

**Love me best, when I deserve it the least.  
Because that's when I need it the most**

*Sue Dominey*

**Abstract**

In this paper I want to shine a light on the journey that men who have been violent and bullying in personal relationships (towards women, children or men) embark on when they seek help and support to change. This journey involves forgiveness, apology and authenticity.

Every man I have worked with as a client, has experienced some kind of violence, abuse, bullying and neglect in his growing up. They have all experienced fear, anxiety, sadness, loss, hurt and pain, and above all, shame - one of the most difficult of emotions to 'stay with'. That is why my work necessitates taking great care not to shame and punish. The long journey violent men make towards authentic apologies for their behaviours, hoping for forgiveness from others and from themselves, involves learning to be empathic and real in their relationships. Helping them to grow in these ways involves giving them the chance to tell their own stories about being bullied and violently abused, in order that they can recover and heal themselves. Confronted by the most horrific violence and abuse, the challenge I face is to remember that it is love, compassion, empathy and understanding that lights the way:

**Key Words:** Violence, anger, abuse, men, domestic abuse, anger management , rage, apology, forgiveness

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**1. The History of The Brave Project**

The Brave Project (Bradford Reducing Anger and Violent Emotions) - Offers Violence Prevention /Anger Management - Therapeutic group work and counselling to men who attend voluntarily. The groups are co-facilitated by trained professionals – Counsellors, Social Workers and Health Workers. The 'one to one' counselling sessions are done by both qualified and trainee counsellors. The Brave Project staff are also experienced in facilitating training workshops, seminars and conferences:

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Building Safe Relationships/Protective Behaviours, Working with Men,  
Health Consequences of Domestic Abuse

The Brave Project began in 2001, in a GP Practice in Bradford, West Yorkshire, where I worked as a Primary Care counsellor: My own life experiences of being trapped in an abusive relationship for 5 years led to me training as a counsellor and my MA studies - Violence, Abuse and Gender Relations. I channelled my anger and rage into starting up a project for men who wanted help and support to change violent and abusive behaviour.

The Brave Project has evolved over the last eight years to being an independent voluntary sector project, offering two group-work sessions a week, plus a number of 'one to one' counselling and assessment sessions, also Health MOT's for men, we are funded by Bradford and Airedale NHS.

The men who come to Brave for help and support all have one thing in common – they have problems in controlling their anger and rage, and they usually all recognise that behaving violently and abusively harms others and themselves.

Many of the men have been abusive to (ex) partners and children, others have been violent, angry, abusive, bullying and controlling in other situations – work, public space, road rage, sport, the military etc. The many consequences of their behaviour include physical and psychological injury, mental health problems, self harm, self medication with drugs and alcohol, suicide, and worse case scenario death/ murder.

The men who approach The Brave Project for help come from all walks of life – we have had builders, lorry drivers, architects, accountants, hells angels, printers, barristers, taxi drivers, teachers, magistrates, ex-soldiers, accountants, fork lift truck drivers etc etc– men from across all social classes and from all walks of life.

As part of MA Violence, Abuse and Gender Relations studies I became interested in 'Perpetrator Work' ( I had a light bulb moment – if we really want to end violence and abuse against women and children we have to work with men!) I looked at the research 'What Works? Perpetrator Programmes' – the findings were that men minimise, deny, lie, re-offend, in fact hardly a good word to say about group work with abusive men. There was also a sense that group work and therapy was a 'soft option' – and that

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prison, probation, punishment etc ‘the ‘hard / tough line’ was actually what worked the best.

The Pro Feminists stance on Domestic Abuse is - Patriarchy - ‘Power and Control’ and that Perpetrators of Domestic abuse (Men) use tactics of Physical, Emotional , Psychological, Sexual, Financial and Spiritual abuse to have power and control over others (women and children) and weaker men!(Respect?)

The STOP Project (Start Treating Others Positively) in Leeds – is a voluntary violence prevention group for men, Kath Grogan the founder and manager, after I had expressed a curiosity in the work, if I would like to ‘sit in’ to get a sense of what happens and what works for the men in the group. After my first session I was astounded with what I saw and heard, and I stayed a year, listening in to the men’s stories, and getting a sense of how the group helped the men to change abusive behaviours, attitudes and beliefs.

I was inspired to set up The Brave Project at The GP Practice where I worked as a counsellor in Bradford, where there was a high prevalence of domestic abuse, with men asking their GP for help – usually asking for anger management (they don’t ask for help saying they are a perpetrator). The rest is history Brave has grown to be a thriving Project and the men who have come through our doors over the last 8 years have taught me a lot.

