

REVISED AND EXPANDED

# Women Reaching Women *IN CRISIS*

MINISTRY HANDBOOK

COMPILED by  
**CHRIS ADAMS**



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# 3

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SPOUSE ABUSE

Karla Downing

This chapter seeks to provide background information and helps to assist those who minister to people experiencing domestic violence and spousal abuse. We will consider how God views these matters and present general legal issues and helps for assisting a woman living in an abusive or violent environment. As you seek to help, your purpose is to inform, support, encourage, and refer the woman who has placed her trust in you as a leader.

## God's View

God does not condone abuse. Psalm 10 demonstrates clearly that He considers abhorrent any behavior used to control and hurt those who are weak.

LORD, why do You stand so far away? Why do You hide in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked relentlessly pursue the afflicted; let them be caught in the schemes they have devised. For the wicked one boasts about his own cravings; the one who is greedy curses and despises the LORD. In all his scheming, the wicked arrogantly thinks: "There is no accountability, since God does not exist." His ways are always secure; Your lofty judgments are beyond his sight; he scoffs at all his adversaries. He says to himself, "I will never be moved—from generation to generation without calamity." Cursing, deceit, and violence fill his mouth; trouble and malice are under his tongue. He waits in ambush near the villages; he kills the innocent in secret places; his eyes are on the lookout for the helpless. He lurks in secret like a lion in a thicket. He lurks in order to seize the afflicted. He seizes the afflicted and drags him in his net. He crouches and bends down; the helpless fall because of his strength. He says to himself, "God has forgotten; He hides His face and will never see." Rise up, LORD God! Lift up Your hand. Do not forget the afflicted. Why has the wicked despised God? He says to himself, "You will not demand an account." But You Yourself have seen trouble and grief, observing it in order to take the matter into Your hands. The helpless entrusts himself to You; You are a helper of the fatherless. Break the arm of the wicked and evil person; call his wickedness into account until nothing remains of it. The LORD is King forever and ever; the nations will perish from His land. LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will strengthen their hearts. You will listen carefully, doing justice for the fatherless and the oppressed, so that men of the earth may terrify them no more.

On the other hand, certain Scripture passages are often cited to suggest that a woman should not defend herself or say anything to her husband about his mistreatment. A prime example is 1 Peter 3:1-6.

"Wives, in the same way, submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, even if some disobey the Christian message, they may be won over without a message by the way their wives live, when they observe your pure, reverent lives. Your beauty should not consist of outward things like elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold ornaments or fine clothes; instead, it should consist of the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very valuable

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in God's eyes. For in the past, the holy women who hoped in God also beautified themselves in this way, submitting to their own husbands, just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. You have become her children when you do good and aren't frightened by anything alarming."

These verses are often misused to support a warped concept of marriage. Submission was never intended to prevent a woman from having control over her own life and body.

A woman does not have to blindly obey her husband when he disobeys God's command to love his wife and treat her gently.

Paul gave God's command to husbands in Ephesians 5:25-29:

"Husbands, love your wives, just as also Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, to make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh, but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church."

A man does not love his wife as his own body if he is willing to destroy her life and the relationship. Abuse produces fear, but "God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment" (2 Timothy 1:7). God does not want a woman or her children to live in continual fear.

As Christians, we are to stand against evil and bring it into the light: "Don't participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead, expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

For the good of the abuser, as well as the abused, abusers must be held accountable. Love has boundaries and is sometimes tough. God wants us to be aware of how people treat us. He has provided family, church, and government to help us protect ourselves from all types of abusive behavior.

## Definitions

The following definitions can help victims to understand that what they are experiencing is not normal. Abuse includes any behavior that treats someone improperly, wrongly, insultingly, harshly, or injuriously. Abusive interactions tear down, disrespect, and devalue the relationship and the recipient. As a contrast, nonabusive relationships mutually respect, value, and empower the participants.

Spousal abuse can range from mild to severe and can be intermittent to chronic. Many people react destructively in a moment of passion. However, if it is rare and acknowledged, it doesn't have the same effect as chronic abuse.

