



Appealing to a man's better nature

Guest Column

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We are all familiar with the tragedy of domestic violence. No doubt most medical practitioners see a relatively large number of domestic violence victims and perpetrators on a weekly basis. Although the woman (most victims are women) can be offered a referral to a safe haven or support, our bigger challenge is how to effectively engage with men who are on a destructive path.

Unfortunately we are all familiar with how well men can fight when they feel backed into a corner. The emotion most accessible to many men is anger: men seem to do "righteous indignation" very well and our culture provides plenty of stories to support this belief. Some men get so engrossed in this "script".

One of our biggest challenges is how to effectively reach out and engage a man productively. Unfortunately, most of our strategies are blind to the basic psychology of the violent male. For example, about 30 years ago certain states in the US introduced a policy of arrest in all cases of reported domestic violence in the hope this would deter the violent male.

An interesting finding emerged – for those men who held down jobs the threat of arrest did work and the level of violence decreased. However, for unemployed men the violence escalated. The potential for angry defiance in a man who believes he has nothing to lose is not to be underestimated. We observe the same problem in trying to get some men respond to

violence restraining orders. Many just see it as throwing down the gauntlet and will escalate the violence. We need a better way.

Without conceding to the acceptability of any use of violence we can engage men better by appealing to their strengths. For most men this comes in the classic imperatives to provide and to protect.

Where children are involved we can get an alliance going with the male by seeking to assist him in his "mission" of protecting his children.

One of the more successful public health campaigns aimed at engaging men in treatment - the Freedom from Fear campaign - used this strategy to break through the blame layer to appeal to men. The advertising campaign focused on the suffering of the children and finished with a suggestion about what action the man could take to protect them.

This strategy provided an avenue for many men to seek help and deal with the conflict without getting side tracked into who was right

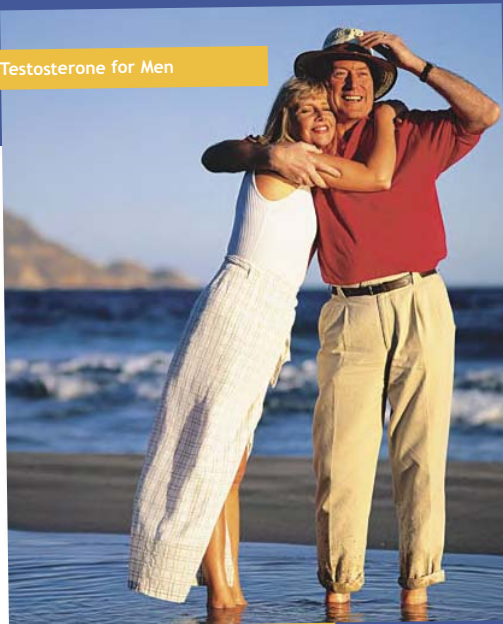
and who was wrong. In an effort to protect and provide for their children men are often willing to do "what it takes" to move on from destructive conflict.

The most important thing is to help the male who is hurting and in a posture of defensive rage. This involves enabling him to take action – but positive action.

One of the first steps is to get him in touch with the men's helpline as a first step to a process of thinking through what really will be effective for him and his children.

The Men's Domestic Violence Helpline is a free telephone information, referral and counselling service for men. Men calling the helpline can talk anonymously to trained professionals. Telephone 9223 1199 or (freecall STD) 1800 000 599. ●

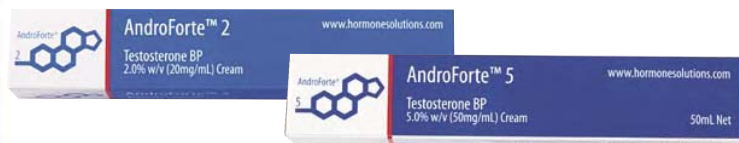
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