We make an assumption in the Sanctuary Model that violence is a group phenomenon and that when violence has occurred the entire group has failed to prevent it, not just the individuals immediately involved. We see the violent person as the weak link in a complex web of interaction that culminates in violence after a cascade of previous, apparently nonviolent events. This movement away from individualism and an absence of context means that new strategies for intervening in and even preventing the emergence of violence become available to the group. Consequently, every act of violence must be analyzed as a problem for and of the entire community and must be resolved by the individuals involved AND the group.

When we shift our focus away from individual outbursts of violence and instead look at all episodes of any kind of violence as a breach of our social defenses that occur in a context that is likely to involve everyone in the group, then we begin thinking in a different way about the entire issue. A useful way to think about this interaction between individual and group is through the metaphor of our own immune system. We think of this as a group’s ability to enhance its “social immunity”. The idea is that we are each surrounded by potentially harmful bacteria and viruses all the time – and yet we usually stay well. What keeps our immune system healthy? As long as you are healthy, your immune system is steadily working to keep infectious agents away from your vital organs and as a result, you don’t get sick. But if you are overtired, stressed, depleted – or if the infectious agent is overwhelmingly powerful – then your defenses are breached and you get sick. Once our immune system is vulnerable, all kinds of things can snowball.

We think of the social body in a similar way, that when we are in a poor state of social health, when there are unconscious interpersonal conflicts, when there are secrets being held, when there is a great deal of stress – the usual defenses of the social body are breached and that is when violence emerges. If we view violence as the contagious agent that can be spread physically, psychologically, socially, or morally then we can begin to think about what keeps us safe from “infection”? And how has our social immunity failed when violence breaks out in a group? How did our shared containment of the violent impulses that exist potentially within all of us all the time suddenly emerge?
By making a Commitment to Nonviolence we commit to eliminating all threats to safety including physical, aggression, demeaning language, threatening glares, apathy, avoidance and any other behavior that permits people to impose their will on each other and abuse power. If staff do not feel safe they cannot help clients feel safe and if clients do not feel safe they cannot do the difficult work necessary to change.

To create nonviolent environments, it is necessary for us to make some reasoned assumptions about how violence evolves within a group. Rarely is an episode of violence in a community a singular and unconnected event. Violent episodes always have a history but that history is not always immediately evident. Violence is relational. It may take a great deal of probing and investigation to figure out cause and effect relationships but they are there. Conflict is the alarm bell of the social immune system so when tracing the evolution of an episode of violence, look for the conflict, particularly the conflict that was below the surface (link to collective disturbance). Unfortunately, rather than reviewing the full complexity and deep understanding of emergent violent episodes, it is quite likely that the only thing that will happen is a lot of finger-pointing and blaming. Getting to the heart of violence requires change and rather than change we substitute scapegoating for real problem identification and solution in far too many cases.

Keeping Your Social Immune System Healthy

Since the earliest days of the therapeutic community movement, it has been recognized that when therapeutic milieu principles are practiced and nonviolent norms are accepted as routine a decrease in violent acting out occurs [1]. A team that shares similar assumptions, goals and practices are able to develop “team mind”, a way of working together smoothly and flexibly while providing a strong and certain perimeter of containment and safety within which traumatized and overwhelmed clients can explore the stormy world of the past while changing behavior in the present.

If we have a shared understanding of these ways in which violence evolves in a group, then it becomes possible to create nonviolent environments. Establishing and routinely reiterating nonviolent norms within the entire community is vital. People tend to live up to expectations and when we expect socially responsible behavior on everyone’s part, we tend to get it. Recognizing the signs of a growing crisis is vital and having enough interpersonal trust established that it is safe for staff members to surface conflict among each other without fear of retribution is necessary if crises are to be averted. Institutional leadership must be willing to recognize the role they play in either creating or resolving collective disturbances and must
be willing to surface and address uncomfortable conflicts that may be resting at the level of ethical, not procedural, dilemmas.

An environment committed to nonviolence, therefore, is one that is committed to understanding every episode of the emergence of any kind of violence and learning how and why the normal social barriers against violence broke apart and therefore how to better protect the well-being of the community in the future. This is why it is vitally important that every episode of physical, psychological, social, or moral violence is thoroughly debriefed and that the results are communicated throughout the whole community – so that social learning can occur.

In order to protect our social immune system, members of the community must have a basic understanding about the roots of violence, what triggers violence, and the manner in which violence spreads. The roots of violence are in the adversity the person has been exposed to, including the structural kinds of violence inherent in poverty, racism, discrimination and all forms of injustice. Violence can be triggered by anything that hurts the person again, reminds them of some pain from the past, and that provokes the natural human desire to retaliate. Unfortunately, nobody comes into a social service environment with a handy movie of their life available so that staff members would know each individual’s vulnerabilities. So, we have to institute “universal precautions” in our service environments that can at least minimize the chances that we will trigger people’s pain. Committing to Nonviolence represents some of those universal precautions. Violence spreads easily in any community because of the social nature of the human species. We are deeply programmed to respond to one person's aggression with our own retaliatory aggression – instantaneously and in a deeply biological and psychological way. So, the less violence there is in any environment, the less violence there will be. See: our guidelines for keeping your social immune system in good health.

References