

The Hidden Side of Domestic Abuse: Men abused in intimate relationships

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"Men too are victims and women too are perpetrators; neither sex has a monopoly of vice or virtue" (David Thomas, 1993)

Domestic abuse has, in recent years, been subjected to a very restricted analysis that is based on stereotypes of what a victim looks like and what an abuser looks like. Typically, the "victim" is portrayed as female, small, timid, oppressed - and the abuser is portrayed as male, large, brutish, aggressive. But such gender stereotypes are dangerous, and leave groups of people suffering and vulnerable because they do not fit the stereotypical descriptions which dominates domestic violence literature and support organizations.

Men as victims of domestic abuse

It is very difficult to come up with accurate figures of domestic violence for either gender because it is suspected the DV is hugely under-reported. However, it is believed that these figures are even more uncertain when it comes to male victims of domestic abuse. The British Crime Survey (2002) reported that almost 20% of reported domestic violence incidents involved male victims, whereas Fiebert (2009) put this figure at 38%, Caetano (2002) at 40% and George (1999) at 14%.

Regardless of the exact statistics, these figures do serve to illustrate that men are victims of domestic abuse, and that it IS a significant problem.

If you are suffering from domestic abuse, it is very clear that you are not alone.

What constitutes domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is any incident or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or are family members, regardless of gender or sexuality.

Emotional abuse:

Being constantly put-down, insulted & humiliated.

Being blamed for things that are not your fault.

Being ordered around and constantly dictated to.

Having beliefs and opinions ridiculed and discounted.
Intimidation – being threatened with violence, breaking things, screaming etc.
Threatening suicide, divorce, to hurt or deny access to children / pets.

Financial abuse:

Being denied any financial control or autonomy.

Isolating:

Having social contacts controlled. Being stopped from seeing or talking to friends and family.

Being restricted access to the outside world / groups / organizations.

Physical abuse:

Being pushed, slapped, punched, kicked, bitten etc.

Having things thrown at you.

Having a weapon used on you.

Being denied basic essentials i.e. food, sleep, medicine etc.

Sexual abuse:

Being forced (either physically, by threats, or by coercion) to participate in a sexual act you do not want to participate in.

Being exploited in a sexual way i.e. harassment, unsolicited and inappropriate sexual comments to you or others.

"Women can't really do any damage anyway?"

A perpetrator of abuse can always cause harm, whether this is physical harm or psychological damage.

Research into the data of victims of domestic violence that required hospital treatment has revealed that women are capable of inflicting very serious physical damage (Goldberg, 1984). Infact, some have reported that men are likely to suffer extremely serious injuries because of the prevalence of weapons used by women (George, 1992). At the extreme end of the scale, almost a quarter of all deaths in the US that were caused as the result of domestic violence were men (NCVS, 2002).

Psychological damage, as the result of domestic abuse, can also have severe implications for a person's life - and this cannot and should not be discounted. Problems with depression, anxiety, substance abuse etc. can accompany domestic abuse, which can affect all aspects of life.

"If she hits you, hit her back!"

This type of attitude just isn't helpful.

Firstly, it does not take into account the dynamics involved in domestic violence. Domestic abuse is about power, and power is not necessarily linked to physical strength. Understandably, if you are very afraid of your partner, taking a physical stand is not something that you may feel able to do. There is also the risk that responding with physical violence yourself, may exacerbate the level of violence and leave you at even greater risk of serious harm.

There is also the threat that, if you were to respond in a violent way, that you will be the one who ends up getting prosecuted (James, 1999). It seems true that for some reason, female-to-male violence has a social acceptance on some level (Greenblatt, 1983) - it shouldn't, but it does - and therefore, retaliating physically could mean that you are the one that ends up being labelled as the abuser - potentially giving your partner even more power.

Some men also consider it to be unmanly for a man to hit a woman for any reason (Steinmetz, 1980) - even if in self-defense.

At the end of the day, violence usually begets more violence, and so domestic violence advocates recommend that you should make attempts to get yourself into a place of safety, rather than planning to respond in a way that could leave you in a more vulnerable position.

"Why don't you just leave?"

There are so many reasons why men may stay with an abusive partner - and everyone has their own combinations of reasons for not being able to walk out. Some of the reasons a man may stay in an abusive relationship are:

He feels afraid of retaliations if he should leave.

He feels financially insecure.

He loves his partner and believes they may change and stop being abusive.

He feels obligated to stay.

