



When Violence Hits Home: Bringing the Facts to Light

Domestic violence is not a new problem. For most of our culture's existence, we knew it was happening but we did not talk about it. This is changing.

Not only are more people talking about domestic violence, many are doing something about it.

Individuals are making choices to leave abusive relationships. Agencies are providing services and education. A few communities are taking a stand against violence and are working together to end tragedies like abuse. More than ever, there is hope.

By learning the facts about domestic violence, you can become a part of the hope that will end this injustice. Silence and secrecy simply deepen the suffering. Admitting the truth and bringing it to light creates an environment where positive choices and freedom are possible.

Since batterers are generally men, we use he/him/man to refer to the abuser. However, a very small percentage of women abuse men. In these cases, the dynamics are very similar to the material presented here.

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a complex issue. Most victims are women. A growing number of victims are teenagers in abusive dating relationships. Most abusers are men, although a small percentage of men experience abuse. Relationship violence occurs in every ethnic

group, every income level, and every age range. It could be happening to anyone.

This abusive pattern has no single cause and no definitive cure. Time typically sees the abuse become worse, not better. Counseling—which makes a difference in many other problems—can make the situation more volatile. Both the victim and the abuser may say they want the violence to end—but it often continues.

Even the acts of violence are complex. The dynamics are as varied and complex as the individuals involved.

At the heart of domestic violence is the abuser's compulsion to gain power over and to control the other person. The abuser regularly uses many tactics to dominate and dehumanize the victim. (See figure 1.)

The "mind games" and manipulation wear down self esteem, independence, and the ability to think objectively about the situation.

Periodically, abuse will escalate into extreme physical violence or sexual assault: beatings, using weapons, or rape. This intermittent, severe trauma strongly reinforces the abuser's power over victim. Like the band around a wagon wheel holds the wheel together, violence forms a band which binds these tactics of power and control into a system of abuse.

Once formed, such a pattern is very difficult to break. Generally, the people caught up in it—the

victim and the abuser—cannot break free without help and support from nonabusive people outside this family system of abuse.

Why Violence?

Why do some relationships experience violence? It isn't a matter of conflict or disagreements. There are disagreements in every relationship. It isn't simply a matter of witnessing violence or being abused as a child. Many people with these factors in their pasts face their hurt, heal, and have healthy relationships. They do not abuse others. It isn't substance abuse; those who commit domestic violence have been shown to commit violence whether or not they are under the influence of a drug or alcohol. So why does violence happen in some intimate relationships?

It is a choice.

It is an individual choice.

The abuser has many choices about the relationship and dealing with life (whether or not he feels like he does):

- I could get help.
- I could improve myself.
- I could talk about potential problems before I feel overwhelmed by them.
- I could appreciate her good qualities and ignore her imperfections.
- I could leave,...etc.

Abuse happens when the abuser *chooses* to assault, insult, manipulate, sabotage, dominate, and destroy. The violence is the abuser's fault, the abuser's choice.

It is a social choice. Most communities and our nation as a whole have been silent until recent years. Few people have stepped forward to say "This is wrong." Few have worked to hold law enforcement agencies accountable to enforce laws which protect victims. Few have held their neighbors, brothers, friends, or

employees accountable for their violent behavior.

Because we have chosen to remain silent, we have created a social environment where abusers are able to do whatever they want to victims. We have created an environment where batterers can even believe that wrong behaviors are "right," that they "have a right"

to treat spouses or friends as if they are not human beings.

The victims, too, have choices, and they take an active role in trying to prevent the violence. When the abuse begins, most women turn to family or friends for advice. Often these people tell her to solve the "problem" by herself. So she tries to appease him

Power and Control Wheel



by making a favorite meal or being very attentive.

Thinking that she is the problem, the woman changes her behavior in the hopes that he will not abuse her. However, she cannot change him by changing herself. In fact, her strategies for trying to limit his violence against her may help keep her trapped in the victim role.

