

gifted for leadership

Ministry to Domestic Violence Victims

This download gives practical advice as you help women who are in abusive relationships.



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Introduction

Facing Abuse

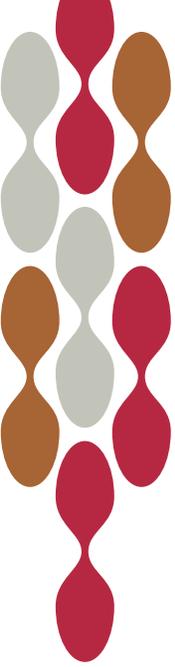
By JoHannah Reardon



Whether you are a pastor, a women's ministry leader, or a mentor, you will find this download to be useful as you try to help those in your care who are suffering from domestic abuse. As Ed Stetzer says in his article "The Church and its Response to Domestic and Sexual Violence," leaders in the church must address this issue:

Monica Taffinder, a Christian counselor who specializes in trauma recovery, depression, anxiety, and sexual abuse recovery, argues that many pastors tend to be somewhat naïve when it comes to the probability that both victims and perpetrators exist within their church.

"I really think people don't think that it happens in their congregation," Taffinder told *The Christian*



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Post. "I mean, [pastors] know these people. They see these people. They go to dinner with these people. They worship with these people. I know they're savvy enough to realize that there's just as much as they don't know people in their congregations as they do, but still."

The study also found that 65 percent of pastors had spoken one or fewer times about domestic and sexual violence, with 22 percent indicating they addressed it annually, while 33 percent mentioned it "rarely." Ten percent of pastors said they had never taught on it.

"Based on the number of times they speak to their congregations about sexual or domestic violence each year, the majority of pastors do not consider sexual or domestic violence central to larger religious themes such as strong families, a peaceful society, pursuing holiness, social justice, etc.," the report states.

Our hope with this download is that you will be better equipped to help those in your care who are struggling with a life of despair and who are feeling trapped. Who better to help than those of us who have the message of freedom in Christ?

Blessings,

JoHannah Reardon

Contributing Editor for GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM

Leader's Guide

How to use this download for a group study



This download can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**

The Silent Epidemic

Countless Christian women are battered every day. Here's how to respond if you or someone you love is abused.

By Corrie Cutrer

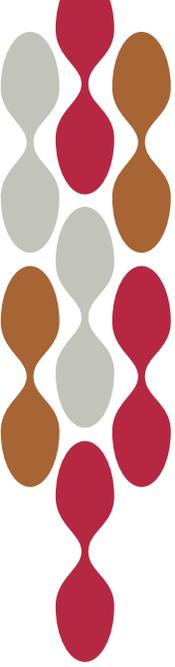


Her husband's comments were so routine that for 20 years, Brenda Branson didn't realize she was a victim of verbal and emotional abuse.

"You breathe too loud," her husband would tell her. "Your smile is silly. You look terrible. Don't you have anything better to wear?"

It wasn't until Brenda realized his comments weren't true that she approached him. And that's when he picked up a chair and hit her with it. Brenda knew she had to do something, so she went to her pastor. Unfortunately he wasn't equipped to handle domestic abuse; his suggestions about submitting to her husband only made her home life more difficult. "Our church didn't know what to do with us," Brenda says. "They just wanted the problem to go away."

Brenda got the help she needed by forming a support group with another domestic-violence victim. Then in 1995 she cofounded Focus Ministries, one of the few Christian



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organizations devoted to helping victims of domestic violence while also training churches on how they can assist members who are being abused.

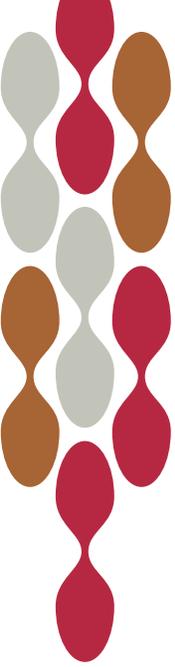
According to Detective Sgt. Don Stewart, a retired police officer who handled domestic violence cases for 25 years, one out of every four Christian couples experiences at least one episode of physical abuse within their marriage. In fact, battering is the single largest cause of injury to women—more than auto accidents, muggings, and rapes combined. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists reports that 3 to 4 million women are beaten in their homes every year. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, approximately 2,000 women are murdered every year by an intimate partner.

"Domestic violence has become an epidemic," says Brenda, who is no longer married to her husband. The enormity of the problem, combined with the fact law enforcement officials and church leaders often lack the skills to address it, led Don to author **Refuge** (New Hope), a book helping victims understand and flee from violence in their homes. "I consider Don to be a missionary who offers hope to hurting women and presents a wakeup call to the Christian community to get involved," says Brenda.

We interviewed both Don and Brenda on how battered women can get help as well as how Christians can respond to this crisis.

Explain the different types of domestic abuse.

Don: Emotional and verbal abuse are the cutting remarks a spouse uses to destroy his wife's sense of self-worth. A man may label a woman fat or stupid. He may demean her personal accomplishments or scream at her that the dinner she cooked is terrible. Perhaps he yells at her because she's 15 minutes late coming home from work.



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Physical abuse is when a man injures his wife in a nonsexual manner. Then there's sexual abuse—when a spouse forces sex on his partner. Most states have adopted laws protecting married women against spousal rape. But because there's so much shame involved for the woman, she may be hesitant to come forward about this.

Brenda: Emotional and verbal abuse can become so commonplace in a woman's relationship that she doesn't realize she's being harmed. It took me a while to realize my husband's attacks weren't my fault and weren't true. For example, we both used to work in our church's children's ministry. My husband often told me I was uncaring toward the kids. For a long time I struggled with this, until one day someone told me how blessed she was by the compassion I extended to her children. Suddenly I saw I'd been basing my identity on my husband's perception of me instead of God's.

What signs indicate verbal abuse may head toward physical abuse?

Don: When a husband starts saying things such as, "If you ever left me, I'd kill myself," or "If you don't do exactly as I tell you, I'm going to beat the daylights out of you." Those are clues the escalation from verbal to physical abuse may have begun.

Another sign is if a husband starts damaging household property that has sentimental value to his wife. A batterer never will demolish his prized possessions, but he often will shatter a piece of pottery or a family heirloom. If his comments intensify to the point he says something such as, "If you ever leave me, I'm going to kill you and the kids," or "I'm going to burn the house down," he's crossed a critical psychological barrier, and it's not

long before he's going to act on his words. As soon as a woman no longer feels safe in her home, she needs to make arrangements to leave. She may have to leave only until she and her husband can get some counseling or until he's arrested and has gone through a treatment program—but she still needs to remove herself from the dangerous situation.