## Types of Abuse

Several categories of abuse exist. They often occur together and are interrelated. Abuse can be verbal/emotional, physical, sexual, and/or spiritual.

### Emotional and Verbal Abuse

This kind of abuse includes the following actions and behaviors. (This list is not meant to be exhaustive.)

- Nonverbal body language, including sneers, stares, and contemptuous looks and gestures that register disapproval, disdain, or threats.
- Blame for relationship problems, the abuser's actions, and events outside the marriage relationship.
- Manipulation, including the deliberate use of mind games and strategies to control or get one's way.
- Withholding affection, approval, money, information, resources, attention, and participation in the relationship.
- Name-calling.
- Denial, which can include lying about actions, motives, thoughts, events, and feelings. The abuser can also pretend not to remember when, in fact, he or she does.
- Threats about physical violence toward animals, children, spouse, spouse's relatives or friends. The abuser can also threaten to withhold any of the mentioned things or threaten to have an affair or take the children.
- Ordering the spouse to do things like a child, using an authoritative voice.
- Minimizing or making light of spouse's emotions, concerns, needs, thoughts, accomplishments, and interests.
- Intimidation through threats, looks, stares, sneers, use of an authoritative voice, and demands that the spouse do what is demanded "or else." It's an attempt to control or frighten the spouse.
- Yelling, raging, or expressing hostile anger.
- Interrogating or demanding an answer to questions the way the abuser requires and not tolerating the spouse to answer on his/her own.
- Humiliation in front of others through criticism, comments, punishment, or cruel jokes. This is purposeful degradation.
- Accusations including attributing feelings, motives, and intentions to the spouse and accusing him or her of doing things without proof.
- Devalue and disrespect involving put downs, undermining achievements, sarcasm, interrupting, harsh criticism, rudeness, belittling, and anything else that communicates contempt and disregard.
- Ridicule, including mocking, telling jokes, belittling remarks, insults, and making fun of efforts and individuality.
- Ignoring spouse's requests and needs, purposefully not responding to conversation, and silent treatments.



### **Physical Abuse**

Physical abuse does not occur alone; it is always accompanied by verbal and emotional abuse. Physical abuse includes using physical actions to threaten harm or do actual harm.

Although they differ in their ability to injure, physical abuse can involve hitting, beating, slapping, pushing, shoving, pulling hair, or pinching. It also includes unwanted physical restraint, including holding someone down or locking a person in a room.

The abuse can involve ripping clothes, threatening violence with a weapon, or using verbal threats or innuendoes about future violence.

Physical abuse can include holding up a fist or appearing to be ready to strike, destroying property, throwing objects, and hurting pets.

### **Sexual Abuse**

Sexual abuse is defined as using intimidation or force to coerce a spouse into unwanted sexual acts. The abuser believes that the spouse has no right to say no and forces this belief on his/her spouse.

Spousal rape is forcing a spouse to have sex against his or her will. You can check your state's laws with your local police department or women's shelter. Most states have laws that make spousal rape illegal.

Sexual abuse includes:

- Demanding sex after an abusive incident.
- Threats and manipulation to pressure a spouse into uncomfortable sexual acts.
- Threats if the spouse says no to sex.
- Ridiculing a spouse's sexual performance.
- Comparing a spouse's body or sexuality to others.
- Using sex as a bargaining tool or withholding to punish.
- Shaming masculinity or femininity with inappropriate comments or insults.

### **Spiritual Abuse**

Spiritual abuse is the misuse of spiritual authority and power. Scripture is often used to manipulate, intimidate, control, or criticize the spouse.

The husband can misuse his authority as the head of the family to demand servant-like obedience. God has made the husband the "head of the wife" (Ephesians 5:23). However, this "master of the house" mentality elevates the man's own needs and feelings and disregards his wife's needs and feelings. It can be used to justify making decisions without her input and controlling her. By demanding she submit, the abusive husband can silence her, refuse to listen to her, and get his way.



Demanding submission, while ignoring the mandate that he is to love his wife “as also Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her” is spiritual abuse (Ephesians 5:25). Colossians 3:19 says, “Husbands, love your wives and don’t become bitter against them.” Men who misuse their spiritual authority do it in a way that devalues their wives; their actions are abusive.

