Domestic Violence Risk Assessment

Whether a criminal or family law case, the assessment of domestic violence recidivism is often requested. Although women certainly abuse men, women abuse women, and men abuse men, the most common scenario is a man abusing a woman. However, many of the traits noted in abusive men can be generalized to anyone who is abusive.

Who Perpetrates Domestic Violence?

Men who batter their wives have often experienced family violence in their childhoods. This includes both witnessing and being the target of violence.

Domestic violence does not discriminate based on socioeconomic strata; however, men with less education and income are more prone to be violent. If there is a difference between the man and the woman's socioeconomic status (i.e. she has more education) this increases the risk as well.

Not surprisingly, alcohol and drug use are high risk factors for abuse. Superbowl Sunday is one of the days with the highest rate of abuse.

Batters report lower self-esteem but research on anger, stress, and depression is mixed. Anger and stress do not appear to be directly related as a risk factor, although they certainly increase the risk in those who are already batterers. Traditional sex role attitudes are also surprisingly unrelated to battering.

So, how do you assess if someone is likely to become abusive again?

Checklists of behavior regarding actions that are emotionally and physically abusive, as well as life-threatening, can be completed such as the Conflict Tactics Scale. Domestic violence dramatically increases with substance use so instruments such as the Michigan Alcohol Screening Test can also be used. However, the most empirically validated assessment guide is the Spousal Risk Assessment (SARA) Guide.

The SARA is a set of structured guidelines for assessing the risk of repeated violence, which is coded from interviews and case history data. It identifies 20 risk factors and gives a risk rating of low, moderate, or high. The factors include:

1. Assault of family members or of strangers or acquaintances
2. Violation of conditional release
3. Relationship problems
4. Employment problems
5. Being the victim of or witness to family violence
6. Substance abuse
7. Social or homicidal ideation or intent
8. Psychotic or manic symptoms
9. Diagnosed personality disorder - particularly antisocial
10. Physical or sexual assault
11. The use of weapons or threats of death
12. An escalation in the severity or frequency of spousal abuse
13. Any violations of no-contact orders
14. Minimization or denial
15. Attitudes that support or condone spousal assault

It should be noted that an evaluator cannot determine if someone committed an offense in the past, only their likelihood of committing an offense in the future. Therefore, if you have a client who has been accused of domestic violence, a risk assessment can look at the likelihood that the individual would commit such an offense. If your client has admitted to committing an offense, or there is strong evidence to suggest the crime has occurred, an evaluation can also determine the likelihood of reoffense.

Reference: Wrightsman, L. & Fulero, S. (2005). Forensic Psychology, Second Edition. Thomson Wadsworth.