

Position Statement: Online programs for men who use family violence

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Executive Summary

The following position statement explores the complexities of translating MBCP practice from in-person to online delivery. The paper explores the fundamentals of MBCP practice and the inherent challenges in translating programs to an online platform. While some supplementary interventions to MBCP have been developed, it remains unclear how a MBCP itself can be translated to an online setting. The statement concludes by recommending that current online interventions not be used as a substitute for in-person MBCP due to a number of programmatic, delivery and safety concerns, and should instead only be used to complement in-person MBCP.

Introduction to MBCP

The most common response in Australia and internationally to men who have used domestic or family violence (DFV) is a Men's Behaviour Change Program (MBCP). MBCPs currently operate across all Australian states and are derived from programs developed out of the women's shelter movement in the United States during the 1980s. These programs were developed in recognition of the importance of men taking responsibility for their violent and controlling behaviours, and as an adjunct to the support work being carried out in shelter settings.

The operation of MBCPs both within and between Australian jurisdictions, as well as internationally, vary in approach, design, content and delivery (Mackay et al., 2015). There are a number of reasons for these variations, including differences in conceptualising the underlying causes of DFV, levels of resourcing available to community organisations to run programs and minimum standards established for the delivery of programs, as well as contention about the factors that increase or mitigate risks associated with DFV. The two models of MBCP practice that predominate in Australia are the Duluth Model (DM) and the Risks Needs and Responsivity (RNR) model.

The DM focuses on the socio-political factors that support a man's use of power, control, and violence towards family members, and conceptualises this use of power and control as an extension of broader patriarchal social structures. The central tenet of the DM programs are to support the safety of women and children harmed, or at risk of being harmed, by the perpetrator of violence. At the same time, the goal in engaging men is to contribute towards accountability for these behaviours by supporting the perpetrator to gain insight and challenging him to make nonviolent choices within his relationships. The RNR model takes a more individualised approach centred on the perpetrator himself. While socio-political factors that support the perpetrator's use of violence are considered, other factors such as an individual's criminal history, instability factors, learning style, life goals and actuarial risk of reoffending are also considered important in contributing to violence perpetration and motivating the perpetrator towards making nonviolent choices (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Despite the variance in approaches across Australia, the broad objectives of each MBCP are largely the same; that is, to contribute to the safety of women and children through addressing the behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of perpetrators of DFV. However, it is how best to achieve these goals which remains the subject of some debate. Research and evaluation has, as yet, not found one theoretical approach to be superior to any other (see Babcock et al., 2004), however evidence suggests that

programs are more effective when part of an integrated response to a man's use of DFV (Devaney & Lazenbatt, 2016; Kelly & Westmarland, 2015; Murphy, Musser & Maton, 1998).

Fundamentals of MBCP

While No to Violence recognises the importance of creative and emergent practice and supports and advocates for safe program innovation, there are a number of elements that are considered fundamental to all MBCPs:

- **An understanding of the gendered nature of DFV**
- **An Integrated approach to DFV interventions:** with multiple agencies including statutory bodies, social services, welfare supports, and behaviour change programs playing a role in moving the perpetrator towards accountability for his behaviour and supporting victims of DFV harm
- **Two facilitators delivering programs;** one of whom is male and the other female (except in groups targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients)
- **Robust risk assessment and management** practices and procedures
- **Victim/survivor contact** and/or mechanisms for supporting the safety and other needs of victim/survivors
- **Program logic:** a clearly articulated program logic to assist both facilitators of programs and participants in programs to stay focused on program outcomes
- **Theory of change:** an articulation of the change that is sought, what change looks like, and the mechanisms by which change is achieved
- **Evaluation framework:** designed to evaluate program fidelity and outcomes based on the measures contained in a given program logic

Translation from 'In-Person' to 'Online'

There has been recent interest in translating interventions with perpetrators of DFV into an online platform. In particular, a number of proposals have been made to translate traditional in-person MBCPs to an online space. These proposals have been made on the same basis that both multiple counselling interventions and education platforms have started to explore online delivery. These consist of creating greater accessibility (in particular, for rural clients and clients with disabilities), reducing the cost of program delivery for both the State and individual participants, and to lessen the burden for clients who do not wish to disclose potentially shameful personal stories in an in-person setting.

At present there is minimal research on the use of online male family violence interventions within the Australian context. However, existing research on online education presents a number of issues relevant for the practice of working with men who use family violence. Stone (2017) studied the engagement levels of university students in Australia and found that only 46.6 per cent who had enrolled as fully external (online) had completed their degree programs between 2005 and 2014, compared with a completion rate for face-to-face students in the same time period of 76.6 per cent. Further, first year attrition for these online students was more than 20 per cent compared with less than seven per cent for the face-to-face students. Yu and Hu (2016) also raise the issue of quality control, believing low-quality education to be a risk endemic to online learning. They recommend regulation, quality control and accreditation to maintain high quality education and resources.