The man can also misuse his authority to mistreat his children by demanding obedience and making himself above questioning. It is an arrogant attitude of “I am the head of this house. You will do what I say and shut your mouth. God put me in charge of you and you better obey me or else.” This harsh authoritarian attitude is obviously abusive to the children but also abusive to a wife. It’s painful for her to see her children mistreated and be powerless to do anything about it. Colossians 3:21 says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so they won’t become discouraged.”

This father may be more concerned with how decisions affect himself than his family. He may believe he owns the children, and they are there to serve his needs. It is common for an abusive man to use the children to punish his wife, induce guilt in her, threaten her, manipulate her, or control her. He can do this by punishing or interacting with the child in a way that hurts his wife. She may come to fear his mistreatment of the child and do what he wants to prevent it.

### **Child Abuse**

Ephesians 6:1-3 tells children to respect and obey their parents:

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right. Honor your father and mother—which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land.”

Verse 4, however, warns parents, especially fathers:

“Fathers, don’t stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Parents can stir up anger in their children through abuse.

Children are more likely to be abused physically, sexually, and verbally/emotionally in homes where abuse in the parental relationship occurs. Observing abuse toward another family member is called “vicarious abuse.” Studies show it causes the same problems as actually being abused. The child feels helpless, responsible, guilty, and fearful, often believing it is his or her fault that the parent or sibling is being abused. Abused children have problems in school, low self-esteem, physical and somatic complaints, loneliness, depression, withdrawal, problems with peers, hyperactivity, poor impulse control, and an increase in anti-social behavior, acting out, and aggression. They are also at an increased risk of being abused or abusive in later relationships.

Many states consider it a form of child abuse when the child observes physical abuse in the home. In extreme cases, Child Protective Services may remove the child from the home.

## Gender Differences

Both men and women act abusively in relationships. Women, being more verbal than men, can attack, retaliate, and tear down their husbands with words. Both use abusive tactics in response to difficult marriage dynamics such as substance abuse, workaholism, dysfunction, addictions, affairs, or spousal abuse in an effort to force change or resolve problems.

Many couples report incidents of mutual mild physical abuse, often occurring during an argument, which may involve restraint, throwing objects, slapping, pushing, grabbing, or shoving. Although this level of violence is harmful to the marital relationship and should be avoided, it often occurs out of momentary frustration and is not likely to escalate. However, when a spouse who is also verbally and emotionally abusive uses violence, it has more significance and may be a sign that the abuse is increasing.

Battering involves beating, choking, sexual assault, and use of weapons that result in serious injury. Severe battering involves a pattern of control, escalates over time, and usually involves more serious injury. Ninety-seven percent of battery is committed by males (Johnson, Michael P. & Ferraro, Kathleen J., "Research on Domestic Violence in the 1990s: Making Distinctions," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, November 2000, 948–963).

What does all this mean to you? If the woman to whom you are ministering admits to hitting her husband or throwing something at him, take the context into consideration. She may be acting out of frustration or self-defense. Don't let this deter you from believing that she could be in an abusive relationship. Help her see that responding this way is ineffective, risky to her, harmful to the children and her marriage, and increases the risk of her husband becoming increasingly physically abusive in retaliation. Encourage her to think of alternative ways to respond, such as leaving the room or house and refusing to argue.

A woman in an abusive relationship needs to understand the implications if she resorts to violence even out of frustration or retaliation. Her abusive husband may purposely provoke her into hitting him and then report her to the authorities to gain an advantage over her in the legal system and to threaten her with losing the kids in a future custody battle. State domestic violence laws usually do not take the context into consideration and often do not understand abusive relationship patterns and what would provoke a woman into hitting her husband. Women can be prosecuted for responding physically to an abuser's verbal and emotional abuse, removed from the home, and subsequently have a distinct disadvantage in further legal matters.

## The Chronically Abusive Relationship

All abuse devalues, disrespects, and tears down the partner's individuality and personhood; however, chronic abuse is based on power, control, and manipulation.