I have always hated labels – so let’s just stop and think, reflect, can any one of us say that we have not ever been a perpetrator, or a bully?.....

If we label we start to make categories and set ourselves apart from, we are different from that other person, a distance, ‘them and us’, when we label, diagnose, prescribe, we feel we have to respond with a certain kind of ‘treatment’, a clever Cognitive Behavioural Programme, medication, corrective measures for the dysfunctional, the normal and the abnormal, good and bad.....

I knew at the start that if I put Domestic Abuse or Perpetrator Group on our leaflets and posters then men who needed help would be put off from coming to the project..... So we work with MEN, and I have come to learn how important it is for me to hear the men’s stories , the pieces in the jig saw of their life that explains why they go on to be abusive

## **2. Journeys of the Brave men – Boy to Man**

When Brave first started , and we were planning the group-work , we were fully informed by current ‘Perpetrator’ research that we should be offering a Pro-Feminist Programme (emphasis on Power and Control ) Cognitive

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Behavioural, Educative, programme content to hold men accountable, challenge attitudes and beliefs, challenging minimisation and denial, with the safety of women and children being our major priority.

There were a few recognised Perpetrator Programmes around at the time based on The Duluth Model ( a version called 'Pathfinder' was adopted by numerous Statutory Sector Probation Services where men were court mandated to attend) a couple of Programme manuals – The Change Manual ( Dave Morran and Monica Wilson) and DVIP, and an organisation called Respect, that grew out of twice yearly Practitioner Network Meetings. Respect had developed Guidelines and Principles for Perpetrator work which stipulated any work with men should have integrated women's support services – or they would be deemed to be unsafe

The Brave Project became a member of Respect, a condition of which was agreeing to abide by their Guidelines and Principles. But from the very start I was uncomfortable with the stance that Respect and numerous other agencies and practitioners took, in particular in terms of the language used in discussing the work with men (Perpetrators) and the expected focus of 'perpetrator programmes'.

As a counsellor coming into violence prevention work with men, my approach was informed by the theories and practice of my counselling training - The Relational Model (Person Centred / Psychodynamic) The central themes of The Person Centred Approach are the core conditions of Empathy, Congruence and Positive Regard. A way of 'being' in relationship with another person – non-judgemental, accepting and 'real', and I was bound by The BACP Code of Ethics – whose basis premise is 'to do no harm'. My passion as a counsellor has always been for working with people, not labelling, the importance of offering a safe space, building trust, empathic listening, hearing stories, validating feelings and emotions, and trusting in the therapeutic process for recovering and healing from life events. I believe the relationship is central in counselling – either one to one or group therapy.

We designed our new leaflet to 'speak' to the men we hoped would come forward to access help from Brave – using the language they used when asking for help in the GP practice where I worked – Anger Management, recognising there are many barriers to men accessing help.

As the men slowly but surely came forward we noticed the many things they had in common – most said how scared and anxious they were to

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come for the first appointment, how worried they were about coming into a group, fears for what the other men would be like, expressing feelings of shame and also “I don’t want to be like my dad”. We offer an initial first ‘assessment appointment – a mutual exchange of information, some paperwork, and the opportunity for them to tell us what brought them to seek help from our project. They would be given the opportunity to join in the group and also to have individual counselling. Our group structure involved a rolling programme, men could join at any time, we would have a ‘check in’ for the first half and then an exercise either taken from one of our many resources or tailored in response to issues brought by the men during that session.

As the (his)stories of the men unfolded we began to appreciate just how much the majority of the men had in common – early childhood experiences of neglect, un-met needs (Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) violence, abuse, bullying, sexual abuse, trauma, insecure attachments due to conflict and dysfunctional families, negative experiences of the education system, involvement with Social Services and The Care System, absent or abusive parents, lack of positive adult role models, risky behaviour, self harming, self-medication (numbing) with drugs and alcohol. The life stories of the men were the ‘pieces of the jigsaw’ that informed us about their behaviour, attitudes and beliefs as an adult.

