Sorting Out Messages

If you are recovering from an addiction, you may be seeing a substance abuse counselor. If you are dealing with violence or abuse, you may be seeing a women’s advocate. If you are seeing a women’s advocate and a substance abuse counselor, you may be getting confused! These are some of the messages you may be hearing:

**Substance abuse counselor:** You have a disease. You need treatment.  
**Women’s advocate:** You are a victim of a crime. You need justice.

**Substance abuse counselor:** Your priority must be sobriety.  
**Women’s advocate:** Our priority is your safety.

**Substance abuse counselor:** You must accept your powerlessness.  
**Women’s advocate:** You need to be empowered.

**Substance abuse counselor:** You need to look for your part in your problems.  
**Women’s advocate:** You are not responsible for what happened. The perpetrator must be held accountable.

**Substance abuse counselor:** You need to change yourself and be of service to others.  
**Women’s advocate:** We need to change society.

Can these statements all be true? One way to reconcile the messages is to understand that substance abuse and violence are different problems. When people talk about different problems, they may need different words and different approaches. Here are some examples.

**Disease or criminal behavior?**
Addiction is a disease. It is not a crime. People do not choose how their bodies will respond to alcohol or drugs. People with addictions deserve treatment and recovery. Violence is a crime. It is not a disease. Perpetrators choose to commit domestic violence, sexual assault and sexual abuse. Their victims deserve justice.

**Safety first or sobriety first?**
For “recovering survivors,” both safety and sobriety must be priorities. Women’s advocates have clients develop a safety plan. Substance abuse counselors have clients develop a recovery plan. You can make recovery part of your safety plan, and safety part of your recovery plan.

**Powerlessness or empowerment?**
You are powerless over the impact of chemicals on your body. You are powerless over another person’s behavior. But you can choose to seek help getting safe and sober. When you make personal choices, you become empowered.

**Who is responsible?**
You are responsible for recovery from addiction. The perpetrator is responsible for violence. You are responsible for your own choices and your own behavior. You are not responsible for another person’s choices or behavior.
\textit{Social change or service to others?}

Service to others is one way to achieve social change. Working for social change can be a way to serve others. When people in 12-Step groups take a meeting to a jail or hospital, they serve others. They also create social change by making recovery available to more people. When abuse survivors make a T-shirt for the Clothesline Project, they help change public attitudes about violence. This serves other victims of violence.

Of course, sometimes the same approach \textit{can} work for different problems. People with addictions often take a “one day at a time” approach to recovery. This approach can also work well for women leaving a violent relationship or healing from abuse. Both recovering women and abused women can benefit by getting support from others.

When sorting out messages from helping professionals, be creative. Give yourself permission to reconcile the messages in a way that works for you. The most important thing is that you be able to benefit from both kinds of services.

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Some examples of the differing words and approaches used by women’s advocates and substance abuse counselors are adapted from \textit{Domestic Violence and Chemical Dependency: Different Languages}, developed by Theresa Zubretsky, New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. Available: www.thesafetyzone.org/alcohol/language.html

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