

Understanding Spousal Abuse
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Violence of spousal abuse is often fatal and is always destructive. For any marriage it is wrong, but for the Christian marriage it is also a disgrace.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in America about 1/3 of American female murder victims are by domestic violence. The number is about 3% of male murder victims. About 11% of all murder victims are by an intimate partner, and about 1,400 women are murdered each year (statistics vary by year).

If you are caught in that brutal trap, there is hope for you. With firm determination, focus, you can gain a new perspective, learn new skills, and have your marriage become what it should be. But it is not easy, it will take time and help, and it will take unwavering commitment by both spouses.

Definitions

What is spousal abuse? Here is a working definition. It is a pattern of battering, bully like, and intimidating behaviors that spouses use to attack each other. Domestic violence is a broader term and includes intimate partners and all members of a household.

Spousal abuse includes physical assaults, sexual rape and molestation, psychological threats, stalking, and economic coercion to terrorize the other. The heart of abuse is to gain and/or maintain power and control over the other spouse. Violence is very effective, especially on the part of men.

Why? Men are generally bigger, stronger, and have been socialized to settle differences by physical force. Then, there is the testosterone stirring up aggression. Women usually fight in other ways, such as gossip, yelling, and less physical ways. However, some women also utilize physical force – though usually it is believed that women use violence as a defense.

Causes

It is difficult to nail down one cause, but here are some causes.

- Learned behavior. Many spousal abusers come from homes where dads beat the daylights out of moms, and the kids think that is the way things are. It forms a vicious cycle where kids do the same thing when they grow up. Some cultures believe that battering is the best way to keep the woman under control.
- Inadequate coping skills. Pressures pour in on people causing stress and anger that the abuser does not know how to manage. Pressures include poor communication or parenting skills, financial problems, conflict and the everyday hassles of life.

- Opportunity. The home is the safest place for abusers to abuse, because the privacy of the home can keep the violence secret.

- Dependency. Spousal abusers sometimes have few supportive relationships, and their deepest relationship is with their spouse. They form an extreme dependency on the victim that expresses itself by possessiveness, jealousy, monitoring, stalking, and violence. These are the ones who won't let go, punish, harass, and would rather kill than lose the partner.

- Psychopaths. These are the ones without conscience or empathy, driven by excitement and instant pleasure. They can or will kill or maim in an instant, and show no remorse. This condition is a serious personality disorder.

Cycle of Violence

Spousal abuse typically follows a ruthless cyclical pattern. If you and I understand the dynamics of this cycle, we can head off violence before things boil over.

- Tension building. This first phase is where the abuser cannot handle the pressures of life. Stressors keep piling on, and the tension simmers and builds. They begin to be more controlling, and blame the victim when anything goes wrong – and are generally frustrated with life.

- Explosion. Something triggers the abuser, and the tension explodes out of control. After the tension is released, they can get back in control of themselves. However, the victim becomes terrified, hysterical, and emotional – and bruised, bleeding, and battered.

- Remorse and honeymoon. In this phase, guilt, fear, and maybe remorse flood the abuser. Promises are given to never hit again. The victim forgives, and gains a false sense of hope. Unfortunately, this is a cycle. Cycles go 'round and 'round.

If intervention does not break up this merciless cycle of spousal abuse, two things will happen. Neither is good. First, the explosions become more intense and fierce. In the beginning, it may be just nasty words hurled at each other. Then, things will escalate to physical force, injury, and perhaps ultimate death.

Second, the cycle becomes more frequent. Twice yearly explosions turn into monthly, then weekly. One woman told me that her husband told her, "What are you complaining about; I don't beat you up daily like my dad did my mom"

The Cure

Here are some guidelines that may bring a changed relationship.

1. Take responsibility. Usually, both abusers and victims tend to deny any problem, minimize the torturous harm, or blame other people. Accept and acknowledge the very serious problem.

2. Refuse violence. A decision must be made that abuse is a wrongful sin no matter what is the situation. The key issue is not when will any perceived or real “unfairness” stop, but rather when will the “violence” stop. Violence will never solve the problem, but only cause undue harm to the children, spouse, and marriage. Just stop. Even cheating does not warrant physical bludgeoning and injury.

3. Understand the biblical point of view. Paul says the husband is to love, nourish, and cherish his wife like he does his own body (Ephesians 5:25, 28, 29, 33). No sane husband would beat and bruise their bodies bloody, black and blue – nor terrorize and injure themselves mentally.

4. Get help. Start a long term program of counseling and learning new skills on handling stress, anger, conflict, impulses, and interpersonal relationship through therapy and counseling. Though anger and alcohol may be involved, neither are necessary causes of spousal abuse.

5. Leave. I will probably start a firestorm with this advice. However, if the relationship is so toxic that physical injury is or will occur, then the victim should leave. If you are a victim, your life and that of your children may be in danger. No one deserves to be hit or brutalized by their spouse. Murder and maiming do occur.

Leaving is hard, and it should be done with careful planning, and a safe refuge to run to. Unfortunately, most murders happen in the few months after the victim leaves the relationship. Sadly, in some cultures there is nowhere for the victim to turn for help, and they are assigned to a desperate life of terror.