

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH

spouse abuse



Coming out of the trap

Carla¹ struggled to dress for work. Her body was sore, and her spirit was beaten.

The bruises wouldn't show; her husband never left marks that others would see, though sometimes she needed to dress carefully.

As she pulled on her clothes, she tried to figure out how she had gotten to this point. What had happened to her? What had happened to her marriage? What did she do to provoke her husband's lashing out? Why was he so controlling? And where was God? The last question felt hollow and hopeless. Did God care about her?

Like a robot, Carla got through her work day. As she drove home, she surprised herself by turning toward her church. A glimmer of hope flickered as she saw the pastor's car in the church parking lot. As she entered the church, the pastor greeted her and invited her in to talk. Slowly, Carla told her story.

She spoke of her early love for her husband and her hopes for her marriage. She always knew her husband had a temper, but he had never physically hurt her until . . . some months after they married. She still remembered the shock she felt the first time his fist landed on her body. *How could someone I love hurt me in this way?* She could hardly speak of her enormous grief.

Her pastor listened carefully, and so she continued. While her husband did not often hit her, Carla felt that the abuse was getting worse and taking a heavy toll on her. She felt isolated from her family and friends, partly because of her husband's control, but also because she didn't feel safe telling her friends. She was afraid to go out and to mix with others, since it was increasingly difficult to keep pretending everything was okay.

She once imagined that her love could heal her husband's brokenness, but now she was sure it couldn't. She was unsure where to turn. She had committed many years to the relationship. And she was embarrassed to think about her marriage ending in failure. "Trapped," was the word she finally said to her pastor. "I feel trapped with nowhere to go."

Today, Carla remembers that moment as the beginning of freedom. With her pastor's support, she stayed in a women's shelter for a short time, then moved into her own housing. The pastor linked her with a caring and mature woman in the church who met regularly with her, prayed with her, and offered her friendship. The church helped pay for professional counseling geared for those who are abused in their homes.

Carla hopes that her marriage covenant can be repaired, but realizes this will take time. Her husband has attended some

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counseling sessions for abusive men, but he has not yet taken full responsibility for his actions or acknowledged how hurtful they were. Until that happens, Carla plans to live separately from him. In the meantime, she has become much more secure in her knowledge that God loves her. She has found new energy to participate in the life of her church and to reach out to others.

¹ name changed to protect identity

What is spouse² abuse?

Spouse abuse takes many forms:

physical (hitting, kicking, choking, biting, pushing);

emotional (put-downs, name-calling, shaming in front of others, social isolation);

sexual (forced sex, or demeaning sexual language or actions);

financial (controlling all finances); or

spiritual (using Scripture or spiritual language to justify abuse).

The reality of domestic violence³

About 25% of workplace problems such as absenteeism, lower productivity, turnover, and excessive use of medical benefits are due to family violence.

Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States—more than the combined totals of car accidents, muggings, and sexual assaults that take place outside the home. The Canadian reality is similar.

Each year in the United States, medical expenses from domestic violence total between 3 and 5 billion dollars.

Six times as many women are victimized by their spouses or intimate partners as are victimized by strangers.

Abuse is a reality for many Christian couples

In a 2004 online poll conducted by *Today's Christian Woman*

- 52% of respondents said they had been emotionally abused by their spouses
- 30% said they had suffered physical abuse from their spouses
- 18% said they had been sexually abused by their spouses

Abuse occurs in all cultures, and among both rich and poor. While they are never an excuse, several factors can increase the risk of abuse: personality characteristics that include a need to control; parental models of abuse; beliefs that women are inferior to men; or financial stress in the home.

While both husbands and wives abuse in various ways, most often it is the women who suffer physical abuse. Women experience more severe injuries, and they are more likely to be killed by their partners. Women are also most at risk of danger when they attempt to leave the relationship (although staying is also dangerous, since abuse tends to escalate over time).

Behavior that appears angry is usually an expression of control more than of anger. The behavior can include limiting the partner's social life, uttering threats, denying financial resources, or using humiliation and insults. The abuser is likely *not* "out of control"; the violence is usually carried out in a planned way, at particular times and places, so that the marks of the violence do not show.

Like Carla, you may find yourself in a situation where abuse is hurting you, wrecking your home, and causing you to feel separated from God's love. Yet Scripture reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:35-39). As you confront the abuse with God's help and the support of caring people, you can find safety and healing.

² This pamphlet is addressed to spouses in a marriage, but these definitions apply to all intimate partners in any domestic situation.

³ From hjomebybergrrl.com; "Violence Against Women, A Majority Staff Report," Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate; and www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/ipvfacts

Abuse, the Bible, and the Christian story

Psalm 55 could have been written by a person facing abuse at the hands of her spouse. “It is not my enemies who taunt me . . . it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company. My companion . . . violated a covenant with me” (vv. 12-14a, 20).

Throughout Scripture, we read of a God who listens to the cries of oppressed people and who acts to save them. The liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is a central story in the Bible. Over and over we read of God showing compassion for people who are caught in traps of hurt and fear (for example, Hagar in Genesis 21, or the woman about to be stoned in John 8).

The Christian community is a key partner with God in bringing wholeness to broken relationships. It is called to deal with violence, protect those who are hurt, and invite all people to live lives of love and peace. As we follow Christ, our broken selves can be made whole again. Damaged marriages can be healed. Even if marriages must end because of abuse or unfaithfulness, new beginnings are possible.