He doesn't want to lose access to his children - or he believes the children will be left in a vulnerable situation.

He has nowhere to go.

He believes he can / or should be able to "handle it".

He doesn't want others to know about the abuse - shame, embarrassment, uncertainty.

He does not want to leave his partner alone.

He blames himself for the abuse.

He may be afraid he will lose other family members and mutual friends if he leaves.

He may believe that "real men should be able to keep their wives under control" (Strauss, 1995).

"Why don't you just report it?"

Anyone who has been the victim of any type of abuse will understand that it's really not that simple to report abuse. The cycle of abuse, especially if it takes place over a long period of time, can make the victim feel powerless and very fearful of change, as well as often experiencing a feeling of personal responsibility for what is happening to them.

If you are being abused, this is NOT your fault.

Men are much less likely than women to talk about domestic abuse to friends and family – in fact research suggests they are 5 times less likely to do this (Stets & Strauss, 1990). In general, only 1-2% of men who are assaulted by their female partners are likely to report the abuse to the police or outside agency (Fontes, 1998).

A man being abused by a woman, also has to contend with inherently sexist stereotypes when it comes to reporting domestic abuse. The media portrays the popular image of the "hen-pecked" guy who is abused by his wife as a figure of fun...portraying him as weak, pathetic, stupid.....and who wants to have this stereotype attached to them?

Even if a man decides that he wants support, men often don't have the social networks in place to easily tell a friend or family member what is happening to them. Generally speaking, men do not ingratiate themselves to others by talking about their feelings - and it is not seen to be the "done thing" to go down the pub for a "*touchy-feely*" chat. This can leave men very isolated and unsupported, feeling very alone and that there is no way of breaking out of their silence.

Men can also be afraid that if he was to report his wife to the police, the police would not take his allegation seriously. It is worth noting that *legally* domestic violence laws are largely gender-neutral, but this does not mean that attitudes are. Similarly, a man may be concerned that if he reports abuse, his partner may counter his allegation, stating that she is the one who's been abused and she hit out in self-defence (Straus, 1990; Pagelow, 1985). Obviously, this is a major concern as it can have very real consequences.

If reporting, take some advice. There are helplines at the bottom of this page.

I'm being abused. What should I do?

Getting yourself to a place of safety is the number one priority. If abuse is imminent, get yourself to a place of safety. Leave the house if possible and allow the situation to calm down.

Do not retaliate or become verbally aggressive. This is likely to escalate the situation. Try to

remain calm.

Keep a diary of incidents, noting time, dates, witnesses, injuries etc. Keep this in a secure place.

Take photographs of any injury.

If you feel able, report each incident to your doctor or hospital.

If you feel able, report each incident to a trained domestic violence police officer. File a restraining order.

If you feel able, seek legal advice on reporting, prosecuting, financial issues, child welfare / custody etc.

Have an emergency plan - i.e. keep some money, spare clothes, medications etc. together somewhere where you can grab it if you need to leave the house without warning.

Find somewhere to stay. If you need emergency accommodation, contact your local / national domestic violence helpline who should be able to give you advice of getting temporary accommodation. Despite the lack of male refuges, they may be able to provide financial assistance in the form of a voucher for a hotel.

Phone a helpline that specialises in this issue.

If it is an emergency, call the police.

REMEMBER: It is not YOUR fault.

Where can I find support?

These national helplines specialise in helping male victims of domestic violence. They are confidential, and can provide emotional support, as well as practical advice and assistance.

UK: The Men's Advice Line: 0808 801 0327

Survivors UK: 0845 122 1201

National Domestic Violence Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Mankind: 01823 334244

USA: Domestic Violence Hotline for Men and Women: 1888 743 5754

Canada: Family Violence Info Line: 403-310-1818

Australia: Men's Domestic Violence Helpline: 08 9223 1199
Men's Accommodation & Crisis Service: 02 6258 4216

This literature may also be helpful:

Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence. P. Cook.

If He is Raped: A Guidebook for Partners, Spouses, Parents and Friends. by Alan W. McEvoy

Trapped in Silence. By C. Cornell.

Video: Battered by their wives. ABC 20/20 Sept 19th 1997 (in US call 1800 913 3434 to order).

Other Pandys' Articles that may be of interest:

[Effects of Intimate Partner Sexual Assault](#)

[An Overview of Partner Rape](#)

Remember also that we have a Relationship Violence Forum at Pandys for member which is gender-neutral

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