Power is the need to feel superior. The relationship is perceived as a power struggle with the spouse as a threat rather than a partner. The abuser undermines the partner's attempts to work together or cooperate and convinces their spouse that he/she has no rights to change the situation.

Control is always an element of an abusive relationship. Some abusers control everything, but most control specific areas. It may show up as jealousy and possessiveness by managing the spouse's activities and time, possibly even forbidding him or her to leave the home.

Control of money is also common. The abuser may take the spouse's paycheck, withhold funds, require a strict accounting of all money spent, refuse to give adequate money for needs, or make the spouse beg for money.

Control could also be exercised over decisions. Taking away or withholding items to punish is also common. Manipulation is accomplished through direct and indirect methods to get the abuser's way and to undermine the spouse to keep him or her off balance and dependent, doubting himself or herself so the abuser can keep the power in the relationship.

Hostility—rather than good will—permeates the abusive relationship. Good will is manifested by caring, kindness, empathy, and a concern for the spouse's well being, as well as the relationship. Hostility is a sense of anger, contempt, negativity, and disregard for the spouse's well being and the relationship. Since the abuser does not value the spouse's feelings or the health of the relationship, the abuser will not care about the effects of the abuse.

Before we examine portraits of the chronically abusive man and woman, let's consider a question that you might hear later.

Can the abuser change? Yes, but it usually takes direct interventions, lengthy therapy, and the realization that they will lose their wife and children if they don't. Change involves an understanding of what is abusive, a willingness to take full responsibility for the abuse, getting outside help, not blaming the abuse on anyone or anything else, and a sincere desire to change. A man will have to change the underlying beliefs he holds about himself, his wife, and the relationship. As long as he holds the entitlement view where he is supposed to be treated a certain way and believes that he should have the power and control in the relationship, he will resort to abusive behavior; he will feel justified. He needs to develop respect and empathy for his wife and give her the space and time she needs to heal and feel safe with him. If he pushes her, she will see it as



a sign that he has not changed, because he cannot accept her feelings. Abusive men can be charming and manipulative and can convince people to believe they are changing when they really are not.

### **A Portrait of the Chronically Abusive Man**

Men are more likely than women to engage in abuse based on power, control, and manipulation. Most of the literature written on abuse focuses on men who abuse women. Since you are dealing with spousal abuse toward women, the rest of this chapter will focus on the abused wife.

If you know the husband of the woman claiming to be abused, it may be difficult for you to believe that this man can do the things she is telling you. He may be successful, respected in his job and outside relationships, spiritual, normal looking, and nice with positive characteristics. This does not mean she is not telling you the truth. Many abusers are competent in other areas of their lives and have a dual personality. Even with their wives, the husband can be gentle, kind, and loving when they are not being abusive. Abuse crosses all socioeconomic levels, nationalities, and occupations.

The abuser does not accept blame for any problems in the relationship and will rarely admit fault. If he feels guilt for how he treats her, he will say she makes him do it or he can't help himself. He may even blame it on his job, outside circumstances, mistreatment in prior relationships by other women, or his childhood. He will also blame her for circumstances in his life. If he has a problem on the job, it's her fault. If the children do something wrong, he blames her. He may even blame her for being upset with him when he treats her abusively, telling her she is too sensitive, always complaining, nagging, or pushing to get her way.

When she points out an incident of abuse to him, he may focus on how it is upsetting him for her to bring up the problem or focus on the fact that she yelled back at him, ignoring the names he called her to start with. He may deny or excuse it, accuse her of lying and making it up, or accuse her of provoking him.

Ironically the man may even accuse his wife of being abusive to him. However, his definition of abuse is quite different than hers. He calls it abusive when she gets angry with him when he mistreats her and when she defends herself. He also thinks it's abusive when she tries to tell him he can't treat her in this manner or when she tries to get him to listen to her.

An abusive man knows what he is doing when he is abusive. The only exception to this is a mental illness, which is rare. Abusers don't just lose control; they plan to use abuse and can control what they do. They can monitor how far they go during a physically abusive incident to insure they hit in places that cannot be seen and can stop themselves from doing what they consider unacceptable or wrong. Even if intoxicated from drugs or alcohol, the abuser knows what he is doing. Substance abuse does not make a man abusive, but it can contribute to

more severe abuse and a lowering of his inhibitions, resulting in more abusive episodes with greater violence.