What are the typical personality traits of a batterer?

Don: Jealousy, hypersensitivity toward even the most constructive criticism, and the tendency to pressure a woman into a quick engagement, marriage, or live-in relationship. I encourage single women to watch out for these signs. Other indications include any use of physical force against you or an unusually harsh attitude toward children or animals. And any history of past battering should be of major concern.

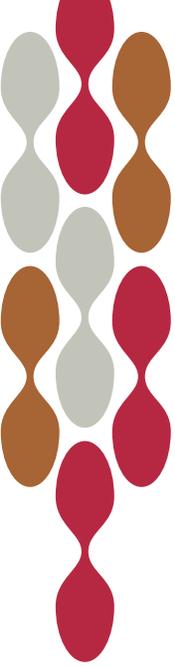
How can we tell if abuse is happening in a woman's life?

Don: A batterer tries to isolate his victim. So if you see a woman being isolated from family, friends, or church, that's a red flag. The second thing to look for is if the woman's husband constantly monitors his wife's whereabouts. He may call her ten times a day at work, and if she doesn't answer each time, he demands to know where she was. Or if she doesn't arrive home in the evening at a precise time, he demands to know why.

Also, be on the lookout if a woman completely covers her body with pants and a long-sleeve shirt even when it's hot outside, or if she uses a lot of makeup. She could be trying to cover a bruise.

Should a friend who suspects abuse approach a woman about it?

Don: It depends on your relationship. If you're friends or even have a good casual relationship, invite her to breakfast or for



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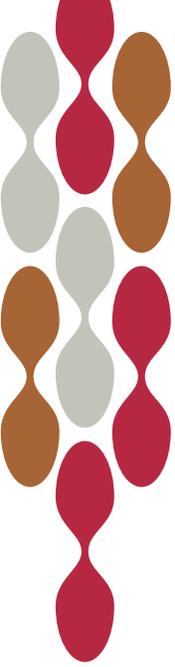
coffee and approach the subject gently by asking, "Is everything okay? Tell me about your personal life. How is your relationship with your husband?" Don't condemn her or try to push her out of her relationship with her husband.

At some point you need to say, "I'm concerned about you. If you'd like to talk about anything that's troubling you, I'm here for you." If she opens up, emphasize that she isn't causing her husband's abuse. Tell her: "You don't deserve what's happening to you. God doesn't approve of any man who beats, controls, or retaliates against his wife. And whenever you're ready to leave, I'm ready to help."

You may want to make an appointment for the two of you to sit down with a pastor, social worker, or law enforcement officer and decide where to go from there. If you discover she's being abused but she's unwilling to do anything about it, you also need to consider the option of calling the police for her. This is a difficult judgment call; it requires prayer and knowledge of the situation. But it may help save her life.

How can we better empathize with an abused woman?

Don: Be careful not to criticize an abused woman, because until you've walked in her shoes, you can't appreciate the unbelievable hell she lives in every day. It's very difficult for a woman to walk away from an abusive situation—often the batterer is the full breadwinner in the family and she fears economic hardship. Nearly 50 percent of all homeless women and children in the U. S. are without a home because they're fleeing from domestic violence. Also, a woman may fear greater harassment from her spouse if she leaves, and this could prevent her from getting the help she needs.



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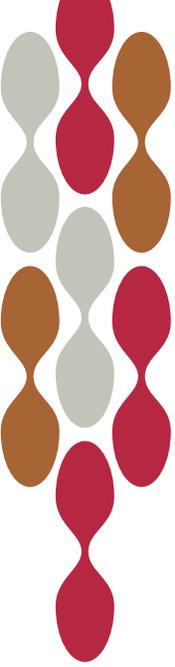
What can the church do?

Brenda: Church members are so afraid of promoting divorce, they often don't give women the help they need. Sometimes divorce is the end result of domestic violence, but I always tell church leaders that Focus Ministries doesn't promote divorce—we promote a woman's *safety*. That's why it's important leaders learn how to properly advise abused women. The techniques people use to counsel couples with other marital problems don't work with domestic abuse.

For example, when I went to my pastor for help, he encouraged me to be extra loving to my husband, to make his favorite meals, to extend empathy and ask if he'd had a hard day when he seemed agitated. Both pastors and abused women often mistakenly think if the *woman* changes, then things will get better. That's not true. Even the most gentle "confrontation" with my husband set him off and made things worse.

Don: Church leaders also need to realize batterers can be manipulative. I know a woman in my community who went to her pastor for help because she was afraid of her husband. The pastor called her husband and asked that he and the wife come in for counseling. The poor woman was absolutely terrified to sit in a joint counseling session with her husband and said nothing while the husband smoothed things over. Shortly after this, the woman made a decision to leave her husband. One night when she thought he was away, she returned home to get some of her things. The husband was there hiding and beat the woman so severely that parts of her brain were exposed.

Leaders also need to work to dismiss misinterpretations of Scripture such as **1 Peter 3:1-6**, which abusers often use to defend their actions. It's unbelievable how many Christian



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men think they're entitled by God to discipline and control their wives. As **1 Peter 3:7** reminds us, no man has a God-given right to punish or retaliate against his wife under *any* condition. And a woman shouldn't be led to think that through her submission and suffering she'll become a better person. To allow someone to abuse you does *not* bring glory to God.

Are there any steps we can take to reach out to the abused?

Brenda: Order training materials or invite someone in your area who's qualified to speak at your church to promote awareness. Most church members don't know how prevalent domestic violence is among Christians and have no idea how to deal with it. Also, find out what local support groups are available for abused women and have that information readily available.

Don: Organize a list of resources within your church you can utilize if you need to help an abused woman flee from a violent situation. She may need a vacant apartment, money for food and clothing, a car, or an attorney. Let women minister to women while men play a secondary role from a distance. Also, work to establish a relationship with your local women's shelter. Most women who work at these shelters are dedicated, passionate people who do wonderful things for abused women. Often these workers are willing to come to a church and provide the kind of instruction and tools church members need to react appropriately when they learn someone's being abused.

The church is in a great position to reach out to women who suffer so badly. My prayer is they'll do it.

This article first appeared on TODAYSCHRISTIANWOMAN.COM.

