

Care or control?

Using personal experiences provided by AA group member Grace, Sarah Galvani asks how helpful AA/NA meetings are for women whose experiences of abuse have already left them feeling powerless, controlled and unworthy

Research evidence is clear. The majority of women receiving formal help for alcohol or drug problems have suffered domestic abuse at some point in their lives. (Becker and Duffy 2002, Humphreys et al. 2005, McKeganey et al. 2002). A significant number experience ongoing abuse or continue to live with the psychological damage and fear that past abuse engenders. Often it isn't the first time – for some women the abuse started in childhood, continued through teenage relationships and into adulthood.

Domestic violence and abuse is not just about physical assault. It is a range of controlling behaviours that can wear women¹ down until they doubt their sanity, their self worth, their right to make decisions about their body, their thoughts or their friendships. The abuse can be subtle at first and may never include physical acts of violence. Survivors of abuse report how damaging and long lasting the negative effects of psychological and emotional abuse can be (Barron 2004, Kaysen et al. 2007, Mechanic et al. 2008). Depression, suicide attempts, flashbacks, and feelings of loneliness and hopelessness are common.

The self-help fellowships of AA and NA offer guidance and support for people facing life without their crutch of alcohol or other drugs, helping people to get in touch with the hope that they can become the people they once were or want to be. They could be perfectly placed to offer a nurturing hand to women coming to terms with both domestic abuse and substance problems. Grace joined the fellowship to take up the offer of the guidance and support and is positive about its role in her own and many people's lives:

"I have great belief in the positive influence it has had on millions of people over the years, it gave hope where before there seemed to be none, and provided a fellowship of likeminded people able to hear strangers speak and take great

¹ Women and children are the main victims of domestic abuse and men are the main perpetrators of abuse. This is not to deny the seriousness of male victims and female perpetrators however the focus of this article is on women's experience of domestic abuse and substance use – one woman in particular.

comfort knowing 'they were not the only ones. The fellowship welcomed me and helped me find a way of coping without alcohol...'

However as her understanding of her experiences with substances and domestic abuse have become clearer, and her sobriety strengthened, she has begun to have doubts about the AA programme's ability to support women suffering domestic abuse.

"It was only as I sponsored fellow women through the programme that I acknowledged how damaging it could be to some people, especially women who had experienced domestic abuse."

In order to fully 'recover', the AA programme emphasises the need for people to admit their powerlessness, acknowledge their defects, turn their will over to God/higher power, and admit their wrongs and shortcomings, among others. This is particularly concerning for women suffering abuse, many of whom have already had their 'will' broken, their life controlled and have been repeatedly told how useless they are. Grace's experience of AA highlights how the Steps of AA can replicate perpetrators' behavior rather than support people recovering from it – in Grace's case her experiences included abuse in childhood and adult relationships. Grace found the courage to raise her doubts in her AA meetings:

"When I expressed feelings of doubt about the programme and how it was making me feel I was told I was in denial, that this was a humbling process. When I talked of feeling overwhelmed with all the things I was trying to do, not drinking, coping with the children's emotions about my drinking, I was told to 'hand it over' (to God or my higher power). Once again I felt powerless, not in control of my own life that I had to 'do' and 'say' certain things to be 'accepted' - that someone else's 'will' was in control of how my life was to develop. Memories of my childhood conditioning surfaced. If I was 'a good little girl, and did what I was told, I would be loved, taken care of, be included. "

For Grace, and women like her, this giving up of her 'will' in order to be accepted by fellowship members had frightening echoes of her experiences of abuse. For those less knowledgeable about domestic abuse, variations of "I'm just doing it for your own good" are often used by perpetrators to rationalise their controlling

behavior – a pattern that Grace felt was being repeated at times in the group that was supposed to be her main support:

“I did my 12 steps, I acknowledged my “defects” - my ‘selfishness’, ‘arrogance’, and being resentful towards people. I was more than happy to own my defects as I knew I was unworthy, I deserved to be treated the way I had been. I was encouraged to ‘see and own my part’ in many situations, including my experiences of abuse. So when trying to come to terms with my husband’s sexual abuse of me, my part was that I had been drinking so did not protect myself. Once again I could blame myself for his behaviour, his anger, manipulation and abuse, I had something wrong with me, I was an alcoholic!”

