

Prevalence and Treatment of Physical Aggression in Couples

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Montreal, Canada May 24, 2018



Definition of Partner Physical Aggression

1. Physically aggressive acts toward a partner as exemplified by pushing, grabbing, shoving, beating, etc
2. The behaviors must occur in the context of an argument
3. The time frame for assessment of such aggressive behavior is one year



Prevalence of Physical Aggression: Male to Female

Representative/Community Samples

Representative Sample U.S.: Straus & Gelles (1990)-
N= 6,000 Overall male to female physical aggression:
12%

Schafer, Caetano & Clark (1998): N =1365: Overall
male to female aggression: 10%

Large Community Sample: Madrid Area: Grana,
O'Leary et al (2010) N= 4550 Male to Female Agg 12%



Prevalence of Partner Physical Aggression in Young Adults

Elliot et al., 1986 Representative US Sample of 25 year olds: Male to Female Aggression: 37%

O'Leary et al, 1989 Suffolk County NY Community Sample of newly weds: Male to Female Aggression: 32%

O'Leary, Slep & O'Leary, 2007: Random Digit Dialing Selection: Male to female: 36%



Percentage of Male to Female Physical Aggression in Couples Seeking Marital Therapy

NY O'Leary, Vivian & Malone, 1992, 53%

Maryland : LaTaillade et al, 2007: 51%

Indiana: Holtzworth-Munroe et al:58%

Overall Point: Roughly Half of women report physical aggression in their relationship!!!!



Do Women Engage in Physical Aggression Against Their Partners as Often as Men?

In Representative Samples Like Straus and Gelles, 1990 – Almost the same

In a recent representative US sample of O'Leary, Tintle & Bromet, 2014, the self-reported rates of women were slightly higher

In adolescents, the rates are higher for female and peak at about 17 yrs, Fernandez et al 2013- **BUT WAIT**



Injury, Murder & Fear

Injury rates are higher in women than men in marital clinic samples, Cascardi et al, 1992

More women than men are murdered by their intimate partners each year
(400 men v 1200 women, BJDS, 2003)

Fear ratings are higher in female than male victims Kar & O'Leary, 2010



Conclusions about Physical Partner Aggression

Most common in Young –Peak at 17-18 yrs

In representative couple samples of parents, about 33% have partner aggression

In Clinic Couples, about 50% have partner aggression



Intervention Implications?

Can Some Physically Aggressive Couples Be Treated in A Dyadic Context?

Do All Aggressive Men Need Batterer Programs?

Clearly Not!

Which Couples are Reasonable Clients for Dyadic Interventions?

Who are Reasonable Clients for A Dyadic Intervention?

No injury to either partner

Neither is Fearful to Speak in Presence of Other and Therapist

The physical aggression has occurred only several times in past year

None of the acts of physical aggression were severe, namely, beating, choking, threatening with knife or gun

How to Assess Physical Aggression in Relationships

Conflict Tactics Scales – Straus and Colleagues
Spouse Specific Assertion and Aggression –
O’Leary & Curley
Psychological Maltreatment of Women Scale-
Tolman
Fear of Partner Scale –Cohen & O’Leary

What Kinds of Interventions work with Couples?

Gender Specific Treatments with Decided Focus on Reducing Psychological and Physical Aggression

Couples with More than Occasional Aggression

Groups for Men and Groups for Women

Brannen and Rubin, 1996

O'Leary, Heyman and Neidig, 1999

What Kinds of Interventions Work with Couples?

Behavioral Marital Therapy: Doss et al., 2005

No Focus on Partner Aggression

No evidence that aggression lessened the positive impact of therapy

Thus some clients with low levels of physical aggression can be helped with standard BMT or acceptance and commitment variants thereof



What Kinds of Interventions Work With Couples?

Continued

Sequence of Individual Treatment followed by Dyadic Treatment

Stith & McCullough, 2008

For initial sessions individual therapy for husband and wife separately

When progress is made, dyadic intervention occurs



Suggested Assessment and Sequenced Intervention for Couples with Low Levels of Physical Aggression

Assessments After Initial Screening with Conflict Tactics Scale, and Fear of Partner Scale

Two Individual Assessment Sessions with Partners to assess level of satisfaction in relationship, characteristic of the partner that can be accepted and those that need to be changed, level of psychological aggression, caring for partner, and individual issues of self and partner that can impede change

Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Spanier; Commitment Scale, Broderick, Love Scale O'Leary et al



Individual Treatment Sessions

Individual Treatment for Both Husband and Wife for 6-8 sessions to address emotional regulation, ability to control anger, acceptance of responsibility for any acts of psychological and physical aggression

These individual treatment sessions are seen as preparation for dyadic treatment

Basically, one moves to dyadic intervention only after the therapist judges that each partner is ready



Dyadic Intervention

Following acceptance into Dyadic intervention, the therapist will address the following across approximately 10-12 sessions

Communication: Ability to listen and reflect;

Insight: Ability to understand needs of partner and which of those needs is most important

Reflection of Being Hurt: Ability to describe how they felt hurt by other that often was reflected in anger

Engage in Caring Behaviors: Can partners some significant things that are wanted by the partner such as affection, helping with chores, anticipating some things the other wants before they ask



Likelihood of Success?

Given the Success of Doss et al, 2005 with BMT and no specific focus on psychological and physical aggression with low levels of physical aggression in the couple, the success seems very likely

Given our clinical experience with such a sequenced treatment, the success seems very likely