Reflect

- *Being aware of emotional abuse may help you get a woman to safety before the physical abuse happens. Think about some questions you can ask a woman to ascertain if they are being emotionally abused.*
- *Read **I Peter 3:1-7**. As you read these verses in context, how do they communicate something different than is often taught regarding submission?*
- *Are there any programs you can begin in your church to help make everyone aware of domestic abuse? If so, work out a plan of action to make it happen.*

When Domestic Violence Knocks



How to minister wisely when it shows up in your congregation

By Lou Reed

Do you ever get a bad feeling when the phone rings? As a domestic violence victim advocate for the City of Miami Beach Police Department, I get that feeling often. "Lou, there's a lady down here who needs to see you."

It had become hauntingly easy for me to spot an abused woman in our busy department lobby. As I introduced myself to this visitor, she looked up at me sheepishly and the bruises on her face spoke volumes.

Jackie (not her real name) came to our department seeking help with a domestic conflict. Her story was typical. She and her husband had gotten into a verbal altercation that escalated to physical violence. She'd called 911. Responding officers determined that he was the "primary aggressor," having struck Jackie with his fist and leaving visible bruises. Having probable cause, our officers arrested him for



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misdemeanor battery, and he was taken into custody immediately to await a hearing.

Before I could begin my usual inquiries, Jackie cut in. "Mr. Reed, is there any way that we can stop this process and let my husband out of jail?"

I was somewhat taken aback, although this kind of "victim's remorse" is common. "Why do you ask, Jackie?"

"You see, he's an elder in our church," she said nervously. "If this ever got out, he could lose his position. I'm really afraid that he would blame me, and that would just make matters worse. I'd rather just forget the whole thing."

"Has he ever physically struck you before?" I asked.

"Yes sir, many times. But this is the first time that I've called the police. I was angry and scared. But I wouldn't have done it if I'd known he would end up in jail."

"Jackie, have you ever talked to your pastor about this situation?"

Her eyes and mouth stretched wide open in disbelief. "I could never do that. My husband would kill me!"

Her response cut me—especially because, though Jackie didn't know it, I wasn't just a professional victim advocate for the City of Miami Beach. I was also a pastor. So I started to think about my own church. Did I have a "Jackie" in my congregation? What would I say to her if she did muster up the courage to come to me with her domestic situation?

I started looking for materials within my denomination that could help me. I was surprised by how much there was. In fact, there are many ministries and organizations throughout the country that are already active in victim advocacy.

But as important as this kind of education is, it will still leave any pastor with questions about handling a specific domestic



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situation. Plus, it's a learning process that takes years. And if a victim walks into your office tomorrow, she can't wait that long. How will you interact with her? Will you confront the abuser? When and how do you get the authorities involved? Here, then, are some essential ground rules for pastoring in the wake of domestic violence.

What to listen for

Although as a victim advocate I was the professional, I realized that victims understood domestic violence in a way that, without personally experiencing it, I never could. So I tried to listen as if they were the experts. In addition to first-hand information about the domestic incident, victims know the history of the relationship. As I asked questions and listened to victims, I actively pinpointed areas where I needed to gain more wisdom and knowledge.

Just by listening, I noticed patterns in the ways victims react and deal with their abusive situations. For instance, most abused women exhibit obvious signs of having been long intimidated by the one who eventually abused them.

Listening not only provided an essential education for me, it also helped the victim put words to the ordeal she'd endured for so long.

Giving power to the victim

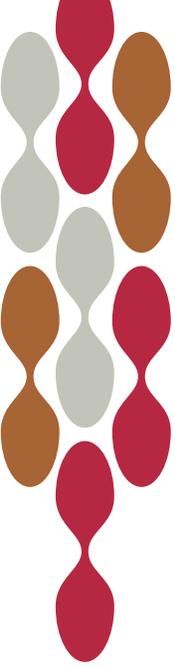
After talking with Jackie, I eventually asked for permission to speak with her pastor.

"What would you say to him?" she asked, bristling with fear.

"Are you going to try to get the case dropped?"

"Actually, that's in your hands," I said.

A key strategy in dealing with abuse victims is empowerment. Most have been rendered powerless in their domestic relation-



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ship, at least they assume they're powerless, and for me to tell a victim what to do in her situation causes "re-victimization."

As a pastor, of course, I often feel like I'm expected to be the Answer Man, and it was hard for me not to make the decisions for Jackie. But I've learned over time that my best contribution is to give concrete information and offer the right options at the right stage of a victim's situation. Yes, there is a place for advice in that process, but the line between giving advice and telling the victim what to do is important. When the victim begins to make the decisions, the process of empowerment begins.

Find the victim advocates

Jackie had come for help to a victim advocate (me) before going to her pastor. I would encourage any pastor to get familiar with your local victim advocates, who work in either the police department or the state or district attorney's offices. These civilian staff are professionally trained to give information and advice on any domestic situation. They can help you understand the intricacies of navigating these incidents, and you will want to refer victims to these advocates when they are ready to notify the authorities.

When to dial 911

Jackie eventually agreed to see her pastor if I would go along, and I was able to help him understand what was happening. Once our session was finished, he took me aside and asked, "What should I have done if Jackie had called me before she contacted the police department about this incident?"

It can be helpful to think of the assistance given to abuse victims as a continuum. On that continuum, the police are the



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"first responders." They know the law, and they have the authority to act quickly and decisively.

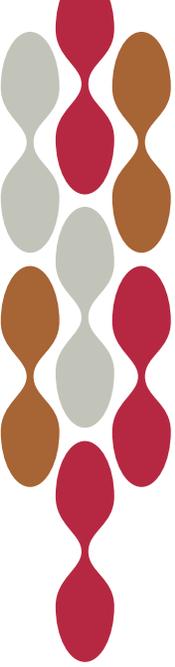
If you ever have first-hand knowledge of domestic abuse (if you've actually witnessed it), calling 911 yourself to report it is a no-brainer. You want to protect the victim as soon as possible. But if the victim is the only witness to the crime, the question of when to call the police gets trickier.

All too often, something like this happens: a neighbor overhears a domestic disturbance and calls 911; the police show up; the victim denies that anything happened and tells the police to leave. Since there are no other first-hand witnesses, the authorities are helpless. So if the victim who comes to you does not want the police to be notified, and you have no other witness to rely on, then—as irresponsible as it sounds—you should not call the police.

Not only will the police be stymied without the victim's cooperation, but you risk two things. You could raise the ire of the abuser and put the victim in even greater danger than before. Plus, you will be overriding the victim's choice, which re-victimizes rather than empowers her.

One exception is if the victim shows physical signs of abuse. In that case, then even if you can't count on the victim's testimony, you should notify the police. That is evidence enough for the authorities to be able to do something. And that is worth overriding the victim's choice, at least for that moment. Even then, though, before I make the call, I will try to ask the victim's permission, explain the gravity of the situation, and ask her not to recant when the authorities come.

