

IDENTIFY, UNDERSTAND, INTERVENE: Training Manual on Domestic Violence



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PREPARED BY THE LCMS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE TASK FORCE

DOMESTIC ABUSE, PART 1:

Training for Pastors and Church Workers to Understand and Identify

- UPDATED APRIL 2015 -



WHY TRAINING MATERIAL?

The following is a tragically common experience for pastors and other church workers. Imagine....

Deborah and Richard have been attending your church for about three years, having transferred from a church across town, which Richard told you was changing in ways they did not approve. They have two boys, and the oldest has just started college. They come to service pretty regularly, missing about once a month. They are not particularly active in the church. They do not attend Bible study or voters' meetings, nor are they on any committees or organizations.

To your surprise, Deborah calls on you at your office on Tuesday. She tells you she wanted to explain why they were not in church on Sunday. She proceeds to tell you that Richard had beaten her up on Friday night. Then she stops talking and looks at you.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



BACKGROUND



In 1992, LCMS President Al Barry convened a Commission on Women to look into domestic violence. In 2001, the Commission produced and distributed a booklet titled *“Never Will I Leave You: A Pastor’s Handbook on Domestic Violence.”* At the 2007 convention, Resolution 6-06 mandated the Board for Human Care Ministries to appoint a committee to “examine the issues of DV/CA (domestic violence and child abuse)” and “provide materials and train individuals to assist districts, congregations and schools in addressing abuse and ministering to the spiritual needs of those affected by abuse.” Through a grant from the InFaith Community Foundation, the Domestic Violence and Child Abuse (DVCA) Task Force was created. The task force reviewed existing materials and determined they were not appropriate for LCMS use. The 2010 convention resolved to continue work.

This information is intended as a supplement to a formal training presentation that has been developed. It is hoped that attendees at one of the formal training presentations will review this material prior to the presentation, in order to maximize the benefits obtained at the presentation.

This material has two parts. This first part consists of information to help you identify and understand domestic abuse. The second part includes information to help you intervene.

PREVIEW

This first part of training contains information intended to help you better understand domestic abuse, including identifying when it is happening. It starts by distinguishing domestic abuse from “situational violence,” which is an unfortunate but singular incident of violence. Following that, domestic abuse is defined, and statistics and risk factors for domestic abuse are presented. After describing the various types of abuse, we describe the typical “mentality” of abusers. Following that, the psychological and environmental factors that constrain or impede a victim’s capacity to end the abuse are described. This will hopefully answer the common but uninformed question, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” Finally, a description of the various laws and police protocols related to domestic abuse are presented.

SITUATIONAL VIOLENCE

It is important to understand the distinction between domestic abuse and situational violence.

The majority of violence among couples is “**situational violence**.” This occurs when a conflict, argument or anger escalates to the point of violence. Situational violence is sudden, unexpected and unplanned.

Situational violence is equally likely by men and women. It may entail violence by one person against another, including female-on-male violence. It may entail mutual violence.

Situational violence occurs when one or both persons in the relationship have poor anger control or conflict resolution skills. *It is most likely during stressful situations* and is often referred to as “**stress-induced violence**.” It is thus most likely to occur at the beginning (e.g., a new couple confronting a stressful incident) or at the end of a relationship (a couple going through a divorce, where hurt feelings and angry emotions are running high). Situational violence can be quite severe, resulting in

A WORD ABOUT WORD CHOICES

The developers of this training have carefully considered word usage.

The modern and frequently preferred terminology (by current articles and textbooks) for domestic abuse is **“intimate partner violence” (IPV)**. Because “domestic” derives from the Latin “domus” and might imply a marital relationship, IPV is used to indicate that violence might occur outside of marriage (e.g., dating, cohabitating). Nonetheless, the term **“domestic abuse”** will be used because (a) *it is familiar terminology to most people*; (b) *abuse often does not include a violent act*; (c) *IPV and other terms suggest discrete incidents, whereas domestic abuse is an ongoing situation*; and (d) *“abuse” properly suggests the misuse of position or authority*.

The terms **“victims”** and **“survivors”** are used. A **“victim”** *is someone currently in an abusive situation*. The term is not meant to imply helplessness, but is meant to acknowledge the awfulness of the current situation. A **“survivor”** *is someone emerged from a past situation of abuse*. A survivor may have overcome the effects of abuse or may still be experiencing those effects. Both terms are intended to be honorific and respectful.

In this presentation, the term **“domestic violence”** *will be used to describe physical violence*. Otherwise, the term **“domestic abuse”** will be used.

The training program tends to use male pronouns to describe abusers and female pronouns to describe victims and survivors. This is because the majority of domestic abuse — and almost all serious violence — is perpetrated by men against women. Nonetheless, it is important neither to understate nor underestimate the reality and seriousness of female-on-male violence. Men can be victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Men can be injured. Men can suffer long-term effects. You may confront female-on-male domestic abuse. Likewise, you may confront instances of “mutual violence.” *This training applies to all situations.*

DEBUNKING THE CLAIM “WOMEN ARE AS VIOLENT AS MEN.”

Readers may hear (perhaps have already heard) it claimed, “Women are as violent as men.” This is true in regard to “situational violence,” but it is not true in the case of domestic abuse. Also, the vast majority of serious violence (requiring medical intervention) is male against female.

injury or even death. It also can cause serious damage to the emotional health of those involved and can cause severe harm to the relationship.

As will now be seen, situational violence is quite distinct from domestic abuse, *but it is not up to you to make the distinction*. You should NEVER attempt to make this distinction. To do so might endanger a victim of domestic abuse. Whenever an episode of violence is confronted, the proper response is to recommend professional help, where the distinction can be properly made. If it is situational violence, it is likely that both will be motivated to understand and stop it from ever happening again. A referral will ensure that the couple can learn to manage anger and conflict more constructively.

DOMESTIC ABUSE: A DEFINITION

“Domestic abuse” is defined as a *deliberate pattern of behavior* used by a person in an intimate relationship to intimidate his or her partner and thereby *gain or maintain power and control*. (Also see definitions by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Justice and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.)

- **Deliberate.** Domestic abuse is not a loss of control. It is intentional and goal-directed. The abuser will assert otherwise. He wants the victim and anyone who might find out about the behavior to believe that he loses control (“*I lost control*,” “*I don’t know why this happens*,” “*This isn’t me*,” “*I hate it when this happens*”). How do we know it is deliberate? Examine the evidence. The abuser *chooses* when and where he is abusive. He never acts that way at work or in public. The abuser *chooses carefully* against whom he commits abuse. He doesn’t insult, threaten or hit everyone. The abuser *chooses* to stop the behavior when necessary, such as when the police arrive, the phone rings or the doorbell sounds. The abuser *chooses* how he abuses. He directs the blows at body parts that won’t be readily seen, such as the upper arms and the thighs.
- **A pattern of behavior.** Domestic abuse is not a single incident. Incidents might be sporadic or they might be continual, but by definition they occur repeatedly (contrast to “situational violence”). To achieve his goals, the abuser creates an expectation of future abuse. Each incident will build upon previous incidents.
- **Goal-directed.** Domestic abuse is goal-driven. It is intended to create a situation rife with fear and intimidation in order to achieve power and control (i.e., obedience) over the victim. In striving for this goal, the abuser will likely assert some fault on the part of the victim to explain the abusive behavior (“*If you had not done this, then I wouldn’t have had to do that*”). Perhaps because she genuinely believes such claims or because she believes she has no choice, the victim may attempt to correct those “faults.”

To summarize, the abuser will repeatedly inflict terrifying and/or painful experiences while claiming that there is nothing he can do to stop because he has no control or because it is her fault. (It should be noted that many abusers achieve terror with only infrequent episodes of actual violence. They use threats of violence and/or emotional abuse to achieve their goal.) This creates the expectation that there will be more abuse, causing a situation teeming with fear and intimidation. The victim may have no choice but to do as he says, when he says, how he says, lest there be more abuse. He has achieved control.

STATISTICS AND RISK FACTORS



National and state-by-state statistics about domestic abuse are readily available. When searching for and viewing statistics, readers should keep in mind that statistics tend to focus on violent incidents. There is a lack of statistics about other forms of abuse (see next section), which are more common.

Statistics clearly indicate that violence against women of all ages is appallingly common.

- ▶ One in four women has experienced domestic abuse in her lifetime (usually by a family member).
- ▶ Nearly one in five teenage girls said a boyfriend threatened violence or self-harm if presented with a breakup.
- ▶ One in five female high school students and one in four college students have reported that they were either abused physically or sexually (or both) by a dating partner.
- ▶ 8 percent of pregnant women have been assaulted while pregnant.
- ▶ 11 percent of female homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner.

The negative impact that violence and emotional abuse have on females is enormous. Half of females that experience violence suffer serious injury at the hands of their partner. Violence by a partner is the leading cause of injury to women — more than car accidents, muggings and rapes combined. Related to the

effects of emotional abuse, research shows that most victims do not seek medical care (sometimes because they are not allowed to, sometimes out of shame) or contact the police.

Research has identified risk factors for being a victim of domestic violence. Risk factors are demographic characteristics that make it more likely that someone will become a victim.

- ▶ Gender is the primary risk factor, as 90 percent of persons abused are female.
- ▶ Women between 20-24 years old are at greatest risk than other cohorts.
- ▶ Black, non-Hispanic women and white, non-Hispanic women are the most likely to be victims.

No one should overlook the reality of female-on-male violence. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in seven adult men in the U.S. will be the victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in his lifetime. One in 10 men experience rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner. Male victims experience similar psychological problems as a result of abuse, but they are even less likely than female victims to seek help from either police or health-care professionals.

Finally, the sins of the father are often paid for by the children. It is estimated that 10 million children witness domestic violence annually. The effects on children are devastating, resulting in school and social problems, increased risk for mental illness and suicide, and increased risk for becoming a victim or an abuser.

