

**Leslie Vernick DCSW, LCSW**  
**Most commonly asked questions on Domestic Violence**

**DOES THIS HAPPEN IN CHRISTIAN HOMES?**

We'd be surprised. A conservative estimate is that out of every 60 married couples, 10 suffer emotional and verbal abuse and 2-3 suffer physical abuse. Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to a 1998 Commonwealth Fund Survey.

**WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

Hitting, shoving, punching, pinching, pulling, bruising, kicking, scratching, stabbing, shooting, spitting, slapping would all be considered physical abuse. Emotional abuse is characterized by intimidation, humiliation, threatening, harassing, isolating and ignoring as well as verbal assaults such as name calling, cursing and berating. Emotional abuse can also be more subtle such as making someone think it's always her fault for things going wrong or lying about things, making a woman believe that what she thinks is happening is only in her mind. Whenever anyone is forced to do something sexually that she does not want to do, it is sexual abuse, even if the person forcing you is your spouse.

**WHO DOES THIS?**

Abuse goes both ways, husbands abusing wives and wives abusing husbands however most often the severity and extent of physical injuries are more extensive for women battered by their husbands.

**WHY DO THEY DO THIS?**

Men who abuse their wives often say they do this because their wives were disobedient, disrespectful, or not submissive to their headship. They blame their circumstances, their wives or something outside of themselves in order to justify their behavior. However, the truth is that they abuse because they have not learned to tolerate frustration or disappointment well and have learned to use violence and intimidation to control and get what they want. Often men who abuse (and we're going to speak primarily about men because that is the majority of domestic violence) are somewhat dependent, possessive people who put the entire responsibility for their well being upon their wives. When she fails to perform whatever would be required to make him happy or satisfied, then abuse follows. However, a flip side to this is also the anger and humiliation a man feels towards himself for his own inadequacy as his wife succeeds at performing whatever he has set up to please him. He then tends to make the requirements harder and more unreasonable so that she never quite knows what will please him, or what will set him off.

**WHY DOES SHE STAY?**

Many women believe that it is their Christian duty to put up with this kind of behavior. Unfortunately, they might have even been counseled to do so by their well meaning Christian

friends and/or church leaders. Also, many women accept that it is their responsibility for the abuse, in other words, they must have done something wrong to "set him off" and therefore "deserved" the punishment he gave them. Also wives might be intimidated to leave or go for help, fearful of further violence against themselves or their children; they may have nowhere to go or few job skills in order to support themselves and their children, so they stay.

Often Christian women have adopted a kind of missionary attitude towards their husbands that goes something like "I am responsible for my husband's entire emotional and spiritual well being." Therefore they see few options other than continuing enduring the battering that comes.

**WHAT ABOUT SUBMISSION. SHOULDN'T A WIFE BE SUBMISSIVE TO HER HUSBAND AND ISN'T HE TO BE THE LEADER OF THE HOME. ISN'T THERE SOME TRUTH THAT SHE MIGHT HAVE PROVOKED THE ABUSE BECAUSE OF HER BEHAVIOR OR ATTITUDE?**

These are two separate questions and I will try to answer them separately. The first is, shouldn't a wife be submissive and what really is headship? Unfortunately I believe the church has incorrectly taught that a wife is to be obedient and submissive to a husband at all costs, and this thinking frees the husband to behave in irresponsible and or selfish ways and cover it under the "guise" of headship. If we look carefully at the scriptures, we see a couple of principles that we need to look at. First in Mark 10:42-45 Jesus talks about headship or leadership and he describes it very differently than ruling with authority and power. In fact he rebukes the leaders for ruling in that way. He describes headship as servant hood. Headship in the family, whatever it means does not mean dictatorship, or absolute power. In fact, most often it is described Biblically as a very sacrificial self giving to the needs of the other person. I don't think that we can ever excuse or explain domestic violence or battering under the dominion of headship. A second principle that the scriptures speak of in 11Corinthians 7 is that of mutuality in marriage. It describes mutually deciding to abstain from sexual relations for a higher purpose of prayer and it talks about a wife's body not belonging to herself but to her husband, and LIKEWISE a husband's body not belonging to himself but to his wife. This sets forth a principle in marriage of mutual decision making in even the most intimate areas. Therefore I don't think headship and submission refer to dominance and obedience exclusively.