An abusive man may be extremely possessive, wanting his wife to be there exclusively for him. He may even be jealous of the time she spends with their children. He may seek to undermine any outside relationships she develops, including treating her friends and relatives offensively so they won't come around. Unreasonable jealousy results in suspiciousness, making it difficult for her to have any interactions with other men without being accused of having an affair or wanting to. This can even result in following her, looking through her things, listening in on phone conversations, and other monitoring activities designed to prove she is unfaithful. It is also possible that she will be punished or abused based on these accusations. Ironically, it is the abuser who is likely to be unfaithful, not his wife, even while he is accusing her.

The abuser changes rules. One day it is OK to fix food a certain way. The next day he may throw it away, telling her she is a rotten cook. She tries harder to please him, trying to figure out what she did wrong. The fact is she didn't do anything wrong; he changed the standard so that he had an excuse to be displeased with her.

The abuse usually intensifies when the wife appears to be getting independent, detached, or doesn't react to the abuse like she used to. If the abuse isn't working, he has to intensify it to maintain control or lose the power he has over her.

Abuse is learned. Most abusive men come from homes where they were abused or observed abuse. When a man sees his father abusing his mother, he learns that he is supposed to treat women that way. When he is abused as a child, he learns that love involves control and hurting others, so he continues to use that pattern of behavior as an adult.

### **A Portrait of the Chronically Abused Woman**

Regardless of the type of abuse, a woman is generally affected the same way. She feels the abuse is her fault and that it will stop if she can just get "it" right. Feelings range from confusion, anxiety, and depression to fear, panic, and loneliness. She doubts herself and develops a low self-esteem. When her husband denies the abuse and minimizes her concerns, she spends a significant amount of time trying to figure out what really happened, replaying their interactions over and over, attempting to reconcile his account with hers.

Her tendency is to minimize the severity of the abuse and its effects on her. She may get to the point that she's so used to it she doesn't even realize it is abuse.

Abuse is cyclical with distinct phases. This was first identified by Lenore Walker in her book *The Battered Woman* (HarperPerennial: New York, New York, 1979, pg. 55-70). The first phase is called the tension-building stage

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where small abuses occur increasingly, but the woman ignores their significance and accepts that they are her fault, while the abuser denies doing anything.

These small abuses build up to an acute battering incident, which will become a major event and escalate the abuse. If physical abuse is used, it may involve injury. If the abuse is verbal and emotional, it will escalate the intensity, throwing her off balance, getting her attention because it is impossible to ignore.

After the escalation, the kindness and contrite loving behavior begins where the abuser will be nice and caring. He may appear to show remorse by apologies, gifts, and promises. This may be the only time she gets treated well in the relationship. She is relieved, wanting to believe and hope he will stay this way; but something inside her knows he will not.

A woman is most likely to reach out for help during the acute battering phase, because the shock that “it” happened again brings despair, hopelessness, and desperation. Then when things calm down, she may doubt herself, thinking her reaction was overboard, and feel relieved that it really isn’t as bad as she let herself believe. She may then feel ashamed that she told you about the abuse.

An abused woman will try to reason with her abuser in getting him to see that she is not doing, saying, or thinking what he is accusing her of. She tries to resolve conflicts with him by explaining what she meant, not realizing that he does not want to reach mutual understanding since his goal is control and power over her. She may try to tell him how his abuse hurts her, thinking that when she finally explains it in a way that he understands, he will stop. She doesn’t realize that he knows it hurts and wants to do it anyway. Rather than seeing her as conciliatory, he views her attempts to explain and reach an understanding as her way of trying to overpower him.

She spends a significant amount of emotional and mental energy trying to please him so he won’t get upset at her. She is always aware of his ever-changing moods and catches undertones in his body language and speech. At times, he is a nice guy and may seem reasonable or even contrite and wounded, desperately needing her. At other times, he is belligerent and angry, capable of being mean and cold toward her. She believes that she did something wrong to change him into this mean man and if she can figure out what it is, he’ll be nice again. So she keeps trying.