TYPES OF ABUSE

The common perception is that abuse always involves violence. Violence is an effective way to intimidate the victim, and most abusive relationships have at least one violent episode. However, violence might be infrequent. Being familiar with the various types of abusive incidents is important.

Keep in mind that any particular incident might include numerous “types” of abuse (e.g., a mix of violence and verbal abuse). Also keep in mind that, regardless of the type of abusive behavior, the goal of intimidation and control remains the same. Finally, know that some — but not all — of these types of abuse are illegal.

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Physical abuse entails any act that intentionally causes bodily harm to the victim. It includes punching, hitting, slapping, backhanding, kicking, kneeling, choking, pushing, pulling, arm-twisting, pulling hair, biting, burning and restraining (e.g., holding down or sitting on).

Acts that cause the victim to fear for her safety count as physical abuse. This might include preventing a victim from leaving a room or the home, or locking the victim out of a room or the home. Threats of violence can be categorized as physical abuse. These include both verbal and nonverbal threats directed at the victim, such as threatening to kill her, pointing a weapon at her or pointing a fist in her direction. Abusers might threaten to harm children or her relatives. Abusers frequently threaten to harm or kill themselves (e.g., *“If you leave me or if you tell anyone, I’ll kill myself”*).

Violence might be directed elsewhere, such as the destruction of property (e.g., smashing or breaking or throwing things, punching a wall, destroying possessions, firing a weapon in close proximity to the victim). Likewise, it might also include physical violence directed at others, such as getting in fights with strangers, displays of road rage or violence toward pets.

Acts that interfere with the victim’s health or well-being count as physical abuse, such as depriving the victim of needed medication, refusing her medical attention, forcing the victim to use substances (i.e., alcohol and/or drugs) and denying or interfering with her basic physical needs (such as eating, sleeping or using the bathroom).

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse is forcing or coercing the victim into unwanted sexual behavior. This includes unwanted touching, coerced intercourse, rape and sadistic sexual acts. Abusers might force or coerce the victim into having sex with others. They might force their victims to videotape sexual behavior or view pornography.

VERBAL ABUSE

Verbal abuse comprises words directed at the victim that damage her sense of self-worth. Verbal abuse is as variable as the abuser’s imagination allows. It might be explicitly derogatory language, such as name calling and cursing. It might be insulting remarks about the victim’s intelligence, personality, or sexual or physical desirability (such as insulting her attractiveness, her body or her appearance).

EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

In contrast to physical and verbal abuse, which are explicit and hard to deny, emotional and psychological abuse can be subtle, allowing the abuser to deny or disavow its cruelty and hurtfulness (e.g., *“You’re too sensitive”* or *“You misunderstood”*). It might entail comments that are somewhat plausible and can be attributed as mere “truth telling” (e.g., *“You’ve gained a lot of weight”* or *“You’re not as attractive as your sister”*). It might be unnecessary or relentless criticism; disproportionate anger at mistakes; or demeaning her in front of coworkers, family or friends. Emotional and psychological abuse might be more extreme. It might take the form of obsessive jealousy or accusations of unfaithfulness. He might irrationally blame her for problems at his work, with the children or with their finances.

Emotional and psychological abuse is intended to convince the victim that she is stupid, worthless, unattractive and unlovable, making her afraid to trust herself, making her fearful of the reactions of other people and making it difficult for her to attempt to change the situation. Victims often report that the effects of emotional and psychological abuse were much more damaging and pervasive than any physical violence.



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GASLIGHTING

In the 1944 film *Gas Light*, a husband attempts to convince his wife and others that she is insane by dimming and then later brightening the house lights, while denying that anything is happening. Similar denial of subtle but very real cruelty by abusers is so common it has come to be called “**gaslighting**.” Intended to cause the victim to question her grip on reality, gaslighting takes many forms. The abuser will deny responsibility for the abuse (“*I had a bad day*”) or blame the victim (“*You know what happens when you make me mad*”). Abusers will deny the seriousness of the abuse (“*We’ve both seen and heard of a lot worse*”). He might assert that what happened didn’t really happen, or that what happened was an accident or unintentional (“*I didn’t mean to hit you when I threw that*”). A favorite tactic is to make implicit threats (silence, body language of threatening looks or gestures, putting weapons on display, driving recklessly) that are disavowed (“*You misunderstood*”) or explicit threats that are outright denied (“*I was kidding*” or “*You can’t take a joke*”).

ABUSIVE CONTROL OVER SOCIAL MATTERS

In an attempt to increase her dependence on him, an abuser might impose social isolation. He might forbid outside employment. He might require his permission to see others or even deny her any visits from family or friends. Insults about friends and family might be combined with blaming them for their marital problems. He will demand a moment-by-moment accounting of her daily activities, open her mail and monitor her car mileage and phone usage. He might deny her any privacy in communications with others by demanding access to her email and Facebook accounts, by listening in on phone calls and by demanding to be present during all visits with others (family, friends, people from church).

ABUSIVE CONTROL OVER FINANCIAL MATTERS

The abuser might also impose strict and unreasonable control over financial matters, partly in an attempt to intimidate her but also to generate the impression of financial dependence on him. He might damage, steal or sell her valuables or possessions. He might not allow her access to checking accounts or credit cards. He might insist on making all financial decisions, no matter how trivial (e.g., spending on food, clothing, toiletries and other necessities).

SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Abusers will misuse spiritual teachings and beliefs, as well as scriptures, to justify abusive behavior. They will make unreasonable demands based on their biblical “interpretation.” They might insist that marital vows imply her consent to any and all sexual activity (e.g., there is no such thing as sexual abuse or rape between husband and wife). They might misinterpret the word “submit” to mean only the abuser can decide where she goes, who she sees, how money is spent or how she dresses. Abusers might belittle the religious beliefs and

practices of the victim or force victims to violate those religious beliefs. They might refuse to allow children to attend church or Sunday school. They misuse her beliefs to cause her to question the validity of her feelings of resentment about the abuse (e.g., “*How can you call yourself religious if you don’t forgive me?*”).

Tragically but expectedly, the victim may come to believe that she must choose between her faith and her safety (and that of her children). She may begin to doubt the validity of her faith. In short, domestic abuse threatens the salvation of the victim and of her children. In direct response to this reality, Lutheran Hour Ministries created a pamphlet titled “*Has God Abandoned Me? For Women Facing Domestic Violence*” in 2001.

STALKING

Stalking is the behavior of repeatedly and intrusively following or inserting oneself into another’s presence. Stalking takes many forms. The stalker may never show his face, or he may be everywhere. Stalking can take place during the relationship (i.e., intense monitoring of the victim’s activities) or it might occur after a breakup. It might be face-to-face (following or showing up at home, school or work) or technological (repeated phone calls, constant emails and instant messages). It might be indirect (e.g., asking friends, co-workers or neighbors about the victim). It might use others (sending unwanted packages, cards or letters via mail or through friends or children). Stalking is abuse because it causes intimidation. It violates the victim’s sense of privacy and safety. It causes her to fear for her safety or to fear damage to her reputation with others.

In summary, abusive behavior is variable. The abuse might entail individual behaviors or multiple behaviors committed in combination. It might be sporadic and unpredictable, or it might be regular and ongoing. No two victims will have same experience.

THE MENTALITY OF ABUSERS

What is the mentality that allows, enables or impels abusers to act abusively? The answer includes the important *difference between feelings and thinking*. A common belief is that domestic violence is due to a loss of control during a fit of anger. While violence and verbal assault are often committed while angry, domestic abuse is not due to anger. It is often done while the abuser is perfectly calm, cool and collected.

DISTORTED THINKING

Domestic abuse is due to distorted thinking on the part of the abuser. The distorted thinking might take a variety of forms. The two general forms are: (1) superiority and entitlement and (2) inferiority and abandonment.

The abuser might be somewhat or even highly *narcissistic*. This abuser thinks of himself as superior to others. He looks

WARNINGS AND CAUTIONS

As you review the next section, there are extremely important things to consider. Be aware of the following:

- ▶ Understanding the mentality or psychological frame of abusive people should never be used as an excuse for abusive behavior. There is *never* an excuse for abuse.
- ▶ Always be aware of the potential for manipulative behavior on his part, including attempts to manipulate you.
- ▶ Any expression of sympathy or understanding toward the abuser *will* be interpreted as agreement with his excuses. He wants you to believe he is the victim of an inability to control himself, a bad past, of the victim's misbehavior. Expressions of sympathy or understanding will be misused to justify — perhaps directly to the victim, perhaps quoting you — previous and future abusive behavior.
- ▶ Be aware that the abuser may hear something you did not say (e.g., forgiveness implies permission). In this regard, be prepared for the victim to come to you asking why you said things you did not say.
- ▶ Never presume to be able to help an abuser change. Understanding the psychological determinants of abusive behavior does **not** qualify you to counsel him. (Note that professionals with special training in such work will typically fail more often than they succeed.) Presuming to be able to do this *will* put the victim in danger.
- ▶ If he requests, hear his confession and offer absolution. But do not presume that confession means contrition (although it might), and do not presume that confession means transformation of his behavior (which is unlikely without long-term effort within professional therapy).
- ▶ Never confront an abuser about his behavior. This is dangerous to the victim. Abusers thrive on secrecy and deceit. They desire control. To be confronted violates these, and it will enrage the abuser.
- ▶ Do not attempt to “uncover the truth” about what happened. It is neither possible nor necessary for you to do so. Law enforcement experts should do this. To attempt to “uncover the truth” could endanger the victim and could entangle you in a situation from which you will have difficulty extricating yourself.
- ▶ Do not make any statement implying that this is a couple's problem, a problem of anger management or a problem with communication. He will use that against her by making her equally responsible.
- ▶ Don't assume that the abuser has a mental illness. Studies indicate that rates of mental illness in abusers are similar to the general population. Abusive behavior is not due to mental illness; it is due to distorted thinking.

down on others who do not agree with his attitudes and beliefs and who may dare to question his behavior (i.e., you and me). He is absolutely convinced he is right in what he thinks and does. This thinking leads directly to beliefs of entitlement. He feels entitled to perfect meals, a spotless house, clean clothes, obedient children and an always-loving, never-demanding wife. Part of the entitlement is the idea that his emotional needs must be understood and met perfectly, and that his sexual desires should be anticipated and fulfilled. His belief in his superiority and his consequent feelings of entitlement justify abusive behavior when not satisfied.

