demands, demonstration of power and threats, exhaustion, occasional indulgences, emotional distance, and "crazy-making."
- Compliance Strategies/Stockholm Syndrome
 - As a result of this constant criticism, victim engages in strategies to change these factors that have been identified as the cause of the abuse. These excuses that blame the victim always change, keeping her busy trying to fix herself until she eventually sees that the abuse does not originate with her
 - Therapists must address the general misplacement of responsibility that is so common with this population.
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)