An abused woman can choose to remain a victim of abuse or refuse to be a victim. For her to exercise this choice, it must be a *real* choice.

- She needs humane laws that are enforced.
- She needs a way to get out of dangerous situations and a place to stay for a while so she can be safe.
- Some women need a way to get out of the relationship altogether; many abusers never stop being violent.
- The abused woman needs a social environment which recognizes that violence and human degradation are wrong.
- She needs people to tell her the truth. If she has been isolated, all she may have heard are his lies: “You are worthless.” “No one will believe you.” “You deserve it.” “No one else would want you.” “I will kill you if you try to leave and no one will care.”

She has a choice, but it is costly and difficult. Support from individuals and the community can lessen the obstacles to her making and living her own choices.

Violence is not an involuntary, uncontrollable act. It is a choice. And, choice is good news. If we have the power to choose violence (or to tolerate violence), we also have the power to choose to stop the violence.

Why Doesn't He Stop His Violence?

Several factors help keep violence entrenched in the abuser's life.

First, a batterer stubbornly chooses to not stop. Most batterers never choose to stop their abusive behavior until it is exposed and they are held accountable, usually by arrest. Even then, many batterers soon return to their abusive patterns.

Secondly, abuse is a learned behavior. The batterer has learned to use violence and coercion to deal with insecurities and problems, usually to the exclusion of other coping skills. If the batterer chooses to stop the violence, living out this choice is very difficult. A batterer must be willing to learn (and often have help to learn) new ways of coping and relating.

Third, as long as violence pays, the batterer will be violent. If the partner gives in to an abuser's demands, the violence will continue. If no one, including family, neighbors, church members, and the boss, offer any consequences to an abuser's behavior, there is little incentive to stop. An abuser's perspective is this: why should tremendous energy be expended to learn how to live differently and to face one's insecurities (an overwhelming prospect to an abuser!) when the abuse seems to bring what the abuser wants?

Individuals, communities, and society as a whole must cooperate to create a social environment that promotes change in batterers. This includes recognizing abuse as wrong and holding batterers accountable for their behavior.

We can work together to create a social environment where violence does *not* pay. And, we should compassionately but carefully provide support to help

batterers who are willing to learn alternatives to violence.

Why Doesn't She Leave?

Is there something wrong with a woman that makes her stay? Not at all. Leaving isn't the simple solution we might like to think it is. There are many sane but complex reasons why she might stay.

Fear. The abuser has made terrible threats and has demonstrated he can hurt her. He may have terrorized her like this: “No one else would want you.” “I will take the children; you will never see them again.” “I will kill you (or your parents, children) if you try to leave. I will hunt you down and bring you back and show you just how mean I can be.” She has every reason to believe he could and would.

Economics. She may be financially dependent. Perhaps she needs more job skills or experience to support herself and her children. Even if she had education and experience, there are few jobs where a woman can support a family above the poverty level on her own. She may have no or little money to leave with; there would be no way to pay rent, survive until she could earn a paycheck, or perhaps even to get out of town. Batterers often liquidate women's assets and deny them access to money.

Low self-esteem. After hearing little but his condemnation for all this time, she probably believes the lies he has told her.

For example:

- Lie: It is a man's right to beat a woman. (Truth: It is against the law.)
- Lie: You did something wrong and deserve it. (Truth: He may beat her no matter how “good” she is.)
- Lie: “You made the bed, now lie in it.” (Truth: He was the one who “made the bed” violent; she

can choose to “not lie in it.” So can he.)

• Lie: There is no way out.
(Truth: There is.)

Shame. She may feel she is the only person facing this situation. She feels alone, humiliated, and disgraced. She may have no one to tell her otherwise; batterers often cut off their partners’ relationships with family, friends, and other supportive people. He might not even allow her out of the house or to use the telephone.

Surviving the moment. She is very busy focusing on how to survive this day, this moment. In order to cope with the tremendous stress and trauma, she has developed a “tunnel vision” that allows her to manage right now. Unfortunately, this may prevent her from seeing the dangers, as well as the opportunities, for change that may lie ahead.