It could be argued that the focus on ‘powerlessness’ relates purely to ‘powerlessness over alcohol’ or ‘defects’ relating to a woman’s behaviour under the influence of substances. Given that research evidence has shown that many women drink to cope with their experiences of abuse or that their substance use is exacerbated by it (Clark and Foy 2000; Corbin et al. 2001, Downs and Miller 1994, Galvani 2006) the two issues cannot be so neatly separated. And yet, in spite of the personal and research-based evidence, Grace reports how she has not yet heard anyone offering support for victims of domestic abuse in a meeting or challenging women who believe the abuse is their fault:

“I have heard women share their stories about waking up with black eyes and other injuries from their partner, but they always take responsibility for the violence, like it was their fault because they drank or they had been stropky. I have never heard a woman say that it was wrong for their partner to have been violent with them. It is a ‘given’ that as an alcoholic with ‘defects’ they have a part to play in it. What does this tell us about personal power, choice and responsibility? There is no space to question why a woman drank, they are just alcoholics.”

Grace also reports how men remain unchallenged in meetings about their perpetration of domestic abuse under the influence of substances and reflects on the safety implications for their partners and children:

“I have also often listened to men talk about how alcohol made them violent. Now they don’t drink ‘life is different today’. They then go on to reveal behaviours which still come under the spectrum of domestic abuse but as they are not

physically violent that's ok then! And what about the partner of this man, the children who have to live with this 'reformed' drinker, carrying his badge of 'humility', can they question his behaviour? Are they safe now?

For women whose substance problems have stemmed from or worsened through their experiences of domestic violence and abuse, it is vital that they are believed, valued, and built back up psychologically, emotionally, and sometimes physically. Grace's experience as an AA sponsor has helped her take a different approach to the women she supports:

"Working with other women has given me a different perspective on the programme. I don't feel I have a right to tell another woman that she is arrogant or selfish or feeling sorry for herself. I don't think there is anything wrong with feeling sad about our experiences; this brings much needed empathy for ourselves, something often missing in women who have been abused. If, like me, you find a good sponsor, you can feel understood but I know this is not always the case."

Because of the self-help nature of fellowship groups Grace accepts that her experiences may have been different in other groups and that some sponsors, like her, will have greater insight and offer more appropriate support, but she remains sceptical.

"It would depend on the sponsors knowledge and skills. My experience of some of the people who sponsor is that some are very supportive, but some use sponsoring as a means to 'control' through their rigid recital of the 'big book'. I have heard many stories of sponsors or other 'well meaning AA members' suggesting that a woman will not find peace or 'recover' unless she make amends to her husband for their behaviour whilst drinking."

Set within the context of domestic abuse such advice is inappropriate and unsafe.

In Grace's professional life she has worked in both substance abuse and domestic violence services and is keen to highlight how common the overlapping issues of domestic abuse and substance use are and how important it is for those in supporting roles to acknowledge and support women fully:

“It is really important to remember that many women do not even understand or acknowledge that they have been victims of domestic abuse, especially if they are using alcohol to cope, and may still be living with the abuser.”

However like many of us who have worked in health and social care, when our focus is so firmly on supporting other people we can often fail to recognise our own needs. Grace reflects:

“Even with my knowledge, experience and skills, I got lost and turned to alcohol. In spite of all my professional experience I did not see that it was my reality. It is not just people out there who experience these issues, it’s about me as a knowledgeable and informed professional.”

Grace continues to attend meetings and sponsor other women and while she is critical of some aspects of the fellowship, and concerned that her experiences of abuse and those of other women have not been considered or acknowledged within it, she is open to its power to help people. She poses just one key question:

“How can a global multi-cultural programme ignore this issue?”

This article is the first half of a two-part exploration of the overlapping issues of domestic abuse and substance use. Part two (coming in January) will explore the implications for fellowship members and sponsors who support women living with these issues as well as some broader implications for alcohol and drug professionals.

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