

## Domestic Violence Statement From PREP, Inc.

*NOTE (2016): This document was written in 1996. We find that it holds up well in terms of conceptualizations and issues in the field, both in terms of practice and research. If you want further information, please contact us. See also the Getting More Help document and the Derrington et al. document in your resources.*

Since the PREP™ programs and materials deal with communication and conflict between partners, questions about domestic violence arise among many of those who are interested in conducting PREP with couples. Therefore, we have prepared this statement of our concerns and views on the issues as they relate to PREP. Our chief concerns regarding this sometimes controversial topic can be summarized as follows:

- ***PREP is not a treatment program for domestic violence.***

PREP was conceived as a program to help couples reduce the chances of divorce and marital distress. The prevention or reduction of patterns that lead to marital failure is the chief focus of the program.

- ***PREP has been shown to reduce the likelihood of couples becoming physically violent in the first place. Specifically, over a period of five years, couples who took PREP premaritally had approximately one quarter the number of self-reported incidents of aggression as compared to control couples.***

While there are many complex issues in the area of domestic violence, there is no controversy about the benefits of primary prevention. PREP targets conflict patterns such as escalation between partners--and escalation is a precursor for a significant number of couples to becoming violent. In part, PREP teaches more appropriate strategies for handling conflict and anger than many couples naturally have in their repertoire. Furthermore, PREP fosters a "peer" relationship wherein the two partners work as a team to overcome tendencies to misuse power and control.

- ***Domestic violence of any sort is unacceptable and wrong and dangerous.***
- ***There is an alarming level of domestic violence (at various levels) taking place in families in our society.***
- ***No matter what the nature of the violence, when males strike females, there is every reason to believe that females are both in greater danger and will likely suffer more long lasting and negative aftereffects.***
- ***When there is the presence of domestic violence, the preeminent concern should be safety.***

While there are controversies about what options make for the greatest degree of safety in various situations, decisions about referrals and treatment options should be made with safety as the first concern. There does exist a hotly debated controversy about domestic violence--what causes it, are there different patterns, and what are the best strategies to achieve safety? Based on the current data, we are inclined toward the view that there are various forms of domestic violence that call for varying strategies to achieve the greatest safety.

- ***Not every act of physical aggression in relationships is driven by power and control dynamics on the part of the male. Rather, there are various ways in which domestic aggression comes about.***

As a somewhat extreme contrast, consider two different couples. Over the past two years, the female of couple A has, on two occasions, slapped her husband in the heat of arguments over money. He has not hit her back, though on one occasion he grabbed her wrists as she was preparing to slap him again (a thorough individual assessment of each spouse documents that there is no pattern of intimidation by the male toward the female and no ongoing fear of physical harm on the part of the woman). In couple B, the man has repeatedly intimidated, beaten, and caused injuries to his wife over a five year period--including two times where her injuries required trips to the emergency room for treatment.

This case highlights a controversy in the field among researchers and domestic violence counselors as to whether domestic violence occurs on something more like a continuum (in terms of damage or threat, but not underlying motivation) or whether it is better thought of as occurring in different types. We believe there is solid reason to believe that both ways of thinking have merit and one model need not totally invalidate the other.

As you can see by the example raised above, we believe that there are very different ways in which couples become violent. In our view, the two cases above do not represent the same phenomena. Further, we do not think it is likely that these two cases would ideally benefit from the same kind of treatment. Couple A may benefit most from treatments aimed at helping them to handle conflict better as a couple. Couple B may benefit most from interventions designed for male batterers, such as separation, jail, and traditional, individually oriented domestic violence treatment programs.

Our concern in the controversy over treatment is this: while working with the couple conjointly may increase the danger when dealing with a couple like couple B (this is commonly assumed to be the case in battering models), couple A may actually be in more danger if one does not work with them conjointly (at least in part) because there could be failure to target their mutual engagement in escalating, angry arguments. As more research is being conducted on the treatment of domestic violence in its various forms, we believe that clinicians and others who help couples will be better guided in making decisions that--while not guaranteeing safety--lead to the best chances for lasting safety for the parties involved. We know of very talented female and male researchers who are pursuing the information that can help us all be more effective in understanding and treating the phenomena of domestic violence.

- ***There may be couples who have experienced infrequent, low level incidents of aggression that could benefit greatly from the kinds of strategies in PREP. Care should be exercised in considering the options, including attention to any local laws or governmental guidelines that may affect your decision making.***

While we do not recommend PREP as a domestic violence treatment program, PREP is aimed at helping couples handle conflict better. When all the signs suggest that each partner plays a role in mishandling conflict, and that this has contributed to physical aggression, we believe the kinds of strategies in PREP may be helpful. Research currently underway by Daniel O'Leary and colleagues suggests the value of conjoint approaches for some couples with a history of violence (Heyman & Neidig, in press). Hence, upon careful consideration, PREP and PREP-like techniques might be considered as one part of a broader treatment approach designed to foster both change and greater safety in couples who are clearly planning to stay together. However, one may need to do extra work around anger management and be prepared to address other issues that have great bearing on physical aggression (e.g., substance abuse).

- ***We recommend that those who work with couples be aware of the complex issues around domestic violence, and also be fully aware of local resources for help in dealing with domestic violence in ways that can increase safety (e.g., law enforcement access, shelters).***

Among other things, this also means that you should consider ahead of time your stance on screening. Some advocate attempting to pre-screen moderately to severely aggressive couples out of programs like PREP. Others suggest that this may simply close off one avenue wherein a spouse in a truly dangerous situation finds out about other resources that can help. While we could express our preference for how to think about this, it is most important that you think about this issue for your setting, your staff, and the kinds of couples you most often are working with. Be clear what you are trying to do about this issue.

For more reading about the controversies surrounding domestic violence, we recommend the book:

"Current Controversies on Family Violence" which is published by Sage Publications (1993) and edited by Richard Gelles and Donileen Loseke.

If you would like clarification of our viewpoints on these matters, especially as they relate to the implementation of PREP, please write to us. Further, if you have ideas, concerns, and suggestions for how to make this statement clearer or better in some way, please let us know. You can write to us at:

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