Hopelessness. Being victimized in this situation may trigger an avalanche of feelings from the past if she has been a victim of child abuse. This may compound her sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Women who were not abused as children still have cause to feel hopeless. The batterer has blamed her for the problem. Yet, no matter how perfect she has been, he still abuses her. She doesn’t realize it is his fault, not hers. She may not be aware that there are alternatives: people and resources that can help her. She may have tried to seek help from others, or even from the legal system, and been thwarted by barriers (this is common). She may have had little success in solving her problems and has lost heart.

Attachment. She probably has intense feelings for him still. He is the father of her children. And, when he is not abusing her, he may actually be kind or charming. At the very least, it is difficult for her

to bury the “happily ever after” she dreamed of beneath her wedding veil. She may tie herself more tightly to him emotionally, trying to change him or to save him, making excuses for him, and trying to be responsible for his behavior. “What would happen to him if I weren’t here to take care of him?”

Choosing to leave, even just for one night, takes courage. Choosing to stay away for a while takes tremendous strength, for he will harass her, woo her, or do whatever he thinks he must to get her back under his control. Often the couple must be separated for some time before the batterer will seek help. Without the separation, he may have no incentive to change. If the separation is too short, he will likely abandon all efforts to address his problems and soon the abuse will be as bad or worse than before.

How Can I Help Someone I Care About?

1. *Recognize the effects of domestic violence in their life:*

- poorly explained injuries or work absences.
- social isolation: the abuser often isolates the victim from friends, coworkers, and family members. He may not allow her to go out of the house or to talk to anyone without his permission or presence.
 - low self-esteem, self-deprecating talk.
 - depression, fear, and guilt.
 - feelings of failure, confusion, and hopelessness.
 - difficulty establishing friendships, possibly due to the abuser’s attempts to isolate the victim or feelings of unworthiness brought by the abuse.
 - increased physical illness: headaches, stomach ailments, minor illnesses—often a side effect of stress.
 - a few victims turn to substance

abuse

to try to escape their painful situation or are coerced into drug or alcohol use by the abusive partner. The abuser then uses the addictive substance as another way to control and exploit her.

2. **Realize that victims are not at fault for the abuse, and tell them so...often.** Affirm that they are valuable and that they have choices. Contact the crisis center serving your area for more suggestions about being supportive.

3. **Help victims focus on the children.** Battered women are more likely to seek help and safety when they realize their children are at risk. These children are often in danger of physical harm (including child abuse) and are always in danger of psychological harm. Some grow up to repeat the “victim” or “abuser” roles.

4. **Hold abusers accountable for their actions.** Immediately report domestic violence to the police when you see or hear it. (According to state law, police officers are required to make an arrest if they see probable cause that the crime of domestic violence has occurred.) Join with family members, friends, your church, and your community to publicly take a stand against domestic violence.

5. **Support programs which serve victims.** Many need volunteers and consistent funding. Donations of food, clothing, and toiletries are helpful; many women and children leave home during a violent episode with little but their lives.

6. **Offer support to a recovering batterer you know.** Batterers need to be accepted and valued, although the violence should NEVER be condoned. Honest friendships may give them the opportunity to develop healthier relationship skills and provide resources to help them (and their families) cope during

difficult times—instead of using violence.

7. **Prevent violence.** Share this information with youth who are beginning to think about dating. Find creative, effective ways to strengthen the self-esteem of children in your sphere of influence. Teach them that they never deserve abuse and that abusing others is wrong. Children, youth, and even other adults need role models. Learn more about and model healthy relationship skills, healthy problem-solving skills, and a willingness to face your personal hurts and inadequacies.

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Recommended Reading

Daniel Jay Sonkin and Michael Durphy. *Learning to Live Without Violence: A Handbook for Men*. Volcano, California: Volcano Press, 1989. For more information, call 209-296-3445

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