The second point that sometimes a wife provokes the abuse must be examined carefully. It is true. People provoke us all the time. It can be our neighbors, our children, or employees or even our enemies. However, does that excuse our response? Are we ever justified in responding with violence when someone doesn't cooperate with us, or is even down right belligerent? I don't think that we could find a single example in scripture where God endorses that kind of behavior. Even Moses, when righteously angered by the sin of the Israelites, was punished by God for his inappropriate outbursts and had to suffer the consequences of not entering into the Promised Land. So the answer is yes, a wife may do some provoking or annoying things in the marriage relationship, but NO, abuse is never the proper response.

Another interesting way of looking at this situation is that as a wife becomes more aware of her husband's abuse rages and understands how he takes it out on her, she may provoke them, just to

get it over with. Often after the abuse the husband is quite remorseful and loving. During the build up phase of the abuse cycle, she might be very frightened or unsure just what is going to happen and when. She may provoke is must to end it and move on to the next stage which is the remorseful and loving one.

## **WHAT SHOULD A PASTOR DO IF A WOMAN COMES TO HIM WHO IS BEING ABUSED?**

If I could back up a bit, I think it is first essential that we view abuse Biblically and that is as EVIL. Psalm 140:1-4 says "Rescue me from evil and violent men" and in Proverbs 4:14-17 it says "Don't walk in the way of evil men for they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence". Also Ephesians 4, Colossians 3, and I Corinthians 5:9-13, all refers to abuse, whether verbal or physical. These passages especially refer to verbal abuse, as wickedness and evil and not characteristic of a changed Spirit-filled life. So the first step a pastor must do is to recognize abuse as EVIL and SINFUL and in no way justified, or excused. Therefore that being true what do the scriptures call us to do when we encounter evil and wickedness, especially among so called Christians?

It calls us to confront, expose and help the perpetrator if they are willing to repent. Ephesians 5:11 says that we are not to participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them. and in Galatians 6:1 we are to gently correct a brother who is caught in a trespass, and in I Corinthians 5:11 we are told not to even associate with any so called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler, not even to eat with such a one. The word *reviler* is an interesting one. It means one who heaps abuse upon another person. So a Pastors responsibility is to support the abused women and her children, help her find a safe place to go and to confront the husband about his sin.

IT IS VITALLY IMPORTANT THAT ANYONE HELPING IN THIS KIND OF SITUATION REMEMBER THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHANGE RESTS WITH THE ABUSER. A PASTOR DOES A DESSERVICE TO A WOMAN WHEN HE TRIES TO GET HER TO BE MORE SUBMISSIVE, OR OBEDIENT, OR FIX BETTER MEALS, ETC. Colossians. 3:8, 9. and 17 says that WE ARE TO PUT ASIDE OUR FORMER MANNER OF LIFE and TO WALK ANEW. This is each person's responsibility.

## **HOW DOES ONE CHANGE?**

We all have the capacity for evil. The scriptures say in Jeremiah 29:11 that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, who can know it. We are not immune to evil just because we are Christians. It is a struggle. However, it is important that we not excuse it for any reason. The first step is recognizing it for what it is. It is EVIL and SINFUL. NO EXCUSES. The second is to fully repent. That means really seeing how my sin has hurt others and doing whatever it takes to change. The second part is usually the one where there is often a lot of resistance. They may be really sorry that they have hurt their wives, but often I find they are not willing to do whatever it takes (including extensive counseling) to change their attitudes and behaviors.

The goal of rebuke and confrontation **always** is reconciliation and restoration but the work is done by the one who has sinned. Often they are unwilling to take this step. Without it, the abuse often continues. Promises to change often are broken. They have already promised many times and failed. ... and have consistently demonstrated a lack of self control when angry.

It is important to let a husband grow up and take responsibility for his behavior and to learn self control. He learns this by experiencing the natural and Biblical consequences of his behavior. If we shield him from these under the guise of submission, turning the other cheek, etc., he will never bear the full responsibility for change.

He needs to recognize his abuse for what it is EVIL, and not disguise it under headship.

Bear full responsibility for it and changing the way he deals with his anger.

Look at his idols of control and power and how they influence his thinking.

Learn to bear the fruit of repentance in changed behavior and interpersonal style and allow time to rebuild the marital trust.

**Leslie speaks on this subject as well as many others more suitable for general audiences. To see what topics Leslie speaks on visit her website at [www.leslievernick.com](http://www.leslievernick.com) and go to her speaking page.**

**To look for free resources on this topic visit her website and go to her free resource page.**

**For additional helps, go to her store for her books *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong and The Emotionally Destructive Relationship: Seeing It! Stopping It! Surviving It* as well as a 2 CD teaching on A Biblical Response to Domestic Violence**