More often the abuse is emotional, backed by threats of physical harm. And you can't prove that's happening without the help of the victim. Believe me, if as a pastor I always



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followed my desire to call 911 for a victim, I would do so all the time. But often the best thing you can do is give the victim the phone number of a victim advocate and encourage her to make the call.

Recommend safe houses

Of all the options you can recommend to an abused woman, a women's shelter is probably the best one. These shelters, or safe houses, protect women who are in danger of being repeatedly abused.

Outside of the safe house, abuse victims must rely on the criminal justice system to protect them from the batterer. Unfortunately, these resources—for instance, a restraining order or police intervention—do not guarantee a high degree of safety. But a safe house does. They can provide room and board accommodations, 24-hour security, victim advocates, employment and career counselors, day care facilities for preschoolers, transportation, healthcare professionals, and more.

One risk in recommending the safe house option is (again) the possibility of re-victimization. It may seem absurd to someone on the outside, but many abused women are more afraid of leaving a familiar environment than they are of being hurt again. Since a safe house will only take willing lodgers anyway, be sure that you're only recommending and not trying to make the decision for the victim to enter a safe house.

The issue of "submission"

Nine out of ten cases of reported domestic violence are perpetrated by the man. A pastor cannot ignore how this runs up against the doctrine of "submission in marriage," which almost inevitably comes up in certain church situations. It



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needs to be handled with care.

Putting the theological debate aside, consider the position of an abuse victim who believes it is her duty to submit to her husband. Maybe she can't even articulate the obligation in so many theological terms, but she feels it. Don't let it be the elephant in the room. As her pastor, help her face that sense of duty and loyalty and sacrificial love and understand it in light of an abusive husband.

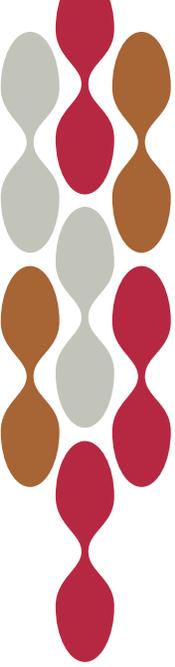
At the same time, consider how your church has talked about submission. My church holds a conservative understanding of this doctrine, and I realized that we often presented it in a way that put more of the burden on the wife than the husband. Such an approach can slant both the victim's and abuser's perspectives on their relationship.

Approaching the abuser

And that brings me to the other side of the coin. As a pastor, what do you do with the perpetrator? In my jurisdiction, a perpetrator of misdemeanor battery is given two options after he has been arrested and charged (assuming he doesn't call in a public defender to take the case to trial). He can (1) serve a prison sentence or (2) complete a court-ordered anger management course. As you might expect, everyone picks anger management.

Still, an abuser who is taken into custody will be jailed until he posts bail or his hearing comes up, which must happen within 15 days in my jurisdiction. So whether it's one night or two weeks, the perpetrator often gets at least a taste of incarceration. And as strange as it may sound, that taste can be just what he needs.

Since domestic violence is often fueled by power and



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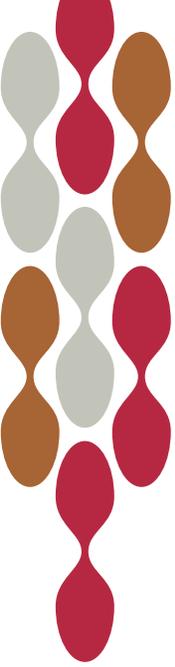
control issues in men, it's logical that the perpetrator would be most vulnerable in a situation that he can't control. A jail cell is certainly that kind of place. So as a pastor I've found that this period of incarceration opens up the abuser and can be a very strategic time to approach him. The jail officials I worked with understood this, too, and they would welcome my visits. Take advantage of this sudden vulnerability to step in, make contact, and start counseling the abuser.

I always start by just trying to assess the abuser's mindset. Research suggests that abusers are pathological blame-shifters, so I look for that going in. But I'll ask him to tell me about himself. Were Mom and Dad both in the home? Who was more dominant? Was there violence or abuse between them? (Most batterers saw one of their parents abuse the other.) If there was abuse, which parent did you identify with? All of my questions for the abuser are leading, as gently as possible, to this one: what do you think about what you did? It's amazing how honest a batterer will be with you, especially (for male pastors) man-to-man. If you are a female pastor, consider bringing your husband or a man you work with in to do this part.

Reinforcing the rehab

Once the anger management course starts, I ask the abuser to agree to meet with me after each session. My hope here is to fill in the gaps of the course. I'll ask him questions to see if he's really processing what they're teaching. Is this course wasting your time? Are you buying this? Often an abuser just sits in class and nods. He doesn't get a chance to verbalize his responses to what he is or isn't learning, so I push him to do that. If he has objections, I can address them.

Since abusers are usually blame-shifters, you'll often hear



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them find ways to blame their spouses. Others will say they were drunk but that they don't have a real anger problem. Consequently, they don't see the need for this anger management course. That's when you ask something like, "Have you ever lost your temper while sober?" If he's honest, he'll admit he has. Push him to consider how badly he could lose his temper again.

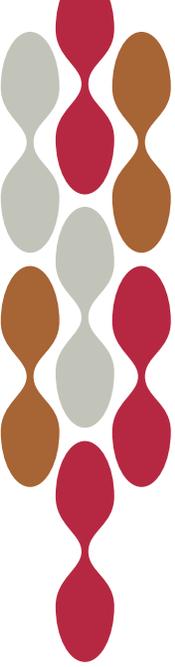
Or, especially if the abuser is a church attender, I will pull in spiritual corollaries to the secular principles being taught in the course. If the abuser is being told that he has to admit his wrongdoing to move forward, I point him to 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

When the anger management course nears its end (often within 12 weeks), I try to set up an extended commitment from the abuser to meet with me. Twelve weeks is rarely enough time for someone to work through the issues that led him to batter a spouse. Plus, as long as we're meeting together in a format that I'm controlling, the abuser remains more vulnerable. I'll ask him to meet with me for another three months, and I'll set some goals for us to evaluate by the end of that time.

Goals for an abuser

First, if we haven't already, we will try to pinpoint what triggers his anger, and once we have, we will work on strategies for diffusing it. Also, we will talk about ways he can make his wife feel safer and more loved. How can he be more affectionate or considerate?

Second, we will discuss personal goals he has, perhaps job-related or advancing his career.



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Third, I work toward his willingness to bring in a third party and, eventually, the wife herself into this process. This makes it more normal for the abuser to talk about his situation and lowers the intensity of the anger and embarrassment.

