

Combining Group and Individual Sessions as a Dual Component of Intervention

Belinda Buckley & Ben Schar
Men's Workers / Social Workers
Northern Violence Intervention Program
South Australia



The Northern Violence Intervention Program (NVIP) has an ongoing commitment to reviewing intervention practices to ensure the safety and well-being of women and the protection of children are upheld, when working with men who use violence and abuse. The following paper will briefly explore the conversations that the NVIP team undertook when revisiting the rationale for combining group and individual sessions as part of the NVIP 26 week Men's Stopping Violence Group (MSVG) program. This process highlighted some of the benefits and limitations of combining group and individual sessions and guided the decision made regarding the current model of intervention used within the NVIP 26 week MSVG.

The NVIP framework is underpinned by the following best practice principles of interventions with men who use violence and abuse towards women and children: **safety** of women and children as the priority; men are **responsible** for their use of violence and abuse; intervention is **accountable** to the experiences of those abused; and all intervention is **respectful** (see www.publications.health.sa.gov.au/edtra/2/). Work with men at the NVIP is one component of a wider integrated response to domestic violence that includes the Elizabeth Magistrates Family Violence Court, Police, Police Prosecution, Correctional Services, Families SA and Primary Health Care Services. This response aims to hold men accountable for their use of violence and abuse, while enhancing the safety of women and the protection of children. Men who are referred to the NVIP are given the opportunity to be assessed in relation to their suitability to attend the NVIP 26 week MSVG, while concurrent services are offered to their partner/former partner and/or children. Services offered to women and children include counselling/therapy, the provision of information, advocacy, support and referral.

Revisiting the rationale

The NVIP 26 week MSVG program currently has an open modulated format, which consists of five, four week group modules with individual review sessions either side of each module. The benefits and limitations of combining group and individual sessions were explored by the NVIP, within the context of each of the best practice principles. This conversation arose out of increasing pressure on resources and concerns that providing individual sessions as part of the group program was time intensive and potentially unaccountable. The following will summarise some of the conversations that ultimately guided the NVIP team's final decision regarding the MSVG format.

Safety

Concerns were raised that one limitation of meeting men individually is that partnership accountability is not present between the two Men's Workers, as occurs in the group setting. A strength of partnership accountability is that it involves a process where Men's Workers commit to providing each other with feedback regarding practices. This aims to continually address men's invitations to workers to collude with their stories of blame, minimisation, justification and denial. It is particularly important for male Men's Workers to acknowledge that they live in and are influenced by men's culture. For this reason, male workers need to be vigilant in the way they respond to both subtle and overt invitations from men to collude with descriptions that minimise and discount women's and children's experiences, which prioritises men's own sense of entitlement. This vigilance involves actively monitoring practice and welcoming feedback from female co-facilitators.

Combining Group and Individual Sessions as a Dual Component of Intervention

Strengths of the individual sessions include creating opportunities for facilitators to gather further detail regarding a man's belief systems and held positions regarding his partner and children's rights to safety, autonomy and respect. This further supports the work done with women and children in relation to assessing risk and safety. Individual sessions allow for more detailed conversations that have the potential to make violence and abuse towards children more visible. This better informs mandatory notifications to the Child Abuse Report Line and allows for more targeted interventions within the group setting in relation to the man's stated commitments to non-violence.

Responsibility

An important aspect of the MSVG is the witnessing of conversations that occur in the group. Men's participation in the group creates the opportunity for men to hear other men speak to a commitment to taking full responsibility for their choices to use tactics of violence and abuse. It was raised that as individual sessions occur in a closed room they do not allow for witnessing of conversations. It was also raised that some men may choose to hold some conversations for the individual sessions and not speak to them in the group. It was argued that this may further contribute to the silence that often surrounds and perpetuates men's use of violence and abuse towards women and children.

