

Making Mistakes Professionally

Written by Dara Carlin | Examiner
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When I received my Masters in Marriage & Family Therapy diploma "with all the rights and privileges thereunto" I felt like I had ascended to a higher level of human intellect with proof now attesting to my officially sanctioned "wisdom".

At **25 years-old**, I envisioned my future to hold a private practice in a comfortable home office where I would always be available for the children I had yet to bear. I would be a living example of practicing what I preached while helping others who would seek me out as they struggled to navigate the relationships in their lives; I would stand side-by-side with my clients bringing peace, love and happiness to all I would influence with my years of scholarly training. (I sincerely hope you're rolling your eyes and shaking your head because I am - I feel like I'm writing about somebody else - but embarrassingly enough, this was me at the "pinnacle of my education".)

There were only two things I recall being said about the issue of domestic violence during my Masters-level education:

1. NEVER put a victim and the abuser in the same room at the same time and attempt an intervention.
2. If you discover domestic violence, it is NEVER to be treated systemically ⁽¹⁾.

The only other mention of domestic violence in class came in response to the question "What do we do if a victim of domestic violence wants Marriage Counseling?"

This was the answer we got: A lady once called our professor, who had a private practice, for marriage counseling. When asked what the problem was that she wanted counseling for, she said her husband hit her and she wanted him to stop. Our professor asked if she was ready to leave him and she angrily replied no saying that she wanted the violence to end, not the marriage. Our professor then told her "It sounds like you haven't been beaten enough. Call me when you've left him. Good-bye" and he hung up. (!)

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We sat there stunned: THAT'S how we're supposed to respond to a victim of domestic violence asking for our help?! Our professor briefly explained that **DV cases involve safety issues and there is no way to "counsel away" domestic violence - it would be dangerous and unethical for any of us to attempt to do so**

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We were going to school to learn how to treat dysfunction and divorce - safety issues and danger were NOT a part of our curriculum - so it was easy for us to move away from the uncomfortable topic. Besides, what were the chances that we would ever be exposed to DV as Marriage & Family Therapists?

No one ever told us that "**One in four women (25%) has experienced domestic violence in her lifetime**" ⁽²⁾. This statistic alone means that as therapists we would surely encounter victims of domestic violence in the course of our work! By comparison "1 in 6 women are at risk for developing Alzheimer's disease in their lifetime"

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while "1 in 8 women will now develop breast cancer"

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No one ever taught us about the dynamics and impact of abuse on the victims and children. No one ever showed us how to identify a victim from a perpetrator from a survivor. Why is any of this relevant?

Because as a graduated Masters-level professional, **I could have legally been able to hang out a shingle and practice any issue that would come before me as a Marriage & Family Therapist.**

Although I knew little to nothing about domestic violence at that time, I could treat you for it. Does that scare you? It should, it really should.

I wish I could reassure you by saying "...but now everyone who graduates with a degree in counseling, law and social services is appropriately trained in DV" but I can't.

Practicing beyond one's area of expertise is unethical and causes significant harm, particularly in DV cases. It's the professionals responsibility to recognize when they are outside their area of expertise and not do it, yet too many professionals proceed regardless under the banner of their title. As a Domestic Violence Survivor Advocate, such malpractice leads to the the majority of my time and effort being spent on trying to undo the consequences of professionals acting beyond their areas of expertise and correcting the professional mistakes that have been made in DV cases as a result.

Many of the mistakes are unintentional but all professional mistakes - inadvertent or not -

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demand redress when lives literally hang in the balance.

How hard could it be to correct professional mistakes? Well, try telling someone who **thinks** they know what domestic violence is that they don't. The 25 year-old me would've psycho-babbled you under the table if you suggested that I didn't know what domestic violence was and there you have it: the most lethal combination known to humanity - **ignorance and arrogance**

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Somewhere along the career path humility goes out the window - whether it's given the heave-ho with each subsequent degree or promotion earned, or whether it happens as an unnoticeable leak over time (through burnout, defensiveness, familiarity: being too comfortable with the job's tasks, pursuing who you should know vs. what you should know, and for other unconscious - and not so unconscious - reasons). However the professional humility was lost, it's what we need to get rid of the ignorance and arrogance that leads to too many mistakes in DV cases and these mistakes cost lives.

The mantra for professionals when mistakes are made is: **take responsibility, apologize for the wrongdoing, make amends if you can, learn from the mistake and don't repeat it** - yet when it's the professionals who've made a mistake, they just can't seem to follow their own advice (and I think that makes us look bad). We're human so we're ALL going to make mistakes, but it's what we do with these mistakes that count.

A degree or title does not an expert make and in the past 20 years, the only thing I think I can claim to be an expert of is being a pupil to those I serve.

(1) "Systems Theory is based on the premise that all pieces of an organism are a part of the whole. A system theorist examines all pieces of the couple's family and identifies holistic changes that need to be made to the entire familial unit, rather than focusing on one individual."
<http://family-marriage-counseling.com/therapists-counselors.htm>

(2) <http://www.dvrc-or.org/domestic/violence/resources/C61/>

(3) <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/03/080318114824.htm>

(4) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/8301183/Breast-cancer-will-hit-one-in-eight-women-study-indicates.html>