Alternatively, the abuser might have a deep-seated sense of inferiority. Perhaps he was abused as a child, with the result that he has difficulty making friends or seeing himself as worthy of love. This type will have a tremendous sense of worthlessness. He may have difficulty believing he has attracted this spouse. His sense of worthlessness will lead to tremendous fear of abandonment. He will be constantly on the alert for signs of her unhappiness or any indication of discontent, which would confirm that she doesn't actually love him and will soon be leaving him. Her unhappiness enrages him (confirms his fear). His abuse is an attempt to convince her that she is worthless, so that she won't leave him.

Most abusers have *distorted ideas about love and relationships*. The abuser does not understand that love and relationships are mutual. Rather the “relationship” should entail her always being kind, polite, attentive, adoring and beautiful, all of which means she should not expect any particular behavior (e.g., kindness and consideration) on his part. Such unrealistic and unfair expectations mean she will never be good enough, which will make him angry and frustrated, which in turn will justify the abuse in order to correct her behavior.

Many abusers have *objectifying attitudes* toward women (all women, not just their partner). Objectification takes two forms. First, abusers view women as inferior to men. Abusers degrade women as weak, unintelligent, overly emotional, irrational and incompetent. Second, they view women as objects for the satisfaction of emotional and sexual needs. Irrational expressions of jealousy and behavior derive from objectifying women as owned possessions. (Related to this thinking, abusive men can become dangerous if she attempts to end the abuse or the relationship.) Third, since they are objects, the abuser does not consider that a woman might have needs that should be respected or that deserve to be satisfied. The objectification of women in these manners compels little hesitation to act disrespectfully.

Of course, objectifying women as sexual objects (to be used barbarically and discarded) is encouraged by much of modern society. This happens most obviously in pornography, but it also happens regularly in television, movies and music and also in magazines (and especially “women's magazines”).

EFFECT OF ABUSE ON ABUSERS

Repeated acts of abusive behavior will affect the victim, obviously (reviewed next), but it also affects the abuser. The abuser might feel shame, which might, in turn, lead to anger and resentment at the victim (for causing him to feel shame). Not only will the abuser attempt to isolate the victim from social and family support, but shame might lead him to isolate himself as well. This might lead to yet greater dependence on his relationship with the victim, leading to greater expectations, demands, entitlements and, ultimately, abuse. A certain effect of committing acts of abuse is desensitization. Like the teacher or preacher who gets comfortable (“desensitized”) with public speaking, the abuser will become insensitive to his own pathological behavior. Being abusive will get easier. He will learn to express cruel words almost reflexively, and he will learn to commit acts of violence with ease.

The spiritual corruption self-inflicted by the abuser cannot be overstated. Both St. Paul and St. Peter warned those who would follow Christ about caring for their families. In the first book of Timothy, Paul writes, **“But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”** (1 TIM. 5:8), and to the Galatians he warned, **“strife, jealousy, fits of anger ... those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”** (GAL. 5:20–21). And Peter wrote, **“Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way ... so that your prayers may not be hindered”** (1 PETER 3:7).

“WHY DOESN’T SHE JUST LEAVE?”

There are a lot of ways people demonstrate that they do not have an understanding of domestic abuse. This includes questions and statements people make about domestic abuse:

- ▶ “Why doesn’t she just leave?”
- ▶ “Why does she tolerate abuse?”
- ▶ “If I were in her situation, I would ...”
- ▶ “There must be some reason this is happening.”

All of these — and similar questions and statements — imply the same thing, which is that the victim could do something to stop the abuse if she wanted. Since she doesn’t stop the abuse, she is making the choice to endure it. This attitude turns victims into “volunteers.” It justifies scorn (*“They are just two weird people in a sick relationship”*). It justifies inaction (*“There is nothing anyone can do”*). It justifies cruelty in the form of accusations of enjoying and even provoking the abuse (*“She must like it or she’d leave”*). For decades, police used this “logic” to justify not intervening in domestic abuse situations, just as district attorneys reasoned that it made little sense to try to prosecute men arrested for domestic violence.

Such questions and comments imply a decision on the part of the victim, meaning a choice between different options. But there is no choice being made.

“ Why didn’t she leave? I think a lot of it had to do with how he whittled away her financial independence. I think she also cared very much for his two children and wanted to be there for them. Abusive partners take your pride, your freedom and your connections. She felt like she had no choice and was embarrassed. She was only 27. She could have had such a long life; filed for bankruptcy and changed her name. It wouldn’t have been easy, but she could have done it. ”

- “JUSTINE’S STORY” TOLD BY HER SISTER LAUREN,
FROM WOMENAGAINSTABUSE.ORG



This attitude is very common, but it reflects a *profound* misunderstanding of the realities of domestic abuse. It reflects a failure of imagination, probably based on an unwillingness to confront the horror of domestic abuse. Lauren wrote about her attempt to understand why her older sister stayed with a man that abused her terribly and eventually killed her. She was able to imagine many of the reasons that victims stay in abusive relationships. There are factors that are internal to the victim (i.e., emotional and psychological) and factors external to the victim that will combine to make it extremely difficult (but, as Lauren noted, not impossible) to end the abuse. These numerous factors help explain the “**counterintuitive**” behavior of victims, meaning behavior that is contrary to the popular notion of how a real victim would or “should” behave. They help explain why the actions and statements of victims, in the aftermath of an assault, often appear illogical to other people.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF ABUSE

Survivors of domestic abuse say that the psychological effects of the abuse were more powerful and more affecting than the physical injuries they might have suffered. These effects might appear quickly, or they might take time to accumulate and manifest. They include fear, low self-worth and a diminished sense of self-efficacy.

Fear. That victims are afraid during domestic abuse incidents is obvious, but the level of fear is perhaps difficult to absorb. Victims rarely will fight back during attacks, out of fear of escalation. Instead, many victims freeze during an attack. But the fear does not stop when the attack stops. Many victims will not cooperate in either the arrest or the prosecution of abusers after a violent incident. Victims sometimes claim to the police that nothing happened, even as they sit with bruises and gashes. They fear reprisal, in the form of more or worse violence, directed at them or at the children (“*I’ll kill you, then I’ll kill the kids*”). They fear the loss of the relationship, into which they have dedicated time, effort and heartache. Moreover, they likely love the abuser. They fear confronting the personal failure of being a good spouse. They fear potential loss of social status. They have probably been threatened, by the abuser, with financial destitution (“*You’ll be penniless*”). They likewise have probably been threatened, by the abuser, with loss of their children (“*I’ll tell the judge you are nuts, and you won’t ever see the kids again*”).

Be aware that her fear is justified. More than 30 percent of prosecuted domestic abuse offenders commit additional assaults. Also, women are most likely to be murdered by the abuser after they report the abuse to someone or while they are attempting to leave an abusive relationship.

Self-Worth. Being the victim of domestic abuse causes a dramatic decrease in self-worth, which might become so bad that the victim comes to believe she deserves the mistreatment.

(Some victims enter into abusive relationships with low self-worth, perhaps related to being abused as a child, and thus the abuser will merely confirm their negative view of themselves.) A quick review of the previous material would convince readers that this is intentional on the part of the abuser. Over time, the victim may begin to agree with the abuser that she is fat, stupid, ugly and worthless. She is unworthy of love, making his tolerance of her something for which she should be grateful (abuse and all).

Self-Efficacy. One of the most pernicious effects of domestic abuse on victims is a weakened sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that acting in a certain way will result in a desired outcome. It is the opposite of helplessness, which is the belief that nothing can be done to improve things. Without a sense of self-efficacy, a victim will be very hard-pressed to believe she can do anything to stop the abuse.

Other Effects of Abuse. Domestic abuse has many other effects on mental health. Victims experience high rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), both of which put them at greater risk of suicide.

Other Internal Factors. As Lauren’s story about her sister (above) implied, there are other internal factors that make it difficult for a victim to end the abuse. Many victims move from shock at the abusive incidents to denial of their severity. This is partly from a desire to believe the abuser, who justifies the abuse (“*I was drunk*,” “*I lost control*”) and makes promises to change (“*It will never happen again*”). Believing the abuser gives the victim hope that things will change and that the relationship, which she may want or need for various external reasons (see below), can be maintained. Denial of the wretchedness of the situation also is motivated by shame.

Some victims do not understand that they have the right to demand change, that they have the option not to tolerate the abuse. They may be unaware that domestic violence and spousal rape, for example, are criminal behaviors. Many victims lack knowledge of resources. This is partly related to the way that society downplays domestic violence offenses or, at least, refuses to discuss them. Some victims have cognitive or physical limitations — due to mental illness or disability — that may limit their capability of responding effectively.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

is defined by its effects on the victim, not by the behavior during the abusive incidents.

EXTERNAL FACTORS THAT CONSTRAIN A VICTIM'S CAPACITY TO RESPOND

External factors probably play an even larger role in preventing victims from believing it is possible for them to end or escape the abuse. The most pressing of these are safety and financial concerns. These include the presence of children; insufficient social support; and family, religious and cultural issues.

Safety Concerns. The main reason victims stay is that they lack an alternative, safe environment for themselves or their children. They have been warned by their abuser about retaliatory violence if they leave. The victim's parents' and friends' homes are known to the abuser. Women's shelters were started in recognition of this reality. Shelters learned long ago to protect the confidentiality of their residents.

Financial Concerns. If a victim is dependent on the abuser for all finances, that will make it very hard, if not outright impossible, to demand change or to leave. One needs money to meet both basic needs, such as food, housing, clothing and fuel for the car, and more complex needs, such as health care for herself and her children.

