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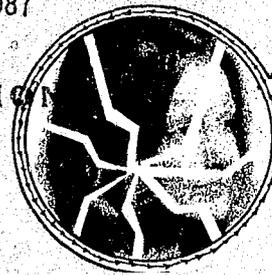
plain talk about...

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Wife Abuse

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH • Division of Communications and Education • Plain Talk Series • Ruth Kay, Editor

- "To have and to hold. . . to love and to cherish. . ."
- "Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home."

These sentiments reflect the feelings of most people toward marriage, home, and family—but not all. The surprising fact is that a lot of violence, bringing fear and pain, is reported among family members.

For example, about one-quarter of all murders in the United States take place within the family. Surveys of American couples show that 20 to 50 percent have suffered violence regularly in their marriages. The records indicate that between two and four million incidents of domestic violence occur every single year. Wife abuse is one kind of family violence that probably occurs far more often than most people imagine. The tragedy is that many women suffer this abuse for years without getting help. This flier explores what wife abuse is, who experiences it, some reasons it occurs, the pattern it usually takes, and why women don't get help. Finally, it looks at what women can do if they are abused and how, ultimately, the abuse might be prevented.

What Do We Mean by "Wife Abuse"?

Defining wife abuse or wife battering is not easy. For starters, whom are we thinking of when we use the word "wife"? Actually, any woman who maintains an intimate relationship with a man (her husband, ex-husband, boyfriend or lover) could become a battered or abused "wife." The words "abused" or "battered" which are used here do not refer to the normal conflict and stress that occur in all close relationships, but rather to the violence that can cause serious injury and death. In the pamphlet *Assaults on Women: Rape and Wife-beating*, Natalie Jaffe cites a typical description of the kind of physical harm suffered by battered women surveyed in shelters and treatment in California.

"Most injuries were to the head and neck and, in addition to bruises, strangle marks, black eyes, and split lips, resulted in eye damage, fractured jaws, broken noses, and permanent hearing loss. Assaults to the trunk of the

body were almost as common and produced a broken collarbone, bruised and broken ribs, a fractured tailbone