

## **The Domestic Abuse Has To Stop! (And It Actually Can)**

At times, it seems like violence is everywhere. We are constantly bombarded by the media with reports of muggings, rapes, “road rage” on our highways, assaults and murders in our communities, and wars in “hot spots” all over the globe. Given all the violence around us, one would hope that our homes would be a refuge and a safe place to return to at the end of the day. Unfortunately, this is all too often not the case. The reality is that domestic abuse, defined as disrespectful, hurtful, and even violent behavior in a family setting, is all too common in this country. Even our homes are not safe for many in this country.

Sadly, in the United States, a woman is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by a male partner than by any other type of assailant. Domestic violence has been identified as one of our country’s most significant public health concerns, not just in terms of its impact on women who are abused but also due to its damaging and long lasting impact on the children who grow up in families where domestic abuse is occurring and on the men who are perpetrating abuse.

Controlling, abusive, and violent behavior devastate the fabric of our families and our society. Explosive anger and abusive behavior are unacceptable and ineffective ways to resolve conflicts and solve the problems that arise in our lives. They destroy trust, intimacy, and safety in a family setting and replace these with hurt, fear, resentment, and emotional distance. This is not the way to live. This is not the way to stay connected to the most important people in our lives, other members of our family.

**The primary goals of abusive behavior are to hurt, punish, intimidate, and control other people.** This desire to control is an especially important part of why domestic abuse occurs. Both men and women in a heterosexual relationship can certainly be controlling and abusive. Control and abuse, by either partner, is not all right. However, we as men, because of our size, musculature, and socialization, are much more likely to be able to impose our will and dominate a relationship through abusive, threatening, or violent actions. In addition, we have a much greater potential, especially if there have actually been instances of property destruction, threats, or physical violence, to create an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, insecurity, and humiliation, than do our female partners. Women are also more likely to be seriously injured if violence is occurring in the home.

Once again, this is not to say that women cannot be hurtful, abusive, or violent. They can. **But abuse in a family setting becomes particularly destructive when there is a consistent**

and ongoing pattern of controlling and abusive behavior by a more powerful person where the less powerful person feels fearful that physical abuse may be used to control what is happening.

One of the most important ways to begin to intervene in domestic abuse is to understand what abusive behavior is. Many of my clients have said they are not even aware that what they have been doing is considered to be abuse. This is the focus of the remainder of this article. Domestic abuse can be divided into several different categories which are described below.

The first category is **MALE ENTITLEMENT**, which involves having an attitude that conveys male dominance and the idea that we as men are more competent and capable than women. This attitude leads to the belief that *“I as a man, have the right and the responsibility to control how my partner thinks, feels, and acts and to make her into the person I want her to be and think she should be.”* As was mentioned previously, this desire to control underlies all abusive behavior. Some examples of this category might be making generalizations and believing stereotypes about women, having the expectation that we as men will make all the important decisions in the relationship, demanding that a partner act in a certain way, determining “who does what” in terms of household chores and parenting, controlling how household money is handled and spent, and acting very jealous and possessive regarding her relationships with others.

A second category is **EMOTIONAL ABUSE**, which involves using non-verbal or behavioral methods to hurt, punish, intimidate, or control a partner. Examples might include sulking or pouting; sneering and acting disgusted; staring or glaring; yelling and screaming; or following a partner around the house to continue an argument even when she does not wish to do so.

A third category is **VERBAL ABUSE**, which involves using words to hurt, punish, intimidate, and control a partner. This can include criticizing and discounting a partner's feelings and opinions; mocking or mimicking what she has said to you; interrupting her; interrogating her; swearing and cussing at or around her; twisting things she says or being dishonest about what you have said or done to get her to feel confused, “crazy,” and “off balance;” and insulting or ridiculing her or other people she cares about.

A fourth category is **THREATS**, which involves communicating an intention to do something designed to create emotional pain, fear, indecision, and insecurity in her. This category includes both non-physical threats like telling her that you are going to withhold money if she does not “shape up” or if she tries to leave; sue her friends and family for “interfering” in

your relationship; take the children or keep them from her if she goes; or end the relationship. It can also include violent threats like standing in her way or blocking her; making statements like *“You’re really asking for it this time”* and *“I really feel like letting you have it right now;”* driving recklessly when you are angry with her; or making physically intimidating gestures like holding up a fist in front of her face.

A fifth category is **VIOLENCE TOWARD PROPERTY OR PETS**, which involves damaging possessions or hurting pets to intimidate or coerce her into doing what you want her to do. Examples of this type of abuse include hitting walls, slamming doors, smashing your fist on countertops; throwing or breaking household items; taking, hiding, or destroying her possessions; and hitting or kicking a family pet. These actions are also generally perceived as violent threats to those who see the violent behavior or the damage left behind.

A sixth category is **SEXUAL ABUSE**, which involves making sexually inappropriate verbal statements and forcing physical affection, touch, or sex on a partner. Examples include viewing and treating a partner and other women like “sex objects;” expecting or demanding sex from her; insulting her body or love-making capabilities; grabbing or pinching her in sexual areas; pressuring her into doing sexual activities she does not feel comfortable with; and forcing sex when she says “no” or in some other ways sets a limit, when she is not asked, or when she is sleeping.

A final category is **PHYSICAL ABUSE**, which involves using any physical actions or force to control or intimidate a partner or to “take charge” of a situation. This includes grabbing, pinching, bumping into her as you go by “to give her a message,” pushing, restraining, slapping, or punching.

If these sorts of behaviors are occurring in your relationship and family, get some help, not just for yourself and your partner but also for your children. Control and abuse are learned, at least in part from the families where we were raised. If these attitudes and behaviors continue, your children will carry on the legacy of control and abuse in their own lives and relationships and you will end up miserable and alone.

There are other abuse programs in all areas of the Twin Cities, Minnesota, and the United States. Make a commitment to yourself and those you love that it is time to stop the cycle of violence and abuse in your life and in the lives of your children. We as men can change the attitudes and behaviors that create this frightening atmosphere at home. The future truly can be different. There is another way to live your life.

**SOME QUESTIONS RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE TO THINK ABOUT FOR YOURSELF:**

- 1) Have you ever been threatened, intimidated, or abused by your partner or anyone else? What happened? How did you feel? What were you thinking? How did you respond to the other person at the time? How did the situation end? How did you feel afterward about what had happened? How did this situation affect your relationship with the other person?
- 2) Have you ever been threatening, intimidating, or abusive with your partner or anyone else? What happened? How were you abusive and controlling? What were you feeling? What were you thinking? How did the other person seem to feel and how did they respond to you at the time? How did the situation end? How did you feel afterward about what you had said or done? How did this situation seem to affect your relationship with the other person later on?
- 3) Why is abusive and controlling behavior so destructive in relationships and families?
- 4) What sorts of things do you want to control in your partner and others? How do you try to exert this control over other people?
- 5) Is male and female violence the same in its impact on the victim in heterosexual partner relationships? If it is, why is it? If it isn't, why isn't it?
- 6) What is one positive thing you can do differently the next time you feel like being abusive and controlling with your partner, your children, or others?