Lack of Social Support. Most victims do not talk about their experience with others. Even more, many abusers enforce social isolation on their victims. This decreases chances for reality checks (e.g., "That is wrong").

Children. Victims may stay and endure abuse because they believe it is better for children to have both parents in the home, even if there is abuse. (In contrast, research indicates that it is better for children to endure parental divorce than to continue to live in an environment of abuse.) Also, it is not uncommon for children to pressure the victim to stay in an abusive relationship (sometimes at the behest of the abuser, even if the children are being abused as well).

Perhaps most importantly, she may fear for the children's safety if she were to try to leave. She may fear that the abuser will kill her, leaving the children motherless (and with a father in prison), or that the abuser will kill them. It is not unlikely that he has explicitly threatened to do both if she tries to leave.

Family, Religious and Cultural Issues. Many victims are explicitly pressured by family to remain in an abusive relationship. Abusers can be quite charming, and families may hesitate to believe that he could be abusive. Or the family might assert that the abuse is merely something that must be tolerated by the victim. They may believe that the abuse is not a big deal, or they may pressure the victim not to embarrass the family by seeking marital dissolution. Some families will insist that their religious tradition demands that the victim stay within an abusive relationship. (Contrast that to "The LCMS Perspective" below.) Victims from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds sometimes report that they feel they are betraying their race or culture if they seek protection from the criminal justice system.

The Effect of Time. The psychological and environmental factors constraining her response will get worse over time. His attitude of entitlement, his objectification of the victim and his desensitization to his depredations increase. Her fear will grow more intense, including her fear of reprisal should she attempt to end or escape the abuse. Depression and other mental-health problems will intensify, and her low self-worth and self-efficacy will go even lower. Financial constraints and dependency on him will increase.

In summary, the question should not be, "Why does she stay?" This and similar questions and statements attribute a decision to the victim that she is not willingly making. The proper question is, "What are the factors keeping her from responding to the abuse in order to put an end to it?" This question has been answered.



THE LCMS PERSPECTIVE ON DOMESTIC ABUSE

The DVCA Task Force generated a document titled "When Homes Are Heartless: An LCMS Perspective on Domestic Violence." It can be downloaded from lcms.org/socialissues/domesticviolence.

LAWS ABOUT AND POLICE RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC ABUSE

Laws about domestic abuse vary state by state. The laws in any particular state are fairly easy to access.

Some abusive behavior is not against the law in all states, such as verbal abuse, emotional abuse and psychological abuse. However, physical and sexual assault are crimes in all states, as are threats of bodily harm (i.e., “terroristic threats”).

The ways that public safety officials, such as police, will respond to domestic violence is related to the laws, and these will similarly vary from one jurisdiction to the next. However, some commonalities are worth noting.

STUDIES OF POLICE INTERVENTIONS

Through the 1960s and 70s, there was increased public awareness of domestic abuse issues, including increased awareness of the generally poor police response. The usual response was to try to calm the situation and then leave as soon as possible. This “policy” derived from police concerns about exacerbating the situation and putting themselves and the victim at risk (e.g., if arrest were to be attempted).

This policy was put to the test in the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment, which was conducted from 1981 to 1982. In this experiment, the police response to a domestic violence incident was not up to the police to determine. Their response was randomly determined. That is, the responding officers were instructed to follow one of three randomly assigned “conditions.” They were to (1) arrest the suspect, (2) order someone away from the residence or (3) try to defuse the situation and make a treatment referral. (The latter condition was the usual practice.) The researchers conducted follow-up reviews of official records. The results indicated that later assaults were reduced by half in the arrest condition.

The results were widely reported on major TV network news programs and in newspapers across the U.S. In 1984, the attorney general recommended widespread adoption of “**mandatory arrest**” or “**pro-arrest**” policies.

However, the study results have confronted some challenges. Later studies did not replicate the findings. There is even some evidence that arrest policies lead victims to hesitate to call the police. Also, perhaps not surprisingly, police dislike having no option for discretion as to whether to arrest or not. Thus, the policy followed by any particular jurisdiction varies. There are three general types.

WHICH POLICY?

At the state level, as of this writing, 21 states have “**mandatory arrest**” policies. This policy requires the responding officers to arrest when there is any evidence of domestic violence.

Nine states have “**pro-arrest**” policies. This policy encourages officers to make an arrest in situations of domestic violence, but ultimately leaves the officer with the discretion of whether an arrest should be made or not. This policy allows police to take into account extenuating circumstances, as well as the wishes of the victim.

The policy of “**officer’s discretion**” neither encourages nor discourages arrest, but rather leaves that decision up to the officer. Some readers might wonder if that amounts to a return of the “**calm and cruise**” policy, which proved ineffective in terms of protecting victims. There is still much to be done, but given the many other changes in police policies, the court systems and society in general, this probably is not the case.



OTHER ADVANCES IN RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Since the 1960s and 70s, police have greatly improved training and awareness with regard to domestic abuse. Many police departments have specially trained officers who respond to these situations. The addition of females to the officer corps has also helped greatly.

Regarding the court system, many state, city and county prosecuting attorney offices have specialized domestic abuse units. Restraining order laws have been rewritten in many jurisdictions, allowing immediate, emergency-based orders, as well as no-contact provisions. Enforcement of the orders has also been strengthened.

Treatment programs for victims have increased in number and have been improved in efficacy. There also are numerous treatment programs for abusers, although their efficacy is still questionable.

DOMESTIC ABUSE, PART 2:

Training for Pastors and Church Workers to Intervene

- UPDATED APRIL 2015 -



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EMPATHIC AND NONDIRECTIVE

Empathy cannot be over-used, nor can its value be overstated. Carl Rogers (1902-1987) created an entire psychotherapy around the practice of empathy, and all mental-health professionals understand its value. Empathy is extremely important in working with those distressed and those in terrible situations.

Empathy means understanding, without judgment, the way in which a person is thinking and feeling. It means expressing that understanding. This communicates to the other person that her thoughts and feelings are understandable (not “crazy”), are being respected (versus being dismissed or ignored) and are the most essential part of who she is. Expressing empathy directly and powerfully helps boost someone’s self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are vital to do for victims of domestic abuse.



PREVIEW

SAFETY ISSUES COMPEL A FOCUS ON THE VICTIMS

To fulfill the mandate put to the task force, the information and training presented here have been developed to assist you in two tasks. The first is to help victims, to the extent possible, in a current situation of domestic abuse put an end to that situation. A less urgent but as important aspect of intervention is to provide spiritual counsel and comfort to victims, survivors and their children. Because of the nature of domestic abuse, the following training does not provide information on how to intervene with persons committing abuse nor on relationships.

The overriding concern in domestic abuse is **safety**. The following training material comprises three major themes that derive from this overriding concern.

First, in relationships corrupted by domestic abuse, the abuser dominates and controls the victim. In some abusive relationships, the victim is in very real danger. Thus, a major theme of this training is that anyone seeking to intervene must be extremely cautious in order not to exacerbate the danger. The following training examines in detail the exigencies of helping a victim while not further compromising her safety.

A related major theme is that to confront an abuser about his sinful behavior is absolutely contraindicated because it might enhance the danger to the victim (and her children). Confronting an abuser exposes something that he has worked hard to hide, which will potentially shame or enrage him.

Finally, couples counseling is contraindicated for the same reason. Since the relationship is not one based on mutuality, love and respect, she is not allowed to express herself either freely or fully. Marital counseling might appear to benefit them (“*They were having problems, but nothing comes up anymore*”), but any benefit will be fabricated and insincere. Indeed, couples counseling might give the abuser the idea that the relationship is fine and has been endorsed by you. In other words, couples counseling will likely perpetuate the abuse.

PREVIEW OF PART 2

This second part of training starts with a discussion of a “**dialectical attitude**” that we encourage you to take toward victims of domestic abuse. Issues of safety are discussed, with the hope of convincing readers of the potential, when trying to help, of exacerbating danger to the victim and, therefore, the necessity of referring to resources and experts that understand how to minimize risk. We then present advice on having and starting “difficult conversations” with victims (or women you think might be victims), including the various goals you will want to accomplish during such conversations (including a safe referral to experts). We present advice on finding resources and experts to whom you can refer victims. The important issue of spiritual comfort and counsel to victims is then discussed. The presentation then discusses the potential dangers of confronting abusers and, on a related note, of conducting couples counseling in situations of domestic abuse. Ways that you and your church can reach out to victims, to encourage them to come forward so they can get the help they need, is then discussed. The presentation ends with a discussion of issues that might be confronted when embroiled in the difficult but sanctified act of attempting to help victims of domestic abuse.

A DIALECTICAL ATTITUDE

The task force encourages anyone seeking to help a victim of domestic abuse to adopt the following **dialectical attitude** (i.e., an attitude based on seemingly contradictory ideas):

Be cognizant of, understanding of and empathic with her fear of acting to end the abuse, but be realistic about the need for her to act to end it. Ultimately, respect her decision as to what she will and will not do.

Based on the previous training, you should be cognizant and understanding of the reasons that a victim is afraid to act to end the abuse. Her situation is likely fraught with danger for herself and for her children.

Being empathic means, first and foremost, listening to her. Do not assume that you know how she is feeling. Just because if you were in her situation you would be afraid, angry or upset does not mean she is feeling those ways. Do not assume how she is feeling; listen to how she is feeling.

Empathic understanding means you accept how she thinks and feels *without evaluating* the “validity” of those thoughts and feelings. She is in an overwhelming, terrifying situation; she may feel afraid; she may feel trapped, hopeless and helpless. She may have low self-worth, low self-efficacy. She may blame herself. These thoughts and feelings should not be judged as wrong. Even more than not thinking they are wrong is telling and showing her that you empathize. Tell her you understand her feelings and that you would feel the same way if you were in her situation.