I have often heard that not all children who experience neglect or abuse will grow up to be Perpetrators or Victims, so childhood experiences are no excuse for the abusive behaviour of adult men, and I would agree that many children who experience abuse have a resilience, and with the right kind of support can sufficiently recover and heal, and thrive. However – Elie Godsi Clinical psychology notes *the majority of children who were maltreated do not go on to be abusers..... if you take 100 children who were just physically abused (let us keep it simple to start with) and follow them into adulthood (prospectively) you find that only a small minority of them go on to be violent themselves – perhaps as few as about ten of them. However, if you take 100 adults who physically abuse their children (retrospectively), you will find that the overwhelming majority will have been physically abused as children – about ninety of them.P93*

Elie Godsi’s theory upholds our lived experience that 100 of the men Brave works with, do have experiences of childhood neglect and abuse, and they are the 10 in 100 boys who were neglected/ abused).

I have seen Elie Godsi giving a presentation that further elaborates that out of 100 abused boys roughly 10 will go on to be DV perpetrators, 10 may

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commit suicide, 10 may join the military, 10 may channel rage into sport, 10 may become homeless and use drugs and alcohol, 10 may thrive etc – but others may channel / turn anger and rage from early negative experiences into high energy and drives to be successful in business, politics, the music industry, academia, or indeed world leaders. In other words we will see and experience high power, charismatic and seemingly confident individuals who have ‘successful’ lives – a career and family, in positions of high power – who then go on to misuse their power to bully or oppress others. The cracks eventually start to appear, and the show of confidence and power slip when these individuals and their status are challenged in some way – and it becomes apparent that behind the ‘mask’ or façade of confidence’ is actually a low self esteem individual who has a very shaky sense of self, a person who actually feels very ‘small’ and has a drive to put and keep others down for them to get to maintain a powerful position.

I believe our public school system (a hot bed of bullying) manages to turn out many of these high confidence / low self esteem individuals, who end up in powerful positions that can be very harmful to others, and that bullying becomes rife in the vying to hold on to power. We do get men such as these attending Brave, and they can be the most difficult and dangerous to work with, they have developed highly sophisticated ways of manipulating and bullying to get their own way and protect their positions, whilst hiding a great deal of insecurity, shame and lack of self worth.

### **3. Shame – Telling stories: Bullying, Berserkers & Spartans**

Through many hours of listening to the life stories of Brave Project men I have come to understand their journey from boy – to man, what shaped and formed them, the nature (what you are born with) nurture ( the impact of your environment) debate, the consequences of childhood neglect, trauma, abuse and shaming. Many of the men are the first to break the cycle of abuse perpetuated throughout previous generations – it is usually fathers who have been the abusers, but for those men who were abused by mother – the road to recovering and healing can be tougher and more torturous – most of us believe it's our mother's role to love and care for us – so if we are rejected, hurt or abused by mother we come to believe we are unlovable.

An important part of the support we give men to change abusive behaviour and beliefs – usually through one to one counselling, is to help them understand their past life experiences that led them to having problems with

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anger, violence and rage. This involved considering how they made the transition from boy to man.

We have developed an exercise around William Pollock's –Boy Code – ‘*A series of outmoded, unspoken, unwritten rules of conduct by which, for generations, we have brought up boys. According to the code, boys must be tough, stoic, not dependant on others, inexpressive people who are not allowed to share their pain. Boys feel great pressure to emulate the code's ideal boy. Since they always fall short of this impossible ideal, they become frustrated, depressed and angry. Some suffer low self-esteem and turn violent.*

When men consider how they were affected by The Boy Code – we start to hear how they learned to ‘shut down’ – big boys don't cry, it's weak to ask for help, keep everything inside, don't grass on anyone, don't be a wuss or a sissy.

It is well recognised in the world of psychology, psychiatry and therapy that early childhood experience of violence, neglect and trauma can have devastating health consequences and effects, as illustrated by Bob Johnson who spent many years as a psychiatrist in maximum security prisons working with individuals who have committed the most violent crimes – murder, rape, torture etc. Bob is an advocate of engaging with individuals in a trusting relationship, with a philosophy of truth, trust and consent, for stories to be told, that will eventually uncover ‘frozen terror’ in childhood.

Judith Lewis Herman is a leading expert on trauma and the ability to recover, Herman states that: “repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality” she is an advocate of support / therapy groups for survivors of trauma. Babette Rothschild is a therapist who writes eloquently of how trauma is ‘remembered by’ and ‘held’ in the body: “That traumatic events exact a toll on the body as well as the mind is a well-documented and agreed-upon conclusion of the psychiatric community”

In our modern age, in particular with our so called child protection policies and best attempts of Social Services and a Welfare System, there are many adult survivors of the most appalling child abuse, many, like the men who come to the Brave Project, have never had an opportunity to tell their stories, and they have often, for years, carried shame about their experiences. This shame is magnified if they have found themselves perpetuating the abuse they experienced in childhood, in turn harming those closest to them – often (ex) partners and children.

