

Barriers to Leaving Violent Situations Experienced by Victims of Domestic Violence

Victims of domestic violence often face enormous barriers in their attempts to acknowledge and address abuse in their lives. The following are only a few of the common obstacles experienced by victims in their decisions to stay or leave:

FEAR

Victims are afraid to stay because they do not want themselves or their children to be hurt or killed. They are also afraid to leave due to abusers' threats to find them, hurt and/or kill them and/or their children. Victims may also fear being alone or may believe the abusers' criticisms; they may fear the unknown.

FINANCES

Abusers typically do not allow victims to possess, have access to or knowledge of money and resources. Victims who aren't allowed to work or can't access money without the abuser's permission, do not have money for transportation, do not have money for housing, food, clothing and other necessities, and may not be able to earn money without skills training and employment assistance services. Victims with children are constantly asking themselves, "where will we live?," "how will we eat?," and "will we be able to make it?" Financial constraints are significant barriers for victims attempting to leave.

CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Many victims are concerned about what their neighbors, and members of their faith communities, will think if they leave or report the abuse. They may believe or have been told that leaving is not an option, that violence is an expected part of family life, and that they will be abandoned/rejected by God, by their family and by fellow worshipers. For victims who experience language and cultural barriers, leaving an abusive relationship may require them to communicate effectively, to assimilate and accommodate to foreign customs and environments, and to abandon strong connections to and the sense of security provided by their religious or cultural support systems.

Is Domestic Violence A Problem for Communities of Faith?

Consider how these statistics may relate to or represent your congregants:

Approximately 1 in 3 adult women have experienced a physical assault by an intimate partner during adulthood.

(American Psychological Association's Report: *Violence and the Family*, Report of the American Psychological Association's Presidential Task Force, 1996)

Approximately one-third (30%) of all female murder victims in the US were slain by their husbands or

boyfriends. (*Uniform Crime Reports of the US*, 1996, Federal Bureau of Investigation)

Violence by an intimate partner accounts for about 21% of violent crime experienced by women and about 2% of the violence experienced by men.

(*Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends*, US Department of Justice, March 1998)

40% of teenage girls ages 14-17 report knowing someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend.

(Children NOW/Kaiser Permanente poll, 1995) **Approximately 1 in 5 female high school students reports being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner.** (*Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy and Suicidality*, Centers for Disease Control, Journal of the American Medical Association, August 2001)

Studies show that child abuse occurs in 30%-60% of family violence cases that involve families with children.

("The overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering." JL Edleson, *Violence Against Women*, February, 1999)

The elderly are more often abused by their spouses than by their children. (R. Wolfe, "Elder Abuse and Family Violence.")

How Is Domestic Violence a Spiritual Issue for Victims?

Victims of domestic violence are abused and battered by the very people they love, trust, support and believe in. Often abusive relationships begin as healthy relationships do: with promises of love and devotion, plans for a committed future, and schedule changes to ensure time is spent together. Perhaps the victim meets her new partner in her own faith community or in an affiliated setting. The relationship may progress quickly and the couple's commitment may intensify in a relatively short period of time. There may be subtle warning signs, but nothing overtly abusive may occur for a while. The abuser may begin to emotionally abuse the victim, becoming increasingly critical, and begin to isolate her from friends and family, monitoring her activities and contacts. The abuser may begin to question the victim's faith or misuse spiritual teachings to justify abusive actions and beliefs. Some of the ways an abuser may specifically attack his victim's spirituality and connection with her faith community are:

- ◆ Misusing religious teachings, doctrine, scriptures and practices to justify positions of absolute authority, abuse and violence
- ◆ Not allowing the victim to read, have access to or destroying the victim's spiritual books, materials, prayer beads, religious dress, spiritual items, and religious artifacts
- ◆ Interrupting or interfering with the victim's attempts to study religious teachings, pray or communicate with her God
- ◆ Not allowing the victim to attend her faith communities' worship services, faith community sponsored events, and/or religious ceremonies
- ◆ Accusing the victim of inappropriateness with members of her faith community and/or the religious leader, justifying restriction from communication/contact
- ◆ Forcing the victim to worship and adhere to his religious beliefs/practices; forcing the victim to attend religious events, ceremonies and services that are not her own
- ◆ Forbidding the victim from participating in religious celebrations, events or holidays
- ◆ Not allowing the victim to contribute money to or receive money from the faith community

SOME OF THE MISINTERPRETATIONS OF RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- ◆ Spouses, parents, community members, children /descendants from and children of God* are supposed to suffer, surrender, and be grateful that they are chosen to suffer and endure pain as service to God.
- ◆ The abuse suffered now will be rewarded later.
- ◆ God gives someone only that which they deserve and can bear.
- ◆ Turning to God is the only option; prayer and meditation alone will stop domestic violence.
- ◆ The only option available to a victim of domestic violence is to stay in the relationship while the perpetrator gets help (divorce is a "sin" and is forbidden).
- ◆ If victims are good "Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.," they will not be abused...victims of domestic violence are deserving of abuse.

*In this packet, the word "God" is used in a general way and is meant to be inclusive of all specific language of all religions.





It is not an enemy who taunts me -

then I could bear it;

*It is not an adversary who deals
insolently with me -*

then I could hide from him.

*But it is you, my equal, my companion,
my familiar friend.*

*We used to hold sweet converse together
within God's house we walked in
fellowship.*