Obviously, cases of domestic violence are complicated. It may take years to reach a point of resolution. Sometimes it never comes. As a pastor trying to help, you may wonder if you actually can. It is encouraging then to remember that, among the many victim advocates out there, we have one Advocate whom we can trust above all to bring justice, repentance, and healing into these homes.

As humble instruments of that Advocate, we keep learning and hoping.

Lou Reed has 25 years of pastoral experience, most recently at West Side Baptist Church in Hollywood, Florida. He is also a former supervisor for the City of Miami Beach Police Department's domestic violence unit and an adjunct professor at Trinity International University in Davie, Florida. This article first appeared in LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.

Reflect

- *How can you help a domestic violence victim face what their spouse is doing and move out of harm's way?*
- *Do you agree with his advice about calling 911 only if the woman is ready to? Why or why not?*
- *Clearly, a male abuser needs to hear from another man. Who can you count on to step into that role?*

Why Not Leave Him?

Questioning the victim takes focus away from the real problem: the abuse.

By Justin and Lindsey Holcomb

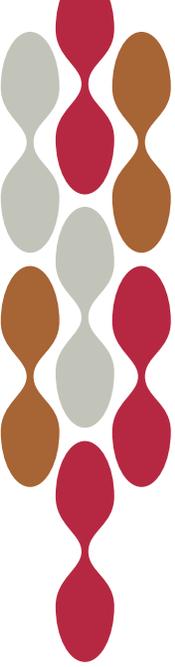


Many survivors of domestic abuse, deep down, may be asking, "Is it my fault?" Most assume they did something to spur their abusers on, that they were too passive or too demanding, or that they are somehow to blame for the abuse.

Yet, research on domestic violence reveals that a woman's behavior actually has no bearing on the abuse. Psychologists Neil Jacobson and John Gottman say it plainly: "There was nothing battered women could do to stop the abuse except get out of the relationship."

Unfortunately, victims not only blame themselves, but are also blamed by the perpetrator and society. Social psychology researchers have found that we hold prejudices against domestic violence victims. These negative stereotypes make victims feel socially derogated, which can prolong their substantial psychological and emotional distress.

The common question of "If it's so bad, why don't you



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leave?" can further this sense of stigma and victimization, since it puts the responsibility on the victim, the one experiencing abuse. This is an important question; however, focusing on the abuser's behavior—rather than the woman's response to his behavior—is crucial for survivors to overcome any feelings of guilt for what has happened to them. Our hope is that people will instead begin asking, "Why does he choose to abuse?"

While characteristics vary from person to person, all abusers share one thing in common: they choose to abuse deliberately. They may blame their behavior on their partners, an abusive childhood, stress, alcohol problems, their cultural background, financial problems, or their personalities.

Others aid in this false claim by assuming violence and abuse only happen because the abuser isn't able to control his behavior. Or they believe abusers do what they do because they were abused as a child, or that their behavior is dictated by mental illness. Certainly childhood issues, alcohol, drugs, mental illness, and other health problems may be factors of domestic abuse, but they are not the cause.

The truth is, the only reason an abuser abuses is because he chooses to. Abusers are able to control their behavior—they do it all the time. Just look at how they behave when they are not around their victims.

We know that certain factors intensify an abuser's desire to abuse, but none of those factors cause abuse. Abusers abuse for one reason: because they want to. Yet, there are no acceptable reasons for a partner to abuse another in an intimate relationship.

That means the abuser is the only one to blame. Of course, he does not want anyone to see it this way. Men who abuse



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share some common characteristics—and one of these characteristics is to blame-shift. They want others to believe the woman is at fault or at least shares some responsibility for the abuse she is receiving. But this is not true.

As Christians react to the pain and suffering of women who are abused, we should meditate on God's love and care for women revealed in the Bible. But God's love should do more than just make us feel better—it should lead us to **imitate his care** for those hurting, take action against evil toward the vulnerable, and pray for God's peace and salvation to cover the earth.

Those suffering abuse need to know that God sees their suffering and that God cares about them and hears their cries and prayers. He cares for them so much that **he wants them safe** and delivered from threat and violence. He wants them to heal from the many ways they've been hurt and wounded.

The deepest message of the ministry of Jesus and the Bible is the **grace of God** to all of us because we are all broken people in a broken world. Grace is most needed and best understood in the midst of sin, suffering, and brokenness.

To Those Suffering Domestic Abuse

If you are experiencing physical, sexual, emotional, and/or verbal abuse from a partner, spouse, or family member, you can **create a personalized safety plan**.

No matter what kind of abuse you have experienced, there is nothing you can do, nothing you can say, nothing you think that makes you deserving of it. There is no mistake you could have made and no sin you could have committed to make you deserving of violence.

You do not deserve this. And it is never your fault.

You did not ask for this. You should not be silenced. You are



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not worthless. You do not have to pretend like nothing happened. You are not damaged goods, forgotten or ignored by God, or "getting what you deserve."

But you are created in the image of God. You should be treated with dignity, love, and respect, but instead you are or were the victim of abuse and violence, and *it was wrong*. You were sinned against.

God knows and sees you in your experience of violence and abuse, He loves you through it all, and he greatly desires your safety and protection. God has not forgotten you. He grieves with you. And we hope that knowing this will embolden you to be honest with both him and others, and know that it is courageous—not shameful—to reach out for support.

God says to you clearly, it is *not* your fault. You were made for more than this. And it is his great desire to see you safe, healed, and made whole.

*Justin Holcomb is an Episcopal priest and adjunct professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Lindsey Holcomb counsels victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, and she conducts training seminars to service providers and pastors. Together they wrote **Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence** and **Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault**. This article first appeared on HER.MENEUTICS.*

Reflect

- *Why is it so important to take the guilt off the woman who is being abused? What are some practical ways you can do this as you counsel?*
- *What kind of personalized safety plan can you put together for the one you are counseling?*
- *How can you encourage the one you are counseling that God loves her and wants good for her?*

It's Not Your Fault

11 practical tips for ministering to those suffering from domestic violence.

By Justin Holcomb



Domestic violence is extremely prevalent and damaging, but frequently hidden.

One in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. Nearly three out of four of Americans personally know someone who is or has been a victim of domestic violence.

These statistics don't begin to reveal the darkness and grief experienced by the women themselves. Those suffering domestic violence are in the midst of a whirlwind of emotions and have serious and important questions. My wife, Lindsey, and I have ministered to many abuse victims. Here are some of the most frequent questions we've been asked:

Does the grace of God apply to me?