It was also argued that as individual sessions are considered part of the group program, there is an expectation that conversations men have in the individual sessions are brought back into the following group sessions. This aims to hold men to account to both their spoken commitments to non-violence and to monitoring their own thinking and behaviour. The individual sessions also provide an opportunity for Men's Workers to gain a clear sense of where each man is positioning himself in relation to his use of violence and abuse, which then informs the planning of the proceeding module.

Accountability

Some of the concerns raised regarding the individual sessions included the possibility that facilitators might hold back from challenging men within the group context and wait for the individual sessions to follow-up with men, due to time constraints, the greater ease of addressing difficult conversations in individual work and the desire to get through planned material in the group sessions. It was further discussed that having these conversations in the group can maximise responsiveness in terms of challenging men at that point in time regarding their held values, beliefs and thinking that support their use of violence and abuse. It was also put forward that these conversations are relevant for all the men in the group to witness rather than risk losing the momentum and rawness of the conversation, while waiting for the next individual session. Another point raised was that individual sessions require more intensive worker time than group sessions.

In response to the above points it was calculated that when the amount of worker time needed for group planning, group facilitation and risk assessment was considered, it was comparative to the time required to see each man individually. It was discussed that men within the MSVG are fully aware that conversations within individual sessions are not closed door conversations. Rather, in the following group session men are expected to refer, reflect and be challenged in relation to conversations that took place in their individual sessions (an exception is in relation to disclosures of experiencing abuse, e.g. as a child). A strength of the individual sessions is that they offer a greater opportunity to gather more detailed information in regards to risk and safety to feed back to Women's Advocates and Children & Young People's Advocates, the Criminal Justice System and Families SA. As well as this the individual sessions create an opportunity for men to further face some of the impacts their use of violence and abuse may have had on their partner/former partner and/or children. These sessions also consolidate men's stated commitments to non-violence from the previous module and assess men's ongoing eligibility for the MSVG.

Respect

The provision of services to men within the NVIP is upheld by a commitment to respectfully engage men in ways that hold men accountable for their use of violence and abuse, while working in ways that are respectful of the experiences of women and children. In conversations it was again emphasised by the NVIP team that individual sessions do not allow for public acknowledgement by men regarding their use of violence and abuse, which could be experienced by women and children as disrespectful and lacking in recognition of the impacts of tactics of violence and abuse upon their lives.

It was discussed that offering individual sessions ensures men are provided with an opportunity to address their own attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, choices and behaviours for a full 50 minutes. In contrast, group sessions run for 165 minutes and allow for an average speaking time of 12 minutes per man. It has been observed that at times some men may choose to contribute minimally in group conversations, whereas individual sessions require that men contribute for a full 50 minutes. This extended time allows for more details to be sought regarding the man's use of violence and abuse which informs risk assessments and contributes to consultation communication between Men's Workers and Women's Advocates and Children & Young People's Advocates. Feedback from Advocates is utilised by Men's Workers to inform group content and conversations, in ways that uphold women and children's confidentiality.

Conclusion

The NVIP have an ongoing commitment to reviewing intervention practices to ensure the safety and well-being of women and the protection of children are upheld. Through reviewing the rationale for combining group and individual sessions as part of the NVIP 26 week MSVG program, a decision was made by the NVIP team that individual sessions would continue to be offered as part of the MSVG. While it was acknowledged that the concerns raised would need to be continually reviewed, it was agreed that the benefits of combining group and individual sessions incorporates the best from the group work model and the richness of individual sessions. The NVIP team believes that this structure utilises the strengths of both approaches and ultimately supports the program's commitment to maximising the safety and well-being of women and children, while holding men accountable for their use of violence and abuse.

**Belinda Buckley & Ben Schar
2011**

NTV asked Belinda & Ben to write this article after hearing about the way they combine group and individual sessions in their program. We are very grateful for the time they took to share their thoughts on some of the benefits and potential risks of incorporating individual sessions within group-based programs. RV
