

A BETTER MAN

discussion guide



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“I desperately want domestic violence to stop. Art, storytelling, and deep, painful conversations are an integral part of the solution. By getting closer to the truth of what survivors experience, and of why men choose to use violence, we can help stop the violence.”

—Attiya Khan,
writer & co-director,
A BETTER MAN

A Better Man offers a fresh, nuanced look at the healing and revelation that can happen for everyone involved when people take responsibility for abusing their partners. The film depicts co-director Attiya Khan pursuing her personal vision of justice and closure with the man who abused her 20 years ago.

This discussion kit is designed to help audience members unpack the film’s key themes together, and begin to envision new roles they can play in challenging domestic violence, whether it’s in their own relationships or as part of a broader movement for social change. This kit can be used to spark discussion in formal or informal settings, from a community workshop to your living room.

SOCIAL ISSUE BACKGROUND

Gender-based violence is among the most pervasive human rights violations in the world, with the United Nations reporting that up to 70% of women have been subject to a form of physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner or loved one. The UN defines violence against women as:

any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (UN 1993).

According to a 2013 *Statistics Canada report*, the rate of violent crime against young women aged 15 to 24 was 42% higher than the rate for women aged 25 to 34, and nearly double the rate for women aged 35 to 44. The study also found that women aged 15 to 24 were the most vulnerable to certain types of dating violence, namely sexual violations. Approximately every six days, a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner.

Despite these startling statistics, in North America, relatively little has been invested in the rehabilitation of men who have used violence with a view to preventing future instances of abuse. Tackling this issue requires changes in norms in society and changes in behaviour within individuals. The UN Human Rights Council's resolution on eliminating domestic violence emphasizes the important role that men and boys can play and encourages them to become strategic partners and allies. It also stresses the importance of effectively responding to violence against boys as well, in order to break intergenerational cycles of violence.

DISCUSSION ENVIRONMENT

WORDS MATTER survivor. victim. plaintiff. person who experienced violence.

Some people identify with one of these terms—others don't! Whenever possible, ask the person what they prefer.

Get more information on the resources page at:
abettermanfilm.com

The subject matter of *A Better Man* and any discussions about the film can be painful or triggering for some. We encourage those engaging in a group discussion about the film to treat one another with care and compassion, recognizing that our opinions about intimate partner violence may be rooted in our own experiences.

Ideally, discussion about *A Better Man* should take place in a calm and quiet space to facilitate reflection and dispel concerns that others might overhear the discussion. In more formal contexts such as a workshop, it is advisable to have a counselor or active listener available for private discussion with participants who need support. It may also be helpful to prepare a list of local support services and resources for participants (get started on our website: abettermanfilm.com).

To base the conversation on trust, it may be helpful for the group to brainstorm a list of ground rules for the discussion. Ground rules could include:

- Things shared in the discussion will not be relayed to others as gossip.
- Nobody will be pressured to share things they don't want to.
- Responses from women and transgender people will be prioritized.

LANGUAGE NOTES

POWER OF WORDS

**abuser. perpetrator.
defendant. person who
has used violence.**

Each of these terms means something unique. Say what you mean.

Learn more at:
abettermanfilm.com

People of any gender identity are capable of using or experiencing violence in intimate partnerships, including those who do not identify as men or women. For this reason, we use gender-neutral language throughout most of this kit (e.g. “people”, “they/them/their”). However, it is important to acknowledge that intimate partner abuse is a gendered form of violence. The majority of people who use violence against their partners are cisgender men (i.e. men whose sex organs match the gender with which they identify), and the majority of people who experience violence are cisgender women and transgender people.

We also refrain from labeling language such as “survivor” or “victim,” opting instead for the term “people who have experienced violence,” although people should always be free to identify or label their own experiences however they wish. We also avoid labeling language such as “abuser” or “perpetrator,” instead using the term “people who have used violence.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Icebreakers

- If you could choose one word to describe how you feel after watching *A Better Man*, what would it be? Why?
- If you could say one thing to Attiya, what would it be? If you could say one thing to Steve, what would it be?
- Is there a person or group in your community who would benefit from watching *A Better Man*? Who, and why?

