

Iowa Tries A New Domestic Violence Intervention: Mindfulness

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Across the parking lot from a YMCA in Des Moines, about a dozen men sit on black plastic chairs in the basement of a former Catholic high school.

This is a court-ordered class for domestic abusers, part of a new statewide curriculum for batterer intervention in Iowa. According to police reports, one man here kicked his wife several times in the stomach. Another threw a lamp at his girlfriend's head.

Lucas Sampson - a man with the imposing appearance of a viking but the gentle demeanor of Mister Rogers - hands out pieces of ice. The men sit silently, holding the ice in their palms, for about three minutes.

Afterwards, Sampson asks the men what they felt while they were holding the ice. They offer up responses: "Burning." "Numbness." "Tingling." "Anger." "Anxiety." "Irritation." "Blame."

This 24-week course is called ACTV: Achieving Change Through Values-Based Behavior. It was created by domestic violence researcher Amie Zarling at Iowa State University. ACTV marks a big shift from the accountability-focused classes most states have used for decades.

The course teaches that when most people get violent, it's because they don't understand their own emotions. The hope is that by getting abusers to recognize and tolerate uncomfortable feelings - like a freezing cold ice cube in their palm - they can stop themselves before they explode into rage. Sampson calls it "situational awareness."

Most of the ACTV class time is spent on discussion, talking about the participants' values and how the decisions they make can get in the way of the lives they want. Sampson tells the class that thoughts and feelings are like the weather: temporary. But impulsive actions driven by emotion can have long-term ramifications.

"One of the things we hear most," Sampson says after the class, "is 'I've never heard anything like this in my entire life. Why didn't they teach us this stuff in high school? It would be nice if I had some of these skills when I was younger, when I was first getting into a relationship.'"

The standard curriculum for abuse intervention hasn't changed much in decades. The best-known program, which Iowa used before switching to ACTV, is the [Duluth Model](#), which grew out of the feminist movement in the early 1980s. Duluth teaches that abuse grows from broader societal issues, including poverty, racism, and misogyny. It focuses on changing the power dynamic between men and women, encouraging offenders to take responsibility for their actions and then replace domineering thoughts with respectful ones.

ACTV creator Amie Zarling says the Duluth Model's approach doesn't work. Zarling says the theory about the root causes of domestic violence may be correct in many cases, but addressing societal issues isn't effective at the individual level.

"The basic ways we kind of mess up as humans is the same," she explains. "We need to be nonjudgmental in general, and allow them to learn the tools to change their own life, as opposed to forcing it on them with shaming and confrontation."

She adds that changing someone's thoughts is impossible.

"You know, it's kind of like if I told you to forget that you know how to speak English," Zarling says, "it's really had to unlearn that. And some social scientists and behaviorists would even argue that you can't unlearn something. Really you can just add additional learning."

So ACTV aims to teach abusers to respond differently to their thoughts.

To test the program's effectiveness, Zarling [compared](#) a group of 515 men who completed ACTV classes to a group of 1,921 who completed the old curriculum. In the 12 months after they took the classes, the ACTV

participants had about half the rate of new domestic violence arrests: 3.6 percent vs. 7 percent - and they were about a third less likely to commit *any* new offense.

Those early results were considered so promising that the Iowa Department of Corrections decided to transition all its batterer intervention classes to ACTV, and the program is getting national attention. In fact, Vermont has begun piloting it too. After the ACTV session in the Des Moines basement, one of the participants (NPR is not using his name, to protect his victim) says he thinks the class is making a difference for him. He says he's more self-aware and is learning new "mind tricks" from ACTV.

"My past mistakes have affected me a lot," he says. "I'm working towards the end goal of spending more time with my kids."

The man adds he's noticed changes since beginning ACTV, like having more patience with his construction employees.

"I can't go to them and say, 'you're an idiot,'" he says. "You got to go to them with a grain of salt and say, 'Listen you're doing it wrong, this is how you're doing it, please do it this way, or go home.'"

But not everyone is sold on the switch to ACTV. Some victims' advocates say they don't think emotional awareness alone will stop abuse if the batterer still feels contempt for their victim.

"Nothing ever is really going to change because the belief stays the same," says survivor Tiffany Allison, who founded the Des Moines-based victims' advocacy organization [Soaring Hearts](#).

Allison argues that recidivism data doesn't tell the whole story. Some victims may stop reporting assaults. And there are types of abuse that don't get you arrested, like controlling someone's money, preventing them from seeing their family, or calling them names.

She wants to see clear evidence that ACTV helps victims of abuse. Those studies haven't been done yet.

"We need to talk to the people who are most affected. We need to find out if this is actuality working in reality, not in this reality that we want to create," she says.

ACTV's creator, Amie Zarling, agrees with Allison about the lack of victim data. Even she's not sure there's enough research yet to justify the program going statewide.

"I have concerns about that," she says, "but it wasn't really up to me."

But Beth Skinner, director of Risk Reduction at the Iowa Department of Corrections, says she's confident this is the right decision. She says the department wasn't happy with the results from the Duluth Model, and she argues that Zarling's study shows that ACTV will make people safer.

"This is how the field moves forward in terms of innovation, and programs and practices," says Skinner. "Since we had the intended results in terms of recidivism reduction, we want to continue to expand that out."

We should find out soon if Skinner's correct. ACTV recently received a nearly \$392,000 research grant from the Department of Justice. Amie Zarling says victim impact will be part of that work.