Empathy means understanding her thoughts, but it does not necessarily mean agreeing with them. We encourage those undergoing this training to hold beliefs that she might not endorse. We hold that abuse is never acceptable (regardless of what the abuser has convinced her). We know that the abuse is not her fault. We believe that the situation must change, and we acknowledge that it will not change unless she does something to change it. But we remain cognizant that to try might be dangerous, and we remain empathic that to try will be terrifying to her.

Being empathic means recognizing that she is the expert on her situation. She knows the abuser better than anyone. Thus, an essential aspect of this approach is to be nondirective. What she can do and what she will do are entirely up to her. It is crucial to demonstrate that respect for her thinking and feelings. Likewise, it is vital to respect the choices she makes. We encourage, but we do not direct, command or insist. Rather, we remain patient, kind and understanding. (The only exception to being nondirective is a situation of immediate danger.)

CALLING THE POLICE

Be prepared to call the police when necessary, that is, when violence is *happening* or is *imminent*. Thus, if you witness violence or the victim tells you of current violence or immediate danger, do not hesitate to call 911. When violence is *manifest*, hesitation *guarantees* harm. Calling the police can be done anonymously (although there is probably no reason to do so).

In situations in which you are unsure or uncomfortable, you might also call a women's shelter or a hotline for advice on how to proceed.

Trust her to know what she can and should do. Understand and accept that it may take time and several attempts before she can do something. If you feel judgmental, then you do not understand. If you do understand, then you will not judge. Therefore, strive to understand.

SAFETY ISSUES

There cannot be too much emphasis placed on the issue of safety. As noted in the previous training, victims are most likely to be murdered by abusers when they are discovered attempting to leave the relationship. In similar fashion, many abusers commit new acts of violence after they are arrested and released.

Because safety concerns are so paramount and can be so complex, the overriding suggestion in this training on how to intervene is to *refer victims to professionals* with experience and expertise. Doing so involves identifying the abuse and making the referral. These entail communication with the victim, and these must be done without exacerbating the danger to the victim and her children.

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE, ATTEND TO SAFETY

Telling you about experiences of abuse might be dangerous for a victim. When meeting with a victim, ask her about present safety (e.g., “Does he know you are here?” and “When do you have to be home?”).

During conversations, calmly responding with concern will make the victim more comfortable and more likely to continue talking to you (and ultimately seeking help). However, during conversations, you may show that you are upset and alarmed. This might suggest to her that you want to do something, which might cause her to fear that you will act and put her in danger. To assuage such fear, assure her that you will do nothing without her permission. Assure her that it is entirely and only up to her what you will do (e.g., “I hope it is obvious that I am concerned, but I will do nothing unless you want me to” and “I won't say anything to anybody until you ask me to do so”). These assurances will communicate that you understand the danger she might be in and also that you respect her autonomy.

In particular, explicitly state that you will not be communicating with the abuser and that, if he asks about the meeting, you will not tell him what she disclosed.

If the victim expresses to you that she is ready to act, you yourself should do and suggest nothing beyond having her contact professionals who can offer her needed resources and consultation, including safety planning.

SAFETY PLANNING

A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan that includes ways for a victim to (1) avoid dangerous situations if possible and (2) react effectively when in immediate danger. In other words, safety plans are intended to reduce danger to the victim and any children. Safety plans are important. According to experts such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline: “When adrenaline is pumping through your veins it can be hard to think clearly or make logical decisions about your safety. Having a safety plan laid out in advance can help you to protect yourself in those stressful moments.”

Safety planning can be complicated. Experts have learned from decades of hard experiences what to do and what not to do. Safety plans typically include the following:

- ▶ Planning **escape routes and procedures**, including safe places to flee to, safe people who can and will help and the best time to leave. Safety plans might be pictures or well-practiced visualizations of routes and destinations. They can include code words to children, neighbors, friends or relatives to request that they call 911 or to inform them that an escape from danger is about to be attempted.
- ▶ A safety plan will probably include a “**Grab and Go Bag**” that contains survival necessities and can be easily accessed and taken in an emergency. The “Grab and Go Bag” will be hidden (probably outside of the home). It might contain cash, credit cards and a copy of her driver’s license and car registration. It might contain a pre-paid cell phone and the phone numbers of doctors, family, friends and the domestic abuse hotline. Other necessities might include medications, prescriptions and medical and car insurance information, as well as children’s school and medical records. For some victims, passports, welfare identification and work permits might be needed, not to mention restraining orders and custody orders. It might also contain precious possessions, such as valued photos and photo albums, jewelry, favorite books and children’s toys.
- ▶ Safety planning experts will instruct victims in the dangers of using computers and phones that the abuser might access or have enabled to alert him to any and all activity. In other words, safety planning includes using computers and phones safely.
- ▶ From the victim’s perspective, the most important aspect of planning will likely be the safety of her children. As noted in the previous training, many abusers explicitly and regularly threaten the safety of children (e.g., threaten to kill the children if she tries to leave), and concerns about the safety of children are often the primary or only reason many victims stay in abusive relationships.

Hopefully, safety issues sound complicated. Hopefully, you now think safety issues are above your competence. This is good (and intentional) because they probably are. Given the complexity, hopefully you now understand that it could be supremely foolish and potentially disastrous to try to make a safety plan with a victim without being an expert at doing so. Fortunately, it is not necessary for you to be an expert. There are national, state and (probably) local resources to which you can refer the victim. Finally, if you are put in a situation where you are the only resource, we strongly recommend that you consult with experts, via phone if necessary, about safety planning. Often, advocates and resources will actually come to you, if you need assistance in such a matter. At the least, they are available by phone 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

KEYS TO HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

A conversation with a victim of domestic abuse might be difficult because of her fears. She might fear that you will reject her, think badly of her or inform the abuser of what she says. Your primary goals during the conversation are to convince her that you care and can be trusted, which will hopefully convince her to talk. This section reviews the practical requirements of having a successful — if difficult — conversation, including the vitally important technique of “**active listening**.”

PRACTICAL REQUIREMENTS

The primary practical requirements when attempting to help a victim or survivor of abuse are *time* and *space*.

It will take *time* to accomplish what is necessary in conversations with victims and survivors. It takes time to listen empathically and especially to communicate to the other person that you are being empathic. Similarly, it takes some time to make sure she knows that you believe her and that you are concerned for her.

Be aware that the victim might be very anxious about time. She might be fearful of being found out by her abuser, who might be monitoring her behavior (e.g., her car mileage). She might have low self-esteem due to the abuse, and she might thus feel bad for taking up your valuable time. In any event, if she abruptly expresses a need to leave, honor this. Likewise, be prepared to reschedule the meeting if she needs to cancel.

It is recommended that, for these reasons, you establish time parameters at the start of the meeting. Ask her how much time she can spend with you, and inform her if you have only limited time to spend with her (otherwise, she might assume that you are ending your meeting because you don’t believe her or because you don’t care). Related to the same concern, do not allow there to be any interruptions or distractions during your meeting, such as phone calls or other business.

It also is recommended that you pay attention to the *space* in the meeting office. Given that she may have a history of either regular or severe (or both) physical violence directed at her, be careful not to unintentionally violate her sense of personal space or her “**personal safe zone**.” Evaluate the meeting room before she arrives. Be sure to place the chair in which she will sit so that she has easy access to the door. It is highly unlikely she will run away from you in fear, but this space detail will nonetheless subconsciously assuage her fear. Likewise, be sure that there is sufficient space between your chair and hers. Also consider the orientation of the chairs toward each other. It is uncomfortable for many people to sit directly face-to-face. Instead, place the chairs so that they face each other at a slight angle.

At the same time as being aware of excessive closeness or directness, which might be intimidating, it also is not recommended that you have a desk between you and the person you are trying to assist. A small table between chairs is fine, but a desk might imply a desire for distance or protection, as if you were repelled by or trying to defend yourself from her “awfulness.”

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS NECESSARY TO HELP

There are some personal characteristics necessary for a person to have in order to be helpful to another person in distress or in a terrible situation. If you do not have these characteristics, you are unlikely to be helpful to the other person. In that case, you should have someone to whom you can refer.

The first requirement is that you care enough to help. This means appreciating that domestic abuse is terrible and unacceptable and being willing to attempt to help someone in such a situation. The second requirement is that you are able to talk about something that makes you uncomfortable. You will hear things that you will not like hearing, such as details about particular violent or abusive incidents or information about someone (i.e., the abuser) that will shock and dismay you. The third requirement is that you are able to be empathic, which means being able to maintain a nonjudgmental attitude toward what she is thinking and feeling. It will not help a victim to perceive that you are judging her for “tolerating” the abuse.

ACTIVE LISTENING

“**Active listening**” is the term used for responding to someone else in a way that encourages him or her to continue to talk. It communicates (hence, “active”) to the speaker that you are giving her your full attention. It is intended to encourage her to tell you difficult things (hence, “listening”). It is highly effective at reassuring the other person that you care, and it encourages her or him to keep talking. In active listening, interest is conveyed using both verbal and nonverbal messages, which are relatively easy to master (with practice).

Verbal Behavior. **Reflective listening** is the most basic active listening skill. Reflective listening entails repeating back to the speaker her own words, perhaps paraphrasing slightly. This is sometimes called verbal mirroring. Given how simple the technique is, it is surprisingly effective. Here are some examples.

VICTIM: “*I was scared and shocked.*”

YOU: “*You were really scared. It shocked you what just happened.*”

VICTIM: “*I cannot believe that I’m telling you this.*”

YOU: “*It’s hard for you to believe what you are telling me.*”

VICTIM: “*I don’t know what to do.*”

YOU: “*You are confused about what to do.*”

Empathic listening entails identifying the victim’s emotions either at present or in the past. Empathic listening can be word for word, like reflective listening. (For example, **VICTIM:** “*I was so scared.*” **YOU:** “*You were really scared.*”) But empathic listening is even more effective when you identify feelings that have not been explicitly spoken about but that were or are very likely present. (For example, “*That must have been terrifying,*” “*You were shocked,*” “*That was very upsetting.*”) As indicated earlier, empathic listening assures the victim that you understand her feelings, even if she has not explicitly spoken about them. This assures her that you are listening, but also that what she is feeling is normal (since it can be understood).