Taking Responsibility

- To what extent do you feel Steve has taken responsibility for his abuse? What other steps could Steve take to continue this journey?
- How do you think Attiya felt about Steve’s efforts to take responsibility?
- What role did Attiya play in Steve’s efforts to take responsibility? How do you think this role affected her?

FACILITATOR NOTE:

It may be helpful to define the term “emotional labour”: managing feelings and expressions (our own and those of others) to serve the needs of a personal or professional relationship.

The Process

- This film depicts a process that Attiya chose on her own terms. Why might a person who has experienced violence not want to undergo a process like the one in *A Better Man*?
- What conditions might be necessary for these kinds of processes to proceed safely and effectively?
- How is the process in *A Better Man* similar to the way the criminal court system addresses abuse? How is it different?

Intimate Partner Violence and Society

- How did people outside of Attiya and Steve's relationship respond (or not) to the abuse? Would you have liked any of them to respond differently? If so, how?
- How did sexism and racism influence Steve's abuse of Attiya?
- What unhealthy beliefs or attitudes about relationships might have influenced Steve's choices to use violence against Attiya?

FACILITATOR NOTE:

Responses from women and non-binary people, particularly those who are racialized, should be given priority.

Defining Justice

- The film depicts Attiya's personal definition of justice: to speak to the person who hurt her about the impact of his actions, and to witness him acknowledging those impacts. What does the word "justice" mean to you?
- Can you think of a time that "justice was done" after somebody hurt you? What, and who, contributed to that sense of justice?
- Now think of a time you hurt someone else. What did you do (or wish you had done) to take responsibility?
- What can we do to ensure that our efforts to take responsibility for hurting someone do not cause further harm?

ACTIVITY: PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In cases of intimate partner violence, both partners need help. The person who experienced violence needs support to heal and feel a sense of safety and justice. The person who used violence needs support to take responsibility and change their behaviour. Both partners may benefit from certain changes in the values, actions or beliefs of the person who used violence.

List all the possible needs you can imagine for each of the following sections. Each list may include contradictions, because different people will have different needs.

NEEDS	EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE	USED VIOLENCE
Material resources e.g. money for childcare		
Social support e.g. a mentor in a respectful and healthy relationship		
Access to services e.g. affordable immigration lawyer		
Actions or changes: community e.g. training on IPV for the student union		
Actions or changes: person who used violence e.g. undergoing counseling		

Compare these lists. How do the different sets of needs intersect? How do they conflict? Name possible courses of action if the partners' needs conflict.

What roles could community members play in fulfilling these needs (e.g. friends, family, co-workers)? What roles could institutions play (e.g. media, schools, government, employers, courts)? How could you support individuals or institutions in playing these roles more effectively?

FURTHER LEARNING

Some participants may wish to dive further into the topics of intimate partner violence, justice and healing. The following links may be especially helpful in promoting reflection, discussion and learning. For more suggestions, visit: abettermanfilm.com.

9 ways to be accountable when you've been abusive

By: Everyday Feminism (Author: Kai Cheng-Thom)

Great for: People who have used violence and wish to learn how they might be able to take responsibility for the harm they have caused.

Link: (<http://bit.ly/1PPiLwo>)

Neighbours, Friends and Families

By: Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University

Great for: People whose friends, family or community members are experiencing or using violence. Includes tips on safety planning, identifying and supporting those who may be experiencing violence, and speaking with those who are using violence.

Link: (<http://bit.ly/1uNWtFD>)

6 ways to confront your friend who's abusing their partner

By: Everyday Feminism (Author: Kai Cheng-Thom)

Great for: People who wish to speak with a friend or loved one about their abusive choices. This article's approach affirms the humanity of the person using violence as well as the person experiencing it, and holds space for complicated feelings.

Link: (<http://bit.ly/1goZFTn>)

The Peak Magazine, Transformative justice issue

By: The Peak Magazine (various authors and contributors)

Great for: Anyone seeking an introduction to the principles of transformative justice. Includes many examples of how to put the principles into action, in settings ranging from prisons to schools to our own homes and personal relationships.

Link: (<http://bit.ly/2fmWMbR>)

Restorative justice e-library

By: Restorative Justice for All

Great for: People who wish to learn more about the theory and practice of restorative justice through a searchable catalogue of multimedia resources.

Link: (<http://bit.ly/2xkcGun>)

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