What does the Bible say about women?

What does the Bible say about violence against women?

What does the Bible say about God delivering victims?

Does the Bible say I should suffer abuse and violence?



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Those suffering abuse need to know that God sees their suffering, and that God cares about them and hears their cries and prayers. He cares for them so much that he wants them safe and delivered from threat and violence. But even beyond physical safety, God wants them to heal from the many ways they've been hurt and wounded.

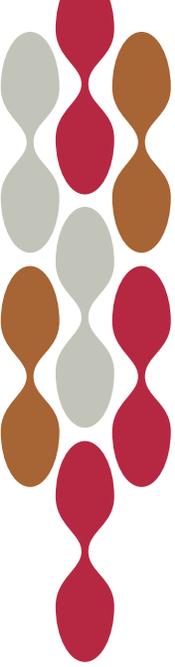
Healing in community

Many people want to help those in their family or circle of friends who are being hurt by domestic violence, but they don't always know how. They are often overwhelmed by the seriousness of the situation and feel helpless to lend adequate support. But here, they couldn't be more wrong. Friends, family, and ministry members can offer *immense* help and support to victims of abuse.

The alternate effect of this, of course, is that some "help"—if misapplied—can actually hurt. Unfortunately, many ministry leaders are woefully under-equipped to deal with domestic violence. Platitudes, prying questions, and shallow "biblical" answers, for example, do more harm than good for a victim who feels stuck in a desperate situation. In fact, many victims believe clergy have the most potential to help them, when in reality they are too often the least helpful and sometimes even harmful.

If you are a leader in ministry, statistics tell us there are people under your care that have suffered—or are currently suffering—from domestic violence. This is particularly tragic because part of God's mission for the church is to proclaim God's healing and to seek justice for everyone it encounters.

We believe that the deepest message of the ministry of Jesus and the Bible is the grace of God to all of us because we are all



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broken people in a broken world. Grace is most needed and best understood in the midst of sin, suffering, and brokenness.

Those suffering domestic violence need the good news of the grace of God applied to the effects of the abuse. As ministry leaders we need to clearly communicate to victims that Jesus responds to their pain. Their stories do not end with abuse and violence. Their lives were intended for more than shame, guilt, fear, anger, and confusion. The abuse does not define them or have the last word on their identity. Yes, it is part of their stories, but not the end of their stories.

In Jesus, the God who delivers us from evil also offers us a path to healing. And it's time to let this truth transform the shape of our own stories and how we minister to others.

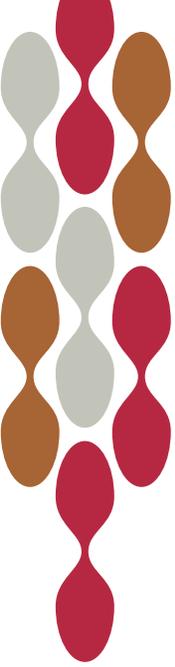
II Practical Ways to Care

If you are a loved one, friend, or minister serving a woman suffering domestic abuse, here are some suggestions on how to best care for her.

1. Let her know the abuse was not her fault. Communicate clearly: "You do not deserve abuse. And it is *never* your fault."
2. Listen. Don't judge or blame them for the abuse. Research has proven that victims tend to have an easier adjustment when they are believed and listened to by others.
3. Don't minimize or deny what happened. The fact that the abuse was not physical doesn't make it any less painful, and it doesn't make it any less wrong. The scars of emotional abuse are very real, can run very deep, and are not to be minimized. In fact, emotional abuse can be just as damaging as physical

abuse—sometimes even more so.

4. Reassure her that she is cared for and loved.
5. Encourage her to talk about the abuse with an advocate, pastor, mental health professional, law enforcement officer, another victim, or a trusted friend.
6. Encourage her to seek medical attention if needed.
7. Fight on her behalf against the lies that the abuse was her fault, that she is to blame, that she is a failure, or that she deserved abuse because she is a bad wife, mother, girlfriend, woman, or Christian.
8. Take care of yourself. As a support person, you need to be healthy in your caregiving role.
9. Avoid placating statements as an attempt to make her feel better.
10. Take time to notice where she is in the healing process and do not rush her through it. Help her to keep moving through it at a pace comfortable to her rather than trying to force progression to a different stage immediately.
11. Say to her, "I am concerned about your safety. How can I support you in creating a safety plan? I'll also support you if you want to call the police or get to a safe place." (Download a [Safety Plan here.](#))



Ministry to Domestic Violence Victims It's Not Your Fault

*Justin S. Holcomb is an Episcopal priest and a professor of theology and Christian thought at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary. He and his wife Lindsey are co-authors of **Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence**. This article first appeared in LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*

Reflect

- Write down how you would answer the questions posed at the beginning of the article:

Does the grace of God apply to me?

What does the Bible say about women?

What does the Bible say about violence against women?

What does the Bible say about God delivering victims?

Does the Bible say I should suffer abuse and violence?

- Think through the 11 things you can do. How can you approach each of these with the person you are trying to help?

Bullying in Marriage

What to do when your spouse is your bully

By Juli Slattery



We expect bullying to show up in schools, in neighborhoods and even in the workplace, but no one thinks of it occurring in marriage. Perhaps this is because phrases like "domestic violence" and "emotional abuse" seem more fitting when one spouse bullies another. While these are obvious forms of bullying, subtler methods might exist in a marriage unrecognized and even wrongly justified. Here are a few examples.

Sarah stood at a fish counter breaking out in a cold sweat. Her husband, Scott, was having important company for dinner and had specifically asked her to make Chilean Sea Bass. She arrived at the grocery store to find them fresh out of sea bass. Instead of choosing another dish to create, Sarah panicked. She knew that Scott would be irate if she didn't make what he had requested. He wouldn't yell or scream, but he would make her "pay" with cold remarks and sarcastic comments.

Debbie felt constant pressure to please her husband, Rick. Whenever he demanded sex, she felt obligated to give it—even



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at 3 A.M. If she were tired or not feeling ready, Rick reminded her of her "wifely duty." Sex, like many things in their marriage, lacked tenderness and sweetness. Rick skillfully leveraged Debbie's desire to be a godly wife by citing Bible verses about submission and the apparent subservient role of women.