Summarizing means repeating back several points of the victim’s verbalizations. It might involve integrating or reiterating them in a briefer, perhaps more logical and clear fashion. Summaries invite the victim to correct any misinformation or to elaborate for purposes of clarification.

Gentle questioning also is an effective technique in active listening. You can gently ask relevant questions, such as “*When was the first incident?*” or “*Where did that happen?*” Related to this are gentle requests for clarification. This involves asking questions to ensure that you understand what she is saying.

When asking questions, be aware of *closed versus open questions*. **Closed questions** have specific answers, whereas open questions invite elaboration. A closed question is appropriate for a small point of clarification, such as “*When did this first happen?*” or “*Who was it that called the police?*” **Open questions** are more appropriate for encouraging the victim to keep speaking, such as, “*What was your reaction after the first time this happened?*” or “*What happened after the police were called?*” Too many closed questions might have two effects. First, it might make the conversation take the tone of an interrogation. Second, it puts you into the position of directing the conversation, rather than encouraging the victim to speak what is on her mind. (This is the difference between active listening and active questioning.)

Being comfortable with occasional *silence* also is an important aspect of active listening. Given the distress the victim is likely in, you should expect occasional pauses and short periods of silence. During these times, nonverbal communication can be used (smiling compassionately, nodding, nonverbal utterances). Waiting out moments of silence gives the other person time to sort through their thoughts and feelings. (Indeed, when asked what was happening during their pauses and periods of silence, speakers will often say, “*I was thinking about what I just said.*”) However, during moments of silence, watch the speaker carefully. If you sense that she needs reassurance to keep talking, then give it to her using an active listening technique (e.g., an empathic reflection, such as, “*This situation has been very difficult for you for a long time.*”). If you sense that she is struggling with what to say next, a very effective active listening technique is the “**here-and-now empathic observation**” (e.g., “*This is really hard for you to talk about*” or “*You are struggling with what to say*”).

Nonverbal Communication. You are strongly encouraged to pay attention to your nonverbal communication with everyone, but especially with victims, potential victims or survivors of domestic abuse. Good nonverbal communication tells the other person that you are glad (or at least content) that the other person is talking. It says, “I’m listening” and “I care.” Nonverbal communication occurs in the face, with the body and with nonverbal utterances.

Facial expressions are the means of nonverbal communication. The most important nonverbal facial expression is relaxing your facial muscles, which might lead to a small and gentle smile. Nodding one’s head encouragingly also is extremely effective in getting a victim in distress to continue talking. Finally, you should strive to make consistent (but not continuous) eye contact. Consistent eye contact communicates that you believe what you are being told, whereas continuous eye contact (i.e., staring) is a sign of dominance.

Seating arrangements during meetings are important. When seated across from someone, good nonverbal communication in the body entails sitting straight (“I am paying attention”)

with an open posture (“I’m willing to listen to anything”). Perhaps lean in, which communicates interest in what the other person is saying.

Finally, take advantage of the power of nonverbal utterances to encourage someone to continue speaking. These include simple commiserative sounds, such as “*Ooh,*” “*Tsk tsk*” and “*Um-hum.*”

We *discourage taking notes* during your meeting with a victim. By definition, note taking signifies an effort to document what was said. While it is acceptable and even somewhat expected during sessions with a mental-health professional, if you do so during your meeting it might intimidate the victim. She might be very hesitant to have anyone document what she is saying. She might imagine you taking your notes to the abuser (“*Look what your partner told me!*”) or to the police.

STARTING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



There are three ways that a conversation with a potential victim or survivor of domestic abuse may start.

SHE COMES TO YOU ABOUT ABUSE

A victim might request a meeting with you. She will probably not preview what the meeting will be about, nor will you know prior that she is a victim of abuse. Even though she requested the meeting, she will likely find it very difficult to bring up the topic because she is fearful of what you will think, say or do.

YOU SEEK TO UNCOVER ABUSE

The other two ways that you might uncover abuse will be at your instigation. In both, if there is abuse occurring, the victim you approach about potential abuse will be even more hesitant and fearful than the victim who requested a meeting. Some will be willing to talk, and may indeed have been waiting for someone to ask, notice or care. Others will be unwilling to talk out of fear or shame. Do not force the issue.

In the first instance, you might request a meeting with someone about whom you are concerned. Your concern might be based on things you have observed or concerns that others

have brought to you. Requesting a meeting must be done very discreetly. Do not call her on the phone or contact her by email unless you can come up with another reason for doing so (such as an invitation to join the choir). It is probably advisable to speak to her in person about a possible meeting. If she agrees, gently share your observations with her, such as, *“You seem really down lately”* or *“I cannot help but notice tension between you and your husband.”* Then, ask her if it would be OK to talk about these things. If she demurs, drop the subject with assurance that you are willing to talk at any time.

In the second instance, a couple might come to you seeking couples counseling. If you are going to meet with any couple for counseling, you have an obligation to meet individually with each of them to ask about domestic violence. This applies to any couple, not just couples where you have a suspicion about abuse. You must meet with them individually, since she will neither bring it up nor admit it, if asked, in his presence. If you do not meet individually with her and ask directly about domestic abuse, you might unwittingly conduct couples counseling with an abuser and a victim, in which case you will be contributing to the continuation of abuse.

To ask about possible violence or abuse, it is best to work your way toward the topic.

- ▶ Start by asking about the relationship, such as, *“How are things going with you and your spouse?”*
- ▶ Then ask about disagreements, which all couples have, such as, *“All couples have disagreements, some more than others. How are disagreements resolved?”*
- ▶ Then ask explicitly about anger, which is probably inevitable in all relationships. You might say, *“What is it like when you get angry with each other?”* or *“What does anger look like in your relationship?”*
- ▶ Finally, ask explicitly about violence, but do not put it in the context of anger. As reviewed in the previous training, much abuse occurs outside of angry feelings. Instead, ask directly whether there are any instances of violence, such as, *“Has there ever been any violence?”* or *“Have you ever hurt each other physically?”*

Whether you act on concerns and ask about abuse or whether you ask about abuse in individual meetings with couples being considered for couples counseling, there will be many instances when you ask about abuse when there is no abuse happening. She and her partner might thus be surprised at your questions. However, they will likely not be offended if you explain your reasons for asking. In the first instance, state that you acted out of concern. In the case of couples counseling, you should inform them that these are questions you routinely ask all couples. Inform them that you take very seriously the obligation always to ask.

CONCERNING CONFIDENTIALITY

Some, but not all, states have mandatory reporting laws with regard to domestic abuse. However, these apply to hospitals, physicians and other health-care professionals treating potential or known victims. Unless you are acting in the role of health-care professional, you can promise confidentiality. Assure the victim that you will not share what she says with anyone else. If possible, promise her that the abuser will not know of your meeting.

Also, with regard to confidentiality, it is possible for you to consult with local, state or national experts confidentially about your concerns. That is, domestic abuse hotlines, women's shelters and other resources frequently field questions or conduct phone consultations with callers, and they do so without requiring that the caller reveal the victim or the perpetrator's name.

Keep in mind that abuse might be happening even if it is denied. Victims will frequently deny being abused even when asked directly. Be especially mindful of this if you decide to proceed with couples counseling.

STEPS IN HELPFUL CONVERSATIONS

Readers hopefully understand that they are not competent to treat all problems. At the same time, readers should recognize that victims and survivors of abuse are likely to first come to their church for help. Therefore, consider yourself the “starting point” for getting help for victims and survivors. The goal of your conversation with a victim or survivor is to get her to accept a referral to experts and resources that can be helpful.

There are several things that you want to communicate to a victim in order to be as helpful as you can be, so that she will accept a referral.

ASSURANCE

Assure the victim that you believe her. Have no hesitation whatsoever to tell her you believe her. Most victims wait years to disclose to someone else that they are being abused. Most are told repeatedly, by the abuser and perhaps by members of her family, that the abuse is not really happening, is not that bad or is her fault. Say something like, *“I believe you,”* *“I’m so sorry that you are going through this”* or *“This is a terrible situation.”*

Assure her that you are available to talk (*"If it helps, you can talk to me anytime"*) and that you particularly want to discuss things from a spiritual perspective, in order for her to find healing. At the same time, be realistic with her about your capacity to help with the practical aspects of ending the abuse (such as safety planning), while assuring her that there are many experts and resources that can help her to do so.

EXPRESS CONCERN

Express concern for her. This will show her that you understand that abuse is an awful experience. Expressing concern will show that you care, which will be salutary in itself (and will help correct her perspective that no one cares about her, which will encourage her to seek further help from experts). Say something like, *"I'm really concerned about you"* or *"I'm worried about your welfare."*

BE AWARE OF YOUR POWER

It is absolutely critical that you not make any statement, explicit or implied, that could be construed as blaming her or making her responsible. She is listening carefully to what you say (and may hear that implication even if not intended). What you say will have a big impact on how she feels and on what she does. Any implication of this on your part will either lead to a continuation of the abuse or will, by necessity, lead her to leave the church. If you are unready or unwilling to state that domestic abuse is his responsibility and is absolutely wrong, do not meet with her.

COMMUNICATE WRONGFULNESS

It may seem unnecessary, but it is vital that you communicate to the victim that domestic abuse is sinful and that anyone who commits abuse is sinning against her and against God. Tell her that Christianity in general and the LCMS specifically consider all forms of domestic abuse to be sinful. It is important to be explicit about this, as the victim might not realize this. Likewise, it might be contrary to what she has previously heard from the abuser, and perhaps others, who have purposefully misinterpreted the Bible to her.

You should also communicate about the law regarding domestic abuse. It may be that the abuser has persuaded her that he is outside the law or that the law doesn't apply in the case of married persons. It may simply be that she is unaware that what he is doing is not lawful. You should either inform the victim, if it seems she does not know, or confirm to the victim, if it seems she is uncertain, that all violence is unlawful.