Mutual love and abuse don't mix!

The New Testament teaches us that equality and mutual respect promote peaceful relations between husbands and wives (Ephesians 5:21). That is the way Christ loves and honors the church. Sexual intimacy is meant to be offered freely, without coercion or violence (1 Corinthians 7:3-4). Violence in family relationships is not in keeping with the Prince of Peace, whom we follow.

Unfortunately, some Christians twist biblical teachings to avoid confronting vio-

lence or even to justify it. They say that Jesus' instruction to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39) and Paul's instructions to wives to “be subject to their husbands” (Ephesians 5:22) means enduring abuse. They may even say that, like Jesus' death on the cross, the unjust violence may somehow be good. Experience shows that these interpretations are very destructive.

The Bible does teach that the marriage covenant, made before God, is meant to be permanent. But Christians share another

What the children see

Beyond your need for safety, another important reason for you and your children to get help now is to protect your children from being exposed to the destructive behavior that your spouse is modeling. A high percentage of spouses who resort to abuse do so because that is what their own parents modeled for them.

value that is equally essential: protection and safety of those who are in danger. The human body is God's temple and is to be guarded with respect (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

If you need to flee your home or live separately from your spouse because of abuse, you are not guilty of breaking your marriage vows. *The abuse has already broken your marriage covenant.* Ending the violence is the first step toward any hope of building a healthy marriage.

Many spiritual resources are available to you. *Prayer* is one way to walk in the Spirit and to ask for God's intervention and guidance. *Worship* that includes both words of lament and words of hope is another way God encourages those going through hard times. Finally, the *caring* that happens through relationships and groups, pastoral support, and professional counseling—all can bring strength and encouragement as you seek freedom from the traps of abuse.

Steps toward freedom and healing

If you are experiencing abuse in your relationship, you *can* find your way to wholeness. But it requires the support of others, and it usually takes a long time. Where can you begin? Here are some basic steps:

1. Tell someone what you are experiencing. Abuse usually happens in a climate of secrecy and shame. The most important step you can take is to tell someone, as frightening as that might feel. This person could be a trusted friend or relative, a member of your church, your pastor, or—if you fear that one of these will tell your spouse—a crisis line. It is especially important to choose a good listener who will take your experience seriously, hold your story in confidence, and not blame you or defend your spouse.

2. Know that you are loved. You may have come to feel that you have little worth. You may find it difficult to receive or even acknowledge God's love. You may suffer from depression. All of these are common responses to abuse in the home. In your healing journey, it will be important to claim your worth and to build your confidence as a precious child of God. Knowing that you are loved, you can have courage to tell others about your needs, including any needs you have for shelter or finances.

3. Find a counselor. Ask your pastor or friend to help you find resources in your community for people in your situation. Find a counselor who understands domestic abuse and who is in a position to help you make necessary changes. The crisis line in your community can be a good starting point.

4. Ensure that you and your children are safe. Know what your emergency arrangements will be, whether you stay at a shelter or with a friend who won't tell your spouse. Memorize emergency phone numbers. Make copies of health, insurance, and social security documents and leave them with a trusted friend.

5. Prepare for change. Your spouse needs to address the wrongdoing, take responsibility, and learn new ways of being a spouse. This is a long and difficult process. Sometimes, couples can remain safely in their home while new patterns of behaving and relating take hold. Often this is not possible, however. In that case, one of you must make alternate living arrangements.

6. Don't rush forgiveness. Forgiveness is certainly central to God's good news. But a common pitfall in domestic abuse work is that partners rush into "forgiveness" before the issues have been properly dealt with. Your spouse may have apologized, and you may feel so eager to repair your relationship that you want to forgive. Be careful to go through the necessary steps of healing from the hurt and building new ways of communicating.

In time, you may be reconciled with your partner—if the violence and controlling behavior have ended and *if* you are *both* committed to the process of restoring confidence in yourselves and relating to each other with respect. All of this takes time. If it becomes clear that reconciliation is not possible, God gives grace to mourn the loss, heal the wounds, and make new beginnings. Where reconciliation is possible, it is one of God's great gifts that should be celebrated.

For further awareness

Books

- Bancroft, Lundy. *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse*. New York: G.B. Putnam, 2004.
- Cory, Jill and Karen McAndless-Davis. *When Love Hurts: A Woman's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Intimate Relationships*. New York: Berkley, 2016.
- Fortune, Marie M. *Keeping the Faith: Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Heggen, Carolyn H. *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006.
- Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Nancy Nason-Clark. *No Place for Abuse: Biblical & Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.
- Miller, Melissa. *Family Violence: The Compassionate Church Responds*. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1994 (out of print, but available in many libraries).
- Morris, Susan Yarrow. *Opening the Door: A Pastor's Guide to Addressing Domestic Violence in Premarital Counseling*. Seattle: FaithTrust Institute, 2006.
- Murphy, Nancy. *God's Reconciling Love: A Pastor's Handbook on Domestic Violence*. Seattle: FaithTrust Institute, 2003.

Hope for the one who abuses

If you are someone who abuses your spouse and happens to read this, you too can work toward positive change. Support is available in your community as you take responsibility, tell someone you trust, and seek professional help. Your behavior and thought patterns have deep roots, so it will take time and persistence to change them. But the good news is that with God's help, you can find wholeness.

Websites

- mcc.org/abuse
- medlineplus.gov/domesticviolence.html

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**Local resources for help with
spouse abuse:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome



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