While there are currently no online MBCPs accredited by No to Violence, there are a number of interventions with perpetrators of DFV that serve as adjuncts or bridges to MBCP. The Men's Referral Service (MRS) offers a webchat that acts as a 'soft entry' to encourage men to call the service to more fully explore their situations with a telephone counsellor as well as a means of sharing referral information with clients. There is some preliminary evidence that suggests the use of online tools in combination with more in depth clinical work can be effective in addressing a variety of issues associated with depression, anxiety and general instability (Haberstroth, et al, 2007), the full utility of the MRS webchat continues to emerge.

Changing For Good is a telephone and webchat-based service for men who have completed a MBCP and require ongoing support, counselling and risk management. A phone application is also being designed to be used alongside mainstream MBCPs in NSW and is being trialled by several MBCP providers. The app is a holding measure that takes into account the challenges experienced by participants between group sessions, provides additional learning tools, incorporates a mindfulness section, explanations and reminders of any standing legal orders, and includes a support network. The app is informed by the RNR approach and is tailored by the MBCP facilitators of each program for each participant according to their needs and risk factors and could be designed to include more functionality as time goes on. There are also several phone applications that are being designed to more peripherally engage men around intervention orders, court dates, and links and contact information to services (e.g. legal services).

The above applications and web-based interventions all currently serve to increase the effectiveness of mainstream MBCPs. The translation of MBCPs to a wholly online platform however, presents a larger challenge. The empirical literature exploring the translation of mental health promotion, mental illness interventions, and substance misuse interventions offers some insight into the complexities of online implementation. Issues around compliance, engagement and retention of clients have all been identified in translating these interventions/treatments to a web-based platform. For example, Waller and Gilbody (2009) found higher rates of drop-out amongst those utilising web-based interventions compared with those receiving services in-person. Several recommendations have been made by researchers, including addressing compliance issues for web-based interventions using guided rather than unguided interventions - it has been suggested that this approach leads to greater compliance, which may cohere well with some aspects of MBCPs (e.g. risk assessment) but not others (e.g. exploring values and intrinsic motivation). Hilvert-Bruce et al., (2012) have also found that participants who viewed their treatment/intervention as 'credible' were more compliant, and that greater contact with participants (even if only in the form of an email) was correlated with greater intervention adherence.

Key practice considerations

Although the translation of education from in-person to an online setting, as well as the translation of multiple therapies and therapeutic interventions serve as useful comparisons to the task of creating an online MBCP, there are unique practice considerations to MBCP practice that require exploration.

Principles of MBCP practice revolve around the accountability of participants, meaningful engagement with program content, risk assessment and management, pro-social peer support, the modelling of respectful relationships between male and female facilitators, and the motivation of clients towards respectful relationship choices, beliefs, and behaviours. It is, as yet, unclear how these principles might be translated to an online setting.

There is risk with online programs utilising a videoconference format that the conference could be terminated by participants instantaneously, having only superficially engaged with the program content. It is also probable that online group programs will occur in the home where participants are in close proximity to a partner and/or children, this places them at significantly greater risk of re-traumatisation. Participants may also censor themselves if family members are close by and thus not meaningfully engage with program content.

The particular videoconferencing software, quality of webcam, microphone and internet connection also need to be considered. All these pieces of technology effect the facilitators' ability to assess participant engagement, manage risk, and hold participants to account. Any proposals of a text based MBCP where video and audio technologies were absent would be entirely inappropriate as there would be no way for facilitators to know who was typing, nor any way for them to know if family members were in close proximity and manage any other risks present in the situation.

Face-to-face engagements are also a key element of behaviour change work. Reading body language and non-verbal cues are essential facilitator skills and are used to assess genuine engagement and manage collusion between members of the group. Group cohesion and rapport is built between participants as they become familiar with each other and establish trust and respond to conversations and processes within the group. Developing a working alliance between facilitators and participants has also been recognised as a crucial component to increasing participant motivation for change and has been positively correlated with participant retention (Murphy & Maiuro, 2009).

The role modelling of respectful relationships that occurs between male and female facilitators in group sessions may be difficult to replicate through webcam. The screen format may also make it difficult to manage complex group dynamics and flow of program content.

Finally, in considering accountability to be one of the main principles of MBCP work, part of the process of accepting responsibility involves each man acknowledging and sharing his use of family violence in a group in person. Attending an online program at home and behind a screen risks diminishing this powerful process.

Recommendations

No to Violence believes there are fundamental aspects of MBCPs that must be adhered to in order to create safety, assess and manage risk, and increase efficacy. No to Violence maintains that the cornerstone of working with men who use family violence are effective face-to-face programs in combination with dynamic risk assessment with all elements of the program focusing on victim safety. It is recommended that any innovation involving online and/or digital tools are developed to complement accredited or registered programs.

Conclusion

Male family violence interventions often involve a considered and nuanced approach involving multiple interventions, with the core response to DFV being MBCPs. The web-based interventions that currently exist should not be relied on as a stand-alone option and instead should be considered as supplementary to MBCPs. It is currently not clear how online translations of MBCP would meet what No to Violence consider the fundamentals of programs. Online interventions should not necessarily be designed to imitate more traditional perpetrator interventions, but make use of their unique mode of delivery and capacities to engage and educate a wider demographic of people, as well as consider how they can complement and elevate existing interventions and programs.

Members' information

No to Violence welcomes hearing from its members. What do you think are some potential uses, deliveries and risks of online-based interventions in the context of ending men's family violence?

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