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When I hear the stories of the Brave Men I am reminded of how The Spartans and The Beserkers turned boys into fighting warriors. They had particularly harsh and abusive methods of 'training': 'Beserkers (or Beserks) were Norse warriors who are reported in the Old Norse literature to have fought in a nearly uncontrollable trance-like fury'- young boys were treated repeatedly with physical violence and abuse, so they would build up anger and rage, that would eventually fuel a fury as they went into battle 'creating a fierce fighting unit out of what began as a mad and indiscriminate rampage'

Stories of The Spartans, who were warrior people who oriented their whole society towards the common goal of turning their male children into the finest warriors in all of Greece' tell tales of boy babies being selected to live or die depending on their perceived 'strength' and potential to be warriors. Those who were deemed to be weak or deformed were known as 'tremblers' and abandoned to perish and die in ravines or mountains. Those lucky enough to live were taken away from their mothers at an early age and put into a special military school called the Agoge – the boys were made to fight each other, endure physical and psychological abuse, never show weakness or give in to pain.

Not much has changed in hundreds of years – the majority of men who come to Brave have had Beserker and Spartan 'training' during their childhoods, and when they walk through our doors, even though they are there because they are harming others, they are in fact damaged, wounded men, bearing the scars and trauma of life experiences. They wear many 'masks' – confidence, comedian, charmer, indifference, apathy, minimiser, family man, angel, brick wall, smooth operator, victim and perpetrator – if we manage to get them through the door, and start to build a relationship, and encourage them to come into the group – the journey towards responsibility, change, recovery, healing, can begin.

#### **4. How the group works – Love, Empathy and Compassion**

It was tough in the early years for The Brave Project – working with men who had issues of violence, anger and abuse, it often felt like a very lonely place to be, with the constant call for more funding for women and children's support services. I sensed a feeling at the local Domestic Violence Forum, that I was a 'traitor', working with the 'enemy' – even if it wasn't said out loud – there were times when I was surrounded by women's support workers that it felt like a taboo to talk positively about men.

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For several years I felt a pressure to be facilitating some kind of ‘all singing, all dancing’ clever programme, when all the time I was thinking – the most important thing seems to be getting the men to the project, and keeping them engaged with us.

We couldn’t work with a man if he didn’t turn up each week, so I started to trust my instincts and my counselling training, and put a lot of effort and mindfulness into our publicity – making sure it was male friendly and they could identify themselves with what we were offering, also being very respectful, warm and welcoming on the phone, and at the first appointment, trying to build trust and convey a sense that there would be something for the man to gain by continuing to attend. We realised how vital it was to be able to ‘see’ the man, ‘see’ beyond his behaviour, to ‘listen’ with our hearts and to model respect, empathy and congruence – the core conditions of Carl Rogers Client Centred Therapy, to really engage with, and nurture our relationships with the men. Rogers states ‘When I am at my best... as a therapist... when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self... Then whatever I do seems full of healing... simply my presence is releasing and helpful to others’

As we got to hear their stories, and how the Brave men relate to, family, partners and children, we realised that the majority of men have insecure attachment patterns. (often set in childhood due to experiences of neglect and abuse.)

After the second world war John Bowlby was commissioned to conduct research on the effects of maternal deprivation on children – his research concluded that babies and children need a safe, secure base, and secure attachments (in particular to mum) whom they trust to meet their needs, and give them love and care – in this environment they will thrive. If a child’s basic needs for love are not met, they will adapt and become mistrustful – insecure and sometimes avoidant in their behaviour – These early attachment patterns get played out later on in adult relationships.

So we became skilled in building trusting relationships with our Brave men, providing a safe and secure place for them to ‘take off their masks’, and as trust deepened in the group, the ‘check-in’ inevitable became the longest part of the session as each man took his turn and spoke his truth

Irving Yalom is an advocate of group therapy – groups instil hope, we have always had a lot of faith in what the men learn from each other (in a positive way), and slowly but surely I have found other inspirational professionals, academics and workers who believe like I do in working in a heart centred way. Put simply, I believe you have to show someone love and respect, before they will really listen, and take on board a challenge or confrontation.