Unproductive arguments and conversations happen frequently. The abusive husband does not want to talk about what really happened or listen to his wife’s concerns. He may change the subject to divert or mislead or use any other abusive tactics to avoid healthy resolution. He might even say that it’s a wrong time to bring up any conflict since they’re getting along so good at that moment. She’s left feeling confused and hopeless.



The intense confusion she feels comes from the difference between her reality and his. Since she believes he cares about her and doesn't understand that he is willingly hurting her, she gives value and weight to his perceptions and feels confused when they differ from hers. The more this happens, the more she doubts herself.

During an encounter, she may feel like she's crazy. "What really happened?" she asks herself. "I thought I was being nice, but he just accused me of being mean. Was I mean? I don't think so, but maybe I could have said it a little softer or not brought up two things at once. Maybe I should have realized that he was in a bad mood from work and waited to ask him. I never get things right. I'm so stupid."

Her words and actions are often twisted and misconstrued. He may interpret her offer to help him as accusing him of being weak. A comment regarding his harsh discipline of a child will be interpreted as her trying to tell him what to do and telling him he is a failure as a father. Her request to find out what is bothering him may be misconstrued as her being nosy and pushy. She may be told that her attempts to cook a nice meal for him are manipulative. Her explanations defending herself may elicit accusations of her being right all the time, arrogant, and always wanting things her way.

This woman may be too embarrassed to tell people what is happening. She may have tried and may not have been believed, since the abuser may have a good reputation with outsiders. Most abusers do so in private and try to present a different public image. Since verbal and emotional abuse is insidious and baffling, she may have difficulty explaining why it is so bad and why she feels the way she feels. The conversations and interactions she is having may not sound that bad on the surface. Yet the impact comes from the motives of the abuser, the double messages, and the confusion and devaluing of his partner—all difficult to convey.

## **Leave or Stay?**

Leaving an abusive relationship is difficult because the woman believes many of the things her abuser says. As long as she doubts herself and minimizes the abuse, she will stay. The abuser knows this and seeks to keep her off balance and undermines any independence or strength she gains. He also tries to keep her isolated from other people and from getting help so she won't leave. Plans to leave could bring anger, remorse, promises to change, more abuse, or an attempt to ruin her reputation. He may threaten her life, threaten to take the children, threaten to leave her penniless, threaten to kill himself, or threaten to "make her pay" if she leaves. Most women leave and return multiple times before they finally leave for good or require change.

It is important not to tell a physically abusive man that his wife is leaving because it may escalate the violence. The risk of major violence increases for a time when the woman first leaves. Risks include violence toward herself, her

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children, a new boyfriend, or anyone else close to her. It includes sexual assault, stalking, accusations, threats, intimidation, and possibly murder.

In situations where she leaves a severely physically abusive husband, she may need to inform others of the danger, consider a restraining order, or contact the police. This woman may have to vary the routes she drives for regular activities, tell family and friends not to give her information to him, and not contact her husband herself. Some women have had to take on a new identity and leave their old life behind completely.

Abusive men rarely agree to a separation to work on the relationship. Fearing her independence, an abusive man doesn't want to give his wife a chance to see how life is without him. He also doesn't accept her right to dictate the terms of their relationship because he doesn't want to give her equality or power in the relationship.

You cannot know for sure which men will be violent, but the following signs are correlated with the increased possibility of violence:

- Her intuitive sense of what he is capable of doing. Women usually know.
- Prior extreme violence, possessiveness, and jealousy.
- Prior serious violence with weapons or threats to use weapons or kill.
- Violence during a pregnancy.
- Use of prior terror tactics like hurting animals or stalking.
- Substance abuse.
- Escalation of threats and violence.
- Prior sexual violence.
- Serious depression with no hope for the future.
- His plan and fantasy about suicide or homicide.

### **So Why Does She Stay?**

One of the most frustrating things about dealing with abused women is that they stay in their situation and continue to tolerate the treatment they're receiving. One of the most common reasons is financial. Even those who have adequate resources do not want to change their financial status and lifestyle. Others will truly be destitute if they leave.