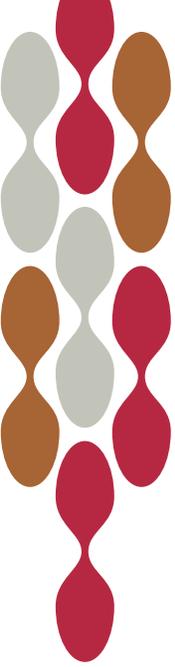
Are Scott and Rick bullies? Not all people who bully in marriage even know that they are doing so. Some grew up in chaotic environments in which structure and order were the primary way of survival. Those coping strategies don't disappear in marriage. Fears and triggers from the past create a deep desire to control at all costs. Others were raised in homes in which conflict was frequent and loud. They learned that resolving conflict means yelling and demanding.

Intentionally or not, a bully uses intimidation and coercion to get his or her way. Yes, women can be bullies too. A wife can skillfully use emotional coercion like humiliation and cynicism to "punish" a husband who isn't "behaving" according to her desires. I've met powerful, competent men who panic at the thought of crossing their wives.

Is This Normal Conflict or Bullying?

What happens in the privacy of your own marriage is difficult to gauge on the scale of normal. All couples have conflict. Most spouses lose their temper or use subversive tactics like manipulation when the relationship is strained. Probably all of us would admit to making sarcastic statements that are just plain mean. So what's the difference between the typical "dysfunction" in the average marriage versus bullying?

Bullying represents a pattern in a relationship. There is an intimidator and a victim. I can remember times when my husband and I have bullied each other over our 20 years of



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marriage. Mike tends to react in anger toward me, and I "bully" him by pulling out overbearing intellectual arguments that make him feel inferior. Although we have had episodes of trying to intimidate each other, this is not the pattern of our relationship.

If you feel tense when you hear your husband's car pull in the garage or you obsess about disappointing him, these may be red flags. Also, pay attention to how people close to you perceive your marriage. Do they make comments indicating that your husband doesn't treat you well or they are concerned about your relationship?

Addressing Bullying in Marriage

Someone once said, "All progress begins by telling the truth." A pattern of bullying continues in marriage because the truth is too inconvenient to admit. As uncomfortable as it is to live with an intimidating spouse, it's less threatening than what might happen if you address the problem. Over the years, most of us adapt to an emotional "dance" in marriage that may not be healthy, but it's all we know.

It takes great courage to change that dance and to honestly admit, "The way we interact is destructive." It takes even more courage to be honest about your own role in the destruction. If you are the bully, be truthful about it. Stop pretending that your controlling spirit is "just your personality."

Because bullying and the fear surrounding it become so entrenched over time, you will probably need the help of a mentor or counselor to effectively address the issue. This is particularly true if your spouse may be a danger to himself, to you or your children, and/or if substance abuse is involved.

Fortunately, there are several great resources that help give clarity in the midst of confronting dysfunctional patterns. My

top recommendations include *Love Must Be Tough* by James Dobson and *Boundaries* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend.

An Issue of “Spiritual Bullies”

Perhaps the most confusing situation in marriage is when one spouse bullies another using religious or spiritual arguments. Throughout generations, people have misapplied biblical teaching to justify evils like slavery, prejudice, witch trials, selling indulgences, and even the Crusades. In millions of homes around the world, religious teaching is used as a form of coercion, deprecation, and abuse. While taking one or two verses out of context may seem to justify such behavior, the whole of Scripture clearly condemns it.

Jesus said that all of the teaching of the Law and the Prophets are summed up by these two commandments, “And you must love the LORD your God with all of your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these” (Mark 12:30–31).

There is nothing about bullying or coercion that represents the love of God. We do ourselves no favors when we allow any form of bullying to exist within the body of Christ, particularly within the intimacy of marriage.

*Juli Slattery is a widely known clinical psychologist, author, speaker, and broadcast media professional. She co-founded Authentic Intimacy (www.authenticintimacy.com) and is the co-author of *Passion Pursuit: What Kind of Love Are You Making?* This article first appeared on TODAYSCHRISTIANWOMAN.COM.*

Reflect

- *The author said that being bullied is a pattern, not a random occurrence. How can you help the one you are concerned about determine the difference?*
- *How might bullying be a precursor for abuse? How can you help those in your care to recognize it and stop it before it gets to that point?*
- *What Bible studies or books might you recommend to those who are victims of bullying in marriage?*

'But He Never Hit Me': A Christian Primer on Emotional Abuse

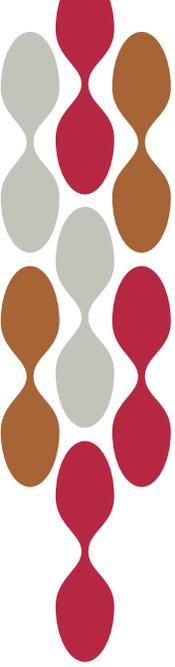


To answer the question, Christians must first understand the problem.

By Jenny Rae Armstrong

Deb* still has a hard time saying she was abused. Her husband knew the Bible well and proclaimed his Christian faith boldly. They studied Scripture together, prayed together, and hosted Bible studies in their home. But a domineering nature lurked behind his confident, God-fearing front. He spent years tearing down Deb's sense of security and self-worth.

"I had things broken around me, threats made to me, emotional games played on me—a knife held to my throat, a gun held to my head," Deb says. "The Bible itself was even



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used as a weapon against me—always out of context, mind you, but used nonetheless."

He blamed his outbursts on Deb, and for years she bought the lie that she was partially responsible. "I had to have been doing something wrong if things weren't going well in a relationship that included God, right? I tried so hard to be godly...and the Bible told me to submit to my husband. Maybe God just wanted me to suffer a bit, to make me more holy. Besides, it wasn't that bad—he never hit me."

But it was bad, enough that their marriage disintegrated under the strain, leaving Deb brokenhearted, fearful, and ashamed.

Deb's story is not unusual. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four American women experiences domestic abuse in her lifetime, with emotional abuse present in the majority of cases. The numbers are no better among churchgoers (a fact supported by research, studies, and statistics in **No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence**, by Nancy Nason-Clark and the late theologian Catherine Clark Kroeger). In fact, the difference seems to be that Christian women are less likely to seek help, because many believe the Bible says they must submit to their husband regardless of his behavior. When they do seek help, it is their churches they go to first.

Emotional abuse is a particularly sticky topic for Christians committed to the sanctity of marriage. While an increasing number of church leaders will suggest that a woman remove herself from a violent situation, they aren't sure whether nonviolent forms of abuse merit anything beyond the suggestion that she "pray and submit." The misguided



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advice many well-intentioned Christians give victims reveals a common misunderstanding about the problem—a misunderstanding some Christian organizations are working to correct.