COMMUNICATE ABOUT RESOURCES

Be ready to have a discussion about domestic abuse resources that are available to help her. As noted earlier (and also reviewed in more detail later), there are numerous national, state and perhaps local resources. Point out that there are so many resources because this is a tragically common issue, meaning she is not alone. Inform her that all these resources have experts that have dealt with situations similar to hers for many years. Point out that many of the experts are former victims who have become survivors.

She may express uncertainty that either the police or the courts can protect her from further abuse. Or she may have experience in this regard that cannot be contradicted (e.g., a previous attempt to call the police, who did not intervene, or a previous attempt to get relief from the courts, who were unsympathetic). These experiences cannot and should not be disputed. Instead, empathize with her experience and strongly advise her to try again to utilize resources and experts to end the abusive situation.

ENCOURAGE TREATMENT-SEEKING

Encourage her to get help. Encourage her to recognize the need for an experienced professional to help her in her situation. If necessary, accept that she may be incapable of acting on the referral at present.

Encourage her to understand that many others have been in her situation and have been able to extricate themselves from it. Say, *"Help is available for you"* or *"There are many women, some that you know, that have been in this very situation, but are no longer in it."*

While remaining empathic to her fears and her sense of helplessness, emphasize that unless she does something, nothing will change. Emphasize that her situation is intolerable and that it is intolerable for her children. Gently encourage her to realize that she both can and must, if not now then at some point, do something to end the abuse. Emphasize that while it seems to her that she can do nothing, from your perspective she is capable of action and she has already started by talking with you.

Be sure she understands why you are referring her elsewhere for help with domestic abuse. Discuss openly your competence and the limits of your competence. Help her to recognize that you are incapable of giving her the professional assistance necessary. Assure her that you are not referring her because you are embarrassed for her or because you are either uncomfortable or disgusted with her. (Anticipate that she may worry about this, as this is what the abuser has been telling her.) Indicate your desire to stay involved, especially with regard to spiritual care and comfort. Tell her that the best and safest thing she can do for herself and her children is to obtain professional assistance.

Develop a professional relationship with resources and experts, so that you can refer victims to a resource that you know personally (see next section on finding resources).

LEAVING IS NOT THE ONLY OPTION

Terminating the relationship may be the only option for a victim in a domestic abuse situation. It might be that the abuser refuses to change. It might be that the damage is so extensive that reconciliation is impossible (see the DVCA Task Force document titled *"When Homes Are Heartless"*). However, be careful not to imply that terminating the relationship is the only option for her. She may not be ready or able to leave, perhaps because of the danger such an effort might pose for her and her children. Thus if you take the position that leaving is necessary, she will feel misunderstood, embarrassed or even alienated. She may feel like she is disappointing you. Any of these will make it hard for her to continue to seek help.

Thus, talk about safety and referral to experts *without* implying either that it is necessary that she stay in the relationship or that she should be planning on terminating the relationship.

BEING MINDFUL OF SAFETY ISSUES, REFER TO EXPERTS

Be prepared to refer her to experts and resources, which are covered in the next section. Do so safely. Paradoxically, it is important to get her to resources that can help her establish and maintain her safety and security.

- ▶ Be aware of your own reaction, but do not do anything to precipitate a crisis. What you heard about will have shocked and upset you, but that is not an excuse for rash action. Never underestimate the potential cruelty and vindictiveness of the abuser. What she has told you was probably awful, but it is only the tip of the iceberg of what has been done to her.
- ▶ Do not give her any directives or insist on any behavior. Never act on her behalf (besides calling 911, if necessary) unless she asks you to do something you can do.
- ▶ It is OK to be more concerned for her safety than she is. She may be in a state where she is not thinking clearly or completely. She may be aware of only some aspects of her lack of privacy. She may not be aware, for example, of the technology abusers can use to track computer and phone usage.
- ▶ Give her information about experts and resources safely. Beware of writing things down. Advise her not to use her regular phone or computer. Discuss with her how to ask friends or neighbors to borrow their computer or phone.

ASK HOW YOU CAN HELP

The victim will not ask you for help unless you bring it up. Ask her, *"Is there anything I or the church can do to help you?"* Or state, *"If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know and I will if I can."* If you are able to do as she requests, then do so. But first discuss with her what you can do and whether doing it will compromise her safety. At least this will reassure her that you are empathic with her situation.

If she declines, reassure her that you will not do anything without her permission. Respect her even if she is reluctant to accept help. Respect what she tells you. Assure her that you are available in the future.

OFFER TO HELP HER GET HELP

Remember that talking with you has probably been very helpful to her, but that she may still be essentially paralyzed with fear or with a sense of helplessness. She may leave the meeting with intentions to act, but not be able to do so. If possible (meaning, without insisting), get her to act in your presence.

Therefore, offer to help her get help or to have someone else (e.g., a trusted person in the congregation) help her get help. This might be as simple as offering to make the phone call to resources or to help her make a phone call to schedule an appointment with a professional. If she would like someone to accompany her to resources (e.g., a women's shelter), do your best to find someone to help.

SAFETY IN DOING NOTHING

Attending to the safety of the victim and her children might mean doing nothing. That is, it might be safer for a victim to stay in a predictable (and potentially violent) situation than to trigger a crisis by acting precipitously (meaning without a safety plan).

FACILITATING TREATMENT-SEEKING

Studies of persons with untreated depression have shown that having them make an appointment with a psychiatrist or psychotherapist while still in the doctor's office in the presence of the doctor or nurse (compared to giving them a referral name or number) greatly increases the chances that they will get help.

FOLLOW UP (IF GIVEN PERMISSION)

At the end of the meeting, ask if you can meet again with the intention of offering her spiritual comfort and counsel. Express your wish that she would call you or meet with you again sometime in the future. She might decline, in which case assure her that you are available at any time in the future. (If appropriate, you can refer her to someone else in your church or to a colleague at a different church.)

Do not suggest that you follow up with her (i.e., that you will contact her). Doing so could endanger her. Out of the same concern, if she asks for a follow-up phone call or visit, discuss with her a safe way for you to do so.

FINDING RESOURCES

Be prepared to provide reference information to the victim to help her find resources and contact local experts. Even better, have references and referrals that you can personally recommend.

REFERENCE INFORMATION

There are numerous national resources, many of which have 24/7 availability for consultation with victims and advocates, such as the **National Domestic Violence Hotline** (thehotline.org). It is beyond the scope of this information to detail all state and local resources, but readers can easily find them. (In February 2015, an Internet search using the words “domestic abuse resources” yielded 23 million pages.)

Resources and experts are usually very willing to provide information and consultation. They can tell you about services as you are either preparing to (as with this training) or actively dealing with issues in your church. They may even be able to provide training, including consultation about safety planning and information about other resources that are available to you and victims.

If you reach out to local resources, do not be offended when they treat your call with extreme caution. Some of the hard-won expertise they have developed over the years has been because they have mistakenly informed callers about security measures or even about residents, later to have abusers arrive and create chaos or worse. For similar reasons, they may express reluctance or unwillingness to have you visit their office or shelter.

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP WITH LOCAL EXPERTS

You should also have available a list of local resources and experts (i.e., mental-health professionals) to whom you are comfortable referring victims and survivors. It is important that you trust these resources. This means that you should attempt to differentiate the quality of care that professionals will offer. Remember, God has given us experts to help victims and survivors of domestic abuse, but He has also given us discernment to differentiate between them (e.g., in the Book of Job, we read about “worthless physicians”). In other words, you should actively seek *competent* resources.

The first step is to locate potential resources. Internet search engines are a good starting place to locate most or all mental-health professionals in your area. You can also check with state licensing boards and professional organizations. You can seek recommendations from parishioners and fellow church workers. Women’s shelters might know of good local therapists.

After locating potential referral sources, you should attempt to determine if they are competent to help the domestic abuse victims and survivors you might refer to them. A simple rule of thumb to ensure minimal competence is to refer only to licensed mental-health professionals. States oversee licensure, and different states have different terminology for licensure offered to psychologists, social workers and master’s level therapists and counselors.

Then reach out to them, one professional to another. Start with a phone call. Identify yourself and state that you are seeking a referral resource for members of your church. Then ask for a visit, so that you can get to know them a little bit. (If you refer a member of your church, then you can say that you have met, since you have been to his or her office. This will be very reassuring to your member.)

During the visit, ask questions. A quality mental-health professional will be willing to answer questions about their experience, therapeutic approach and competencies. Ask them about their competencies. Some are very good with children, others with adults, others with families. Some have expertise in substance use disorders, others have expertise in treating anxiety and depression, others have experience working with trauma and so forth. All mental-health professionals

SAFETY ON THE INTERNET

A visit to most websites emphasizes that safety is the primary concern. When linking to the **National Domestic Violence Hotline** (thehotline.org) page, for example, this box pops up on the first page:



have limits on their competencies, and a good mental-health professional will acknowledge those limits. Ask about their experience and competency in regard to domestic violence. If they deny such expertise, ask if they know a good resource for this particular issue (and perhaps establish a professional relationship with the person anyway, to refer other church members with depression, anxiety or other issues).

Ask about their attitudes toward religion. You want to hear the mental-health professional indicate that he or she is respectful (if not appreciative) of religious beliefs. You should ask if they are willing to refer back to you, the religious “professional,” for any issues that might arise in treatment that are related to faith. In similar fashion, ask them if they are willing to collaborate with you, as you intend to stay involved in order to attend to the spiritual needs of the victim or survivor.

SPIRITUAL NEEDS

The victim and her children have *tremendous* need for the counsel and comfort of their church. Therefore, ask the victim, to whom you have provided referral information, if you can stay involved. Say, “*You probably feel hurt and confused and betrayed. Can we talk about this more in the future?*” or “*I’m going to refer you to some experts, but I’d like to stay involved, to help if I can, to the extent you are comfortable.*”

There are many things to assure and encourage. Assure her that abuse is not God’s punishment for her sins. The abuse is not the result of her behavior, and she does not deserve to be abused. God’s will for her is quite different: “**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope**” (JER. 29:11). Remind her that all the punishment we deserve for our sins was paid in full, once and for all (1 PETER 3:18).

