

“Opportunities for health and social support improvement in men’s domestic violence programming”

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Conference Abstract

The relationship between social support and health is a significant one with, for example, emotional and instrumental support acting to prevent some health problems and improve physical well-being. Heterosexual males in western societies often face challenges to maximising the benefits of social support as socially-constructed masculine stereotypes can limit the quality and range of positive support. Men in group settings may benefit from opportunities to confront these support-limiting stereotypes and in North America alone, there are thousands of men in attendance, annually, in Domestic Violence (DVP’s) or Gender Based Violence treatment groups.

The aim of this research was to explore the participants’ experience with social support and any consequent health related benefits in a cohort of adult men attending a Domestic Violence Program in Vancouver, Canada. Further, to explore whether DVP’s are potential settings for successfully challenging masculine stereotypes beyond their anti-violence/abuse objectives.

This qualitative study used an interpretivist approach to understand the participants subjective experiences of social support and physical health as related to their extended (longer than 3 months) participation within a DVP program. Thirteen adult males over the age of 18 years were interviewed in-depth following purposeful sampling at the Warriors Against Violence Society (WAVS), with an additional eight taking part in focus groups (FG). The data was analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis informed by social constructionist/feminist theory regarding gender, social learning and hegemonic masculinity.

The results indicate that program involvement has successfully assisted men in reconstructing social support systems and in rehabilitating gendered attitudes towards support seeking and physical self-care. Research participants evidenced increased insight regarding the importance of social support and its relationship to physical health. Some participants reported that they continue to struggle with drug and alcohol addictions and a reluctance to attend professional health care services.

The results support the potential of DVP programming for enhancing positive social support among participants with subsequent improved health benefits for men. Recommendations include the expansion of DVP funding options to include Public Health Agencies and Ministries. Additional recommendations include the potential for DVP’s including those that are not informed by First Nations practice to adopt a more holistic or ‘healthy masculinity’ model in program delivery to men. The results may also suggest that a more compassionate approach to working with men who have used Intimate Partners Violence would be beneficial in participant retention and success.

Key Words: Social support, men’s groups, hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, Domestic Violence Program, Gender Based Violence, men’s health and well-being, holistic programming