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Alan Jenkins is a very respected Australian therapist, who has done extensive work with men and boys, he states 'If the therapeutic context is perceived by the man as a respectful one, the therapist can be increasingly confronting over time'. Sue Parker-Hall believes passionately in an empathic approach to anger management –

'The relentless offering of an empathic, respectful and real relationship.....consistently supports clients, across a wide range of diagnoses, to improve their emotional processing ability from the very first session' p33-34

We believe that there are other usually other powerful emotions flowing around anger and rage – namely fear and sadness. David McMillan's excellent book on Emotional Rituals suggests a very powerful technique for focussing on the hurt that anger defends called HEART, he also shares my belief that anger and rage are a defence around hurt and that if we focus only on the abusive behaviour of the men we work with we will 'shame' them, and they will become more defensive.

I believe that shame is a very 'toxic' emotion – it can strike at the heart of who we are as a person and reduce us to feeling small, diminishing self worth. McMillan states ' Shame is painful. It stops pleasure in it's tracks and reins in whatever action we are taking'. Feeling ashamed and humiliated is a very uncomfortable place to be, it's much easier to remain righteously angry, or blame others. We are very careful not to shame the men in The Brave Group, we have ground rules for respecting each other, and we lose men if they are reduced to a shame based place.

Our heart centred, respectful ways of engaging men have lead to men being involved with the project for years – some come for weeks, months, more.... And come back from time to time for top ups to continue on their journey of changing abusive behaviour and beliefs, I feel confident in saying they feel that their stories and feelings have been heard and validated

### **5. Authenticity, Apology and Forgiveness**

My work with men in the Brave Project has been very influenced by my 2005 travels in Australia and New Zealand –researching violence prevention work with men and boys. I visited many projects and talked to hundreds of people, including the indigenous people, who work with men and boys to end bullying, violence and abuse.

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This is a summary of what I came back with (the full report can be accessed from [www.brave-project.org](http://www.brave-project.org)):

Boys need men, to be actively and lovingly in their lives to support and guide them, they need good male role models, male focussed and gender specific interventions, men only spaces are vital (men's business) there are some things that boys can only learn from men, all the men in a community have a responsibility towards the boys, a strengths and resilience approach is more effective than a risk based approach – look at what's working well and do more of it, build 'emotional muscle', the elders in the community hold the stories of the ancestors that help boys make sense of their world and the journey from boy to man, the importance of speaking your truth, telling your story and being heard and 'appropriate rites of passage are essential so boys can see and learn how men deal with anger in a positive and constructive way.

A very important aspect of the work with the Brave men is the role of my male co-facilitator – whatever professional training he has completed is important, but what is most vital for me is that he is aware of his own journey boy to man, all the things that shaped and formed him, self awareness and an ability to see the Brave men as 'struggling brothers' to coin a phrase from my partner Pete Dominey who facilitated the Brave group with me for over 6 years, and who has worked hard on his own 'journey, and research into Men, Masculinities and Violence. My male co-facilitator and I model a healthy respectful way of men and women 'working' together in partnership, the men learn a lot from us, and they also teach us about their journeys.

So the challenge we face in working with the Brave men, as we get to hear the stories of horrific violence, abuse and bullying, is to be the best we can be as people, counsellors, therapists and group facilitators – authentic and real, compassionate, empathic, loving and respectful – this facilitates and enables the men to engage with us in a very real way, to move through their shame, and to become responsible for their behaviour, to recover and heal, forgiving themselves for their abusive behaviour as they come to understand all 'the pieces in the jigsaw' of their lives, to draw a line between the past and the present – with new resolve to be non-violent, to be strong and resilient enough to withstand the anger and rage of those they have hurt and abused, to hope for happy and healthier more loving relationships, hopefully forgiveness and acceptance of the men making their apologies – if there is a belief that their apology is authentic.

I believe that the men we work with are very brave to embark on this journey with us, and I think we are very brave to journey with them – but it is indeed

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a humbling experience, and the only way that I can work if I stay true to myself.

Is there any one of us who can truthfully say we have never been a 'perpetrator', never bullied, hurt or harmed another person?

I believe the way forward for all humanity and a better world is to treat others with honesty, love, compassion, respect and positive regard.

So what about bullies, perpetrators and abusers? The Brave Men ..... we need to have courage, faith and hope.....

I would ask that you consider this ... See the person, the human being, their vulnerability not just the behaviour!

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That's what I believe helps to change a bully into a healthy, non-abusive, respectful, caring, loving human being.

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