Assure her that God has not abandoned her, that God promises to be with her always (MATT. 28:20). God does understand what she is experiencing. He knows her pain and suffering, and He will not forsake her (HEB. 13:5). She can hope for a better life.

She may be filled with anger toward God for letting abuse happen. Assure her that angry feelings are normal. Anger is a human emotion common to us all, especially if we are mistreated. Encourage her to express feelings of anger to someone she trusts — a friend, a family member or a counselor. Encourage her not to cut herself off from His Word or the church. Encourage her to attend church regularly. Tell her to cling to the cross of Christ, since God’s promises are true.

Survivors might be angry at the abuser. It is a Christian obligation to forgive others as we have been forgiven, but this might be very difficult for her. Be patient with her in this regard.



THE LCMS PERSPECTIVE ON DOMESTIC ABUSE

The DVCA Task Force generated a document titled “*When Homes Are Heartless: An LCMS Perspective on Domestic Violence.*” It can be downloaded from lcms.org/socialissues/domesticviolence.

BEHAVIOR WITH THE ABUSER

In summary, (1) you should be prepared to help victims and survivors obtain professional help in trying to end or overcome the abuse, and (2) you should be eager to help victims and survivors with spiritual comfort and counsel. However, it is extremely important that you *do not act in ways that compromise her safety*. This includes how you interact with an abuser.

DO NOT CONFRONT THE ABUSER

Do not confront someone you suspect of abusing a victim. Do not even broach the topic. Tearing away the veil of secrecy could endanger the victim and her children.

DO NOT CONDUCT COUNSELING WITH AN ABUSER

If an abuser comes to you and confesses, you can offer him absolution and spiritual consolation. Encourage him to act on his contrition by seeking the assistance of a mental-health professional who specializes in working with abusers. (There is a commonly believed falsehood, deconstructed in the previous training, that abuse is due to anger and that “**anger management**” will thus resolve the abuse. However, since abuse is not committed in anger, but rather in a calculated way to intimidate and control her, anger management will not help.)

You should never agree to see an abuser for psychological counseling. Recognize that you cannot help him. You are probably unqualified to treat a victim for depression, PTSD and the other negative effects of being abused. Likewise, you not qualified to treat an abuser in order to get him to change the way he thinks or acts. (Don’t let this bother you, since most mental-health professionals also are unqualified to treat abusers.) If you decide to continue to see an abuser for spiritual counsel and comfort, you should strongly consider making this contingent on him seeing a mental-health professional. Otherwise, he might claim to himself and to the victim that he is obtaining all the help that is needed.

You should always refer the abuser to qualified professionals. You do **not** need to have specific professionals in mind, as with the victim. If any specific professional to whom you refer does not “work” for him, he might complain to you that your advice was inadequate. Instead, it is sufficient to tell the abuser, “*To overcome your sinful behavior, you need to find a qualified mental-health professional who works with patients that commit abuse.*” Do not let the abuser convince you that he does not know how to do that.

Directly contradict any abuser who states that mental-health professionals cannot help. They can help anyone willing to be helped. In like fashion, any abuser willing to be helped (meaning, to change) will welcome a referral to a mental-health professional.

You should never agree to act on his behalf (e.g., speak to the victim, try to convince the victim that he is repentant and that she should forgive him [and take him back]). You can empathize with him that his sinful behavior has made a mess of his relationship, and you can tell him that you believe that he is repentant and that he wants to change, but you should never speak to the victim on his behalf.

DO NOT CONDUCT COUPLES COUNSELING

Couples counseling for relationships corrupted by domestic abuse is absolutely and unequivocally a bad idea. No competent mental-health professional would ever agree to do this. (After domestic abuse has been eliminated, if the survivor agrees, couples counseling might help.) Abuse is not about conflict, and conflict resolution strategies, a *sine qua non* of marital counseling, will not help.

Instead, conducting couples counseling in an attempt to end domestic abuse assures that abuse will continue. The abuser will not allow the victim to talk about abuse. If she does (or if she even approaches the topic), he will punish her severely afterwards.

Nonetheless, you may be approached by either the victim or, more likely, the abuser with a request to see them for couples counseling. A victim might suggest couples counseling under the wrong (but commonplace) assumption that domestic abuse is caused by problems in the relationship. The abuser might suggest marital counseling when she starts to make comments or overtures suggesting she is unhappy in the relationship. In either event, the abuser will insist that they be seen together. He will not allow her to attend counseling with you by herself.

As noted previously, whenever you conduct couples counseling, it is incumbent on you to see each of them individually, on different nights, to ask each of them about violence and abuse. If there is any indication of abuse, you should then encourage the victim to contact appropriate resources. At that point, you should refuse to conduct couples counseling.



“SEEING” DOMESTIC ABUSE

The single biggest barrier to helping victims and survivors of domestic abuse is that we are unaware of who they are. Domestic abuse is shameful to the abuser, to the victim and to the survivor. Shame impels them to hide the abuse. We are unaware that they need our help because they remain silent.

- ▶ The victim suffers in silence because she is afraid that she will be more severely abused for speaking up.
- ▶ The victim suffers in silence because she blames herself.
- ▶ The victim suffers in silence because she believes that change is impossible.
- ▶ The victim suffers in silence because she believes she is alone.
- ▶ The survivor suffers in silence because she is ashamed about what she “allowed” to happen to her.
- ▶ The survivor suffers in silence because she is afraid what others will think of her (i.e., stigma).

Neither victim nor survivor will ask for help easily, because they believe that others scorn them. They remain silent, in part, because their church never mentions that abuse is a common, despicable sin that has been suffered by many and that it is condemned.

To uncover domestic abuse, we need to look for it and we need to talk about it.

ASK DURING COUNSELING

As noted, you should ask about domestic abuse at the beginning of any counseling you are considering offering to any couple. If a female seeks your help for any reason, you should likewise ask about domestic abuse. As noted earlier, if there is no abuse, explain your obligation to ask everyone, even if there is no cause for suspicion.

OUTREACH TO VICTIMS

There are some things you can do to break the silence self-imposed by victims and survivors in order to encourage them to come forth for your help and for God’s comfort.

- ▶ Incorporate prayers for victims and survivors of abuse; for unrepentant abusers; and for professionals who work with victims, survivors and abusers.
- ▶ List in your bulletin resources for those who suffer or who have suffered domestic abuse.
- ▶ Sermons can identify all violence, including against wives, as a sin.

- ▶ Incorporate domestic abuse as part of premarital counseling.
- ▶ Identify females in your church who could act as resources for victims and survivors.
- ▶ Educate church staff about domestic abuse.
- ▶ Correct misunderstandings of other church workers about the causes and effects of domestic abuse.

Another outreach strategy is to work with other churches to establish an inter-church support program for victims and survivors. Then you could encourage unknown victims and survivors in your church to seek help from another church, and the other churches can do the same for you. This might provide victims with a better sense of security (i.e., that the abuser will not find out). Victims and survivors might also find it easier to disclose to someone at another church, to whom they do not feel so close and toward whom they might feel less shame. If you do this, we recommend it be done only with churches that have gone through this or similar training, so that they are aware of issues of referrals to experts and especially of safety.

ISSUES YOU MAY CONFRONT

WHO’S TELLING THE TRUTH?

You may be put in a situation where you are asked to decide whether you believe abuse is occurring. The man accused of abuse might vehemently deny wrongdoing and may insist that you believe him. You may hear accusations by the purported abuser that he is actually a victim. You may thus be asked to distinguish between contradictory statements. Finally, you may be asked to make statements to their respective lawyers. Your attitude in all of this should be a simple one: You were not there, you do not know the truth, you cannot know the truth. A related attitude is the realization that it is not necessary for you to know the truth.

If a woman says she is a victim of abuse, refer her to professional resources. If a man says he is being wrongfully accused, refer him to professional resources. Accept everything you hear, even if they are contradictory, as true, even while knowing that everything cannot be true. Refer to domestic abuse resources and professionals.

It is important to understand that false accusations are rare. They do happen, especially if a couple is divorcing or in a custody dispute, but they do not happen often.

ACCUSATIONS BY THE ABUSER

Abusers that are uncovered are likely to react badly toward you. The abuser may accuse you of believing a lie. He may accuse you of weakness and shamefulness. He may assert that you are a bad, unfaithful minister or church worker. He may even accuse you of having or seeking to have an affair with the victim.

VICTIMS FROM OTHER CHURCHES

You may field requests for meetings from members of other churches. This might be because they feel more comfortable talking with someone they do not know as closely. It also might be because they are dissatisfied or potentially endangered by the advice of another pastor or church worker. Regardless of the reason for seeing you, the same ideas, attitudes and approaches apply. That is, your primary goal is to refer the victim or survivor to experts and resources.

Consider calling the other church, but also consider not calling the other church. Do so if you are assured that it will not potentially endanger the victim.

CONCLUSION

To summarize the training:

- ▶ Domestic abuse is common. Domestic abuse endangers the physical and psychological health of the victim, the children and the abuser, just as it endangers their salvation.
- ▶ Victims have many things that constrain their capacity to respond effectively.
- ▶ Victims and survivors might turn to their church for help, and you need to be ready to help.
- ▶ The paramount issue is safety. Do not do anything to exacerbate the danger to the victim.
- ▶ If you meet with a victim of domestic abuse, your task is to: (1) assure her that domestic abuse is wrong and should not be tolerated, (2) encourage her to seek help and (3) refer her to resources and experts that can help. All of this must be done with careful attention to safety.
- ▶ Reach out to local experts so that you can provide a referral.
- ▶ Develop strategies to encourage victims and survivors to seek help.

