

LIFE MATTERS: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is a hidden scourge on our families and communities. Those who are victimized often keep it a private matter for various reasons: fear, shame, well-intended efforts to preserve the family. Aggressors, if they even recognize their problem, are not likely to have it addressed. Yet it touches many, and knows no boundaries of race, social class, ethnicity, creed or age (most victims are first abused as teens). Statistics suggest one in four women experience domestic violence in their lifetime, and three in four Americans are reported to know a victim, though most episodes are not reported to the authorities. Although the majority of victims are female, an estimated 15% are males.

Domestic violence and emotional abuse are typically used together in a relationship to control the victim. Persons may be married, living together, or dating. Examples of emotional abuse include name-calling, putdowns, restricting contact with family or friends, withholding money, preventing a partner from working, actual or threatened physical harm (hitting, pushing, shoving), sexual assault, stalking, and intimidation. In *The Gospel of Life Blessed John Paul II* highlighted the gravity of the issue: “At the root of every act of violence against one’s neighbor there is a *concession to the ‘thinking’ of the evil one*, the one who ‘was a murderer from the beginning’ (Jn 8:44).” He also outlined the importance of the family as the primary community of life and love in which children are nurtured. How vital it is, then, to understand how to keep family members safe from violence in their homes, and how to heal and reunite families where violence has occurred, when possible.

The person being harmed

Persons experiencing domestic violence are often termed “victims,” or if the situation has resolved, “survivors,” but it is most important to recall they are children of God, with inherent dignity and deserving our love and respect. This is especially true because as abused persons they are often plagued by feelings of shame, fear, and depression, and have lost sight of the essential fact of their dignity and worthiness to be loved. At times they may also make decisions that cause an observer (family member or friend) to question their

judgment, or become frustrated with them for remaining in what seems to be an obviously dangerous or hopeless situation.



It is commonly accepted that domestic violence is rarely an isolated incident, but is a pattern of behavior aimed at establishing and maintaining power and control over another. The pattern is typically described as a “cycle of violence,” and the seriousness escalates with each occurrence. The “cycle” begins with a “set-up” phase: The abuser creates a situation in which the victim has no choice but to react in a way that, in the abuser’s mind, justifies the abuse. After the violence, the abuser may fear being held accountable, and so may apologize or make excuses for his or her behavior, pledge to never do it again, or use gifts as a way of coping with guilt or preventing the victim from telling. Next, however, the abuser may excuse the incident as the victim’s fault, or resume “life as usual” as if nothing happened. The abuser expects that the victim will participate in the cover-up. Finally, the abuser thinks about the past and the future in a manner that drives the abuser to mentally “set up” the next episode of violence.

Some victims of domestic abuse have a tendency to “normalize” violent behavior based on experiences in their family of origin, where they struggled with their sense of self-worth, setting boundaries, or emotional dependence. Even though the family of origin was dysfunctional, its unhealthy equilibrium may have been the only thing the person knew. Consequently, some may feel guilty about considering betraying the abuser, or fear they will be judged or further deprived of affection if they disclose or attempt to leave. These persons benefit

from counseling that affirms their inherent dignity, helps them understand the dysfunctional patterns in their past and current relationships, and assists them in establishing a safe home and relationships.

Who are the abusers, and is there hope?

Although common characteristics have been identified, there is no “typical” abuser. In public, they may appear friendly and loving to their family, while the violence and its consequences are hidden from view. The violence does not happen randomly, or solely because of stress or substance abuse; abusers use violence to get what they want. This being said, it is important to recognize that the abusers were not “born that way,” but have their own history of developmental and family problems (often being abused) that can explain how they learned to be aggressive. Because abusers often have a poor sense of self-worth, they do not take responsibility for their actions and try to blame the victim instead. Thus the person perpetrating the violence needs his own help and healing.

Aggressors must first become aware of their need for psychological assistance before they can recover and exercise healthier patterns of bonding and communicating. It is difficult for people to seek help, often burdened by shame, fear of being judged, or psychological issues (e.g., addictions). Once the problem is recognized, there is reason for hope: psychotherapists can help such persons with their thinking, forgiveness, emotional stability, and relationship skills. These skills (e.g., empathy) should be developed first with close friends and family members (initially not the victim), so that the aggressor can experience a healthy manner of dealing with his emotions and disappointments. Although this work can be lengthy and painful, as the perpetrator’s own dignity and worth are rediscovered and affirmed, his ability to then approach and attempt reconciliation with the offended person is greatly enhanced.

The role of friends and extended family

Although this problem tends to be hidden, friends, colleagues, and extended family can play a critical role in fostering peace. Victims generally ask for

help only when the risk of violence increases. An important step to help in preventing or stopping violence is recognizing certain risk factors such as jealousy, hypersensitivity and possessiveness, or controlling, explosive or threatening behaviors. If you believe someone you know may be in a troubled situation, you should call a hotline number for assistance, or encourage the person to do so themselves (911, the local hotline, or the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233/TTY 1-800-787-3224). Research shows that accessing domestic violence shelter resources reduces the incidence and severity of future violence substantially. When recovering from abuse, victims need guidance in planning for their safety. Consultation with legal advisors can help them to understand how to report and ask for further protection.

In sum, the gravity and difficulty for families touched by domestic violence is severe. Although the struggle toward healing and recovery can be difficult, our faith gives us reason for hope. On the *World Day of Peace* in 1997, Blessed John Paul II focused on this theme, as demanding as it is vital: “Offer forgiveness and receive peace.... I know well that it is hard, and sometimes even appears to be impossible to forgive, but it is the only way, because all revenge and all violence give rise to further revenge and violence. It is certainly less difficult to forgive when one is aware that God never tires of loving and forgiving us.... Let us never forget that everything passes, and only *the eternal can fill the heart.*”

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