Yvonne DeVaughn is the national coordinator of **AVA (Advocacy for Victims of Abuse)**, a ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church that equips churches to address domestic abuse. She explains that, contrary to what many believe, domestic abuse is not about an angry person losing their temper and lashing out at their spouse. Rather, it is a *pattern of behaviors that people use to establish dominance in their relationships*. "The common denominator is that it's about having power and control over another human being," she says. "It's not about anger management—often you see that the person can manage that anger when they're in social situations. It's not about drugs, alcohol, genetics, biology, out-of-control behavior, or stress—it is about having power and control over another human."

Abusers use a variety of nonviolent tactics to keep their partners under their thumb. They may chip away at their partner's self-esteem through constant criticism and name-calling, or intimidate them by yelling, using threatening body language, or displaying weapons. They may isolate the victim from family and friends, insist on knowing their every move, or keep them dependent by denying them access to financial information or accounts or preventing them from attending school or getting a job. They may humiliate the victim by manipulating them into performing degrading sexual acts or violating their religious beliefs, and may threaten to hurt the victim, loved ones, pets, or even commit suicide if the victim defies them. And of course, many abusers who are Christians



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twist Scripture to insist that the victim submit to their sinful behavior, using God as a weapon against their partner.

Here's the distinction many Christians fail to make: Emotional abuse is not a *relational* problem, a symptom of an unhealthy marriage (although it can certainly cause both of those). It is a *heart* problem, stemming from the abusive person's un-Christlike drive to attain and maintain dominance. Emotional abuse is a *habitual sin* that seldom goes away on its own. The church needs to treat it accordingly.

Telling the victim to submit to sinful behavior will rarely encourage the healing God wants to bring about in the life of both victim *and* abuser. Instead, it enables the abuser to continue down his or her destructive path, while their family pays the price. The best chance a marriage has for long-term survival is for the cycle of abuse to be broken, and for the abuser be brought to repentance (not just remorse) and get the help they need, preferably from professionals trained to address abuse. Churches can assist families in finding this help, and come alongside them to provide spiritual guidance, emotional support, and ongoing accountability.

Nowadays, Deb puts her painful experiences to good use, sharing her story with advocacy groups and encouraging women who find themselves in the situation she was in 20 years ago. She has made peace with her ex-husband, and can speak with him in grace instead of fear. "God has done great healing in his life as well," she says. "Had we not divorced, I am not at all sure that would have been the case—not because God couldn't, but because the need wouldn't have been acknowledged and healing accepted. God's desire would be to heal marriages. But the healing can happen on both sides only after the pattern has been broken."



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'But He Never Hit Me': A Christian Primer on Emotional Abuse

As the church, let's help people break those patterns earlier, instead of later, and support them wherever they are in the journey.

*Full name withheld

*Jenny Rae Armstrong is an award-winning freelance writer and a member of the Redbud Writer's Guild. She lives in northern Wisconsin with her husband and four not-so-little boys, and recently launched **AVA (Advocacy for Victims of Abuse)**, a ministry that equips churches to deal with domestic abuse and sexual assault, in her region. She blogs at JennyRaeArmstrong.com. This article first appeared on HER.MENEUTICS.*

Reflect

- *Why is emotional abuse sometimes as damaging as physical abuse?*
- *What can you ask the one you are concerned about to ascertain the level of emotional abuse they are going through?*
- *Make sure those in your church know the number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Churches can call the hotline to find out what resources are available in their area. Begin to equip your church to deal with this pervasive problem.*

Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further



Articles

When Someone You Love Is Abused—What you need to know and how you can make a difference. By Corrie Cutrer, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com.

Exposing Abuse: A guest post by Emily Ellis—God gave men strength to defend women, not attack them. By Ed Stetzer, available on ChristianityToday.com.

Not Another Charity Case—Violence against women calls for an immediate, institution-wide response from Christians. By Ruth Moon, available on ChristianityToday.com.

Books

Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence, by Justin S. Holcomb, Elyse M. Fitzpatrick (Moody Publishers, 2014). This is a message of hope and healing to victims who know too well the depths of



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Additional Resources

destruction and the overwhelming reality of domestic violence. The effects of domestic violence are physical, social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual, and can have long-lasting distressing consequences. It is common for victims of domestic violence to suffer from ongoing depression and recurring nightmares, self-harm, panic attacks, substance abuse, and more. This book addresses the abysmal issue of domestic violence with the powerful and transforming biblical message of grace and redemption. It deals with this devastating problem and sin honestly and directly without hiding its prevalence today.

Domestic Violence: Assault on a Woman's Worth, by June Hunt (Aspire Press, 2013) Experts estimate that 1-in-3 women suffer from some form of violence from a husband, boyfriend, or relative. In too many homes around the world, the marriage bond has become bondage and shared lives have become shattered by abuse. This book outlines a Christian approach to help identify and stop physical and emotional abuse.

Online Resources

Domestic Violence—Equip your church to minister to those who suffer from domestic violence. Available from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**.

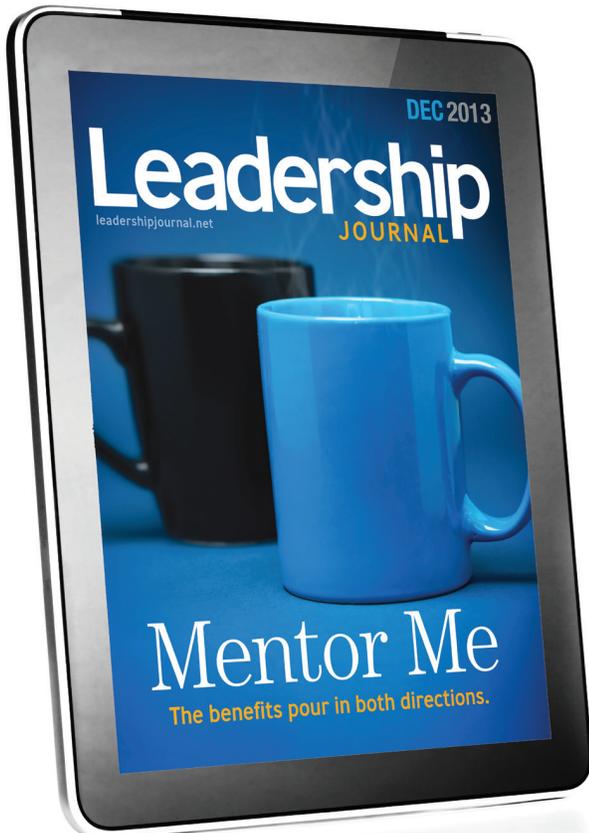
Understanding Pastoral Liability—Pastors, board members, and church administrators about the specifics of pastoral liability. Available from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**.

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