Society and pressure from her church are additional factors to "keep the family together." She is afraid of what he will do if she leaves, afraid to be alone, and afraid of divorce. She feels guilty and blames herself for the problems. She still hopes things will get better. She believes his threats about her leaving. She believes she cannot make it without him. If she saw abuse or was abused as a child, she accepts it as normal. She knows she will have to deal with him anyway after the separation or divorce, so she reasons it is easier to stay.

You cannot make her see the situation. Getting a clear understanding of the abusive relationship dynamics takes time. Unless there is change, gaining

enough strength to leave also takes time. In the meantime, you can be there to support and strengthen her.

It is not your role or responsibility to fix her or help her sort out the complex dynamics in her marriage. When you recognize the signs of spousal abuse, listen, support, and refer her to sources that can help her.

Also watch for physical signs of personal destruction. This woman might start using drugs, alcohol, or prescription drugs to cope. She might either deprive herself of proper nutrition or do the opposite and use food to help soothe her hurt. She may feel depressed, with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Although some physical symptoms are real, often physical complaints and illnesses such as headaches, stomachaches, body aches, weakness, fatigue, depression, anxiety, insomnia, nervousness, lack of concentration, and others are psychosomatic.

## Legal Issues

In the case of physical abuse, she may need to seek protection in the form of a restraining order. There are three types: An Emergency Protective Order is obtainable from a police department and is usually good for five business or seven calendar days. The woman has to show she is in immediate danger as evidenced by a recent abusive incident or serious threat. It is served to the abuser.

A temporary restraining order lasts for approximately three weeks and is granted by a judge in cases where there is physical abuse, a serious threat of emotional or physical abuse, sexual assault, or stalking. The abuser is notified in advance of the hearing.

A permanent restraining order is issued by a judge after a hearing and lasts for three years. It may say “no contact” or “no violent contact.” In extreme cases, the restraining order is permanent. No Contact Orders are issued by the juvenile court ordering the abuser not to have contact with minor children, if they are in danger.

A woman should keep the restraining order with her at all times because an officer would need to see it before he can do anything about a violation.

Restraining orders do not insure a woman’s safety or insure that the abuser will not harass, contact, or harm her. In fact, the threat of physical abuse increases when a woman files a restraining order. This needs to be taken into consideration when the decision is made to file, as she may need to make arrangements to stay safe. Laws differ in various states regarding the penalties for violation of a restraining order. You can check with your local police department or women’s shelter for your state’s specific laws.



## WOMEN REACHING WOMEN IN CRISIS

Domestic violence is a crime. In response to the huge number of women who refuse to prosecute and testify against their abusers after they are arrested, some states have passed laws that allow the district attorney to pursue the case without the woman's testimony. Sentencing can include probation, a batterer's treatment program, fines, counseling, substance abuse treatment, a suspended sentence with probation, and jail time for repeat offenders. Abused women are sometimes ordered to attend a personal empowerment program.

### Counseling

Your purpose is to inform, support, encourage, and refer.

- Help her to understand abuse, focus on how she is being affected, and recognize that she has choices.
- Help this woman to see that the things her husband is telling her are not true. He may be telling her she is mean, a bad mother, stupid, or a bad wife. Help her to look at the proof that those things are not true. Read together several Scripture passages that remind her of God's unconditional love. Some of these include:

Genesis 29:31-35: God saw Leah's pain from not being loved by Jacob and blessed her with children.

Psalms 17: David's prayer for justice

Psalms 37: a contrast between the wicked and the righteous

Romans 5:1-8: We have peace with God through Jesus despite trials.

Romans 8:28-39: We are more than conquerors through Jesus.

- Help her to understand that God's heart hurts when He sees abuse. Reassure her that God is not punishing her for past mistakes.
- Do not be shocked or put down this woman with statements such as, "I would never put up with that! Why are you?" You don't know what you would do in the same situation. She may have said the same thing.
- If she comes to you during an abusive incident and later minimizes it because things seem better, explain to her that this cyclical pattern is further evidence of an abusive relationship and that it will happen again.
- This woman needs validation. She may recite incidents and ask you, "Is what he did right? Did I say the wrong thing? Would you feel that way?" She needs to hear that it is not right for her husband to treat her that way, regardless of what she does. She needs to hear you call it "abuse."

## *Domestic Violence and Spouse Abuse*

- If you tell her to look at her part in the abusive relationship, you are saying the same thing as her abuser—that it is her fault.
- Don't tell her to submit to her abusive husband or to love him. These ignore the realities of her situation and make her feel that the abuse is her fault. Telling her to submit undermines her need to take care of herself and her right to refuse to be treated abusively.
- Help her to understand that no matter what she does, the abuser is responsible for his behavior. She does not cause him to be abusive. It comes from within him and is his choice. You can agree with her that she is like all of us: she is not perfect, will make mistakes, and may even react wrongly at times. However, nothing she does justifies his abuse. That is a separate issue.
- Agreeing with her that it is better to keep the father in the home is agreeing that she should accept the abuse and that the children are better off with an abusive father than without one. This is one of the excuses she uses to stay.
- Believe her. Don't question her perceptions.
- Treat her with respect and reaffirm that is how she should be treated.
- Don't tell her what to do. Let her have control of her own life. Don't tell her she has to leave or stay.
- Reminding this woman that she needs to stay true to her marriage vows or reminding her that she cannot divorce for abuse is telling her she has to stay in the situation and undermining her need to see the abuse as serious.
- Help her to see that it is impossible to please her husband and do everything right. His abusive attitudes and beliefs set her up to fail.
- Help her to see she cannot explain herself to him. He won't let it work.
- Help her to understand that control does not equal love and a man who loves her will value her and treat her with respect.
- Recognize signs of physical abuse: long sleeves in summer, absences from regularly scheduled meetings, and excuses for frequent bruises and injuries.
- Pray with her and for her.
- Offer help for physical needs.
- Don't confront the abuser or tell him what she told you. He may retaliate.
- Keep her disclosures confidential.
- Encourage her to keep a journal of the abusive behavior.
- In the case of physical abuse, help her to develop a safety plan. Tell her to keep an emergency escape kit in her car or at a friend's house that includes clothes, money, important papers, and other essentials. Refer her to a shelter. Give her the National Domestic Violence Hotline number: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Research local facilities, if available, and have phone numbers, websites, and addresses available.
- Refer her to professional counseling, recommending therapists who know how to handle abuse situations. Encourage her to go alone to the counseling session.
- Recommend materials.
- Give her a Bible if she does not already own one. Mark Scriptures for her to read to encourage her.

- Help her to know that divorce is not a reflection of her worth and that she will still be accepted and supported by the church. Remember that God hates divorce, but He does not hate the divorced person.
- If she tells you about physical, sexual, or severe emotional child abuse, you may be required under law as a mandated reporter in your state to report the abuse to Child Protective Services. To check your state's laws, call Child Protective Services or your local police department.
- Be patient. It is difficult to leave an abusive relationship. Don't judge your success or failure with her by whether or not she leaves. Tell her that it takes time to get strong enough to see the situation clearly. She needs to make the decision fully on her own; otherwise, she's just obeying yet another person in her life who's telling her what to do—even if it is good advice.

## Recommended Resources

*10 Lifesaving Principles for Women in Difficult Marriages*, Karla Downing, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2003.

*Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them: Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse*, Paul Hegstrom, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999 and revised 2004.

The next two resources are not Christian, but are helpful in the area of domestic violence and abuse.

*The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond*, Patricia Evans, Bob Adams, Inc. Publishers, 1992.

*Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*, Lundy Bancroft, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2002.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence website: [www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org) or call their National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1.800.799.7233. Get additional information and/or find local women's shelters.

## About the Author

**KARLA DOWNING** is a licensed marriage and family therapist and the author of *10 Lifesaving Principles for Women in Difficult Marriages*, *When Love Hurts: 10 Principles to Transform Difficult Relationships*, and *The Truth in the Mirror*. She is also the founder of *ChangeMyRelationship.com*. Karla offers practical tools based on biblical truths to Christians in difficult relationships. She also has a passion to teach ministry leaders how to minister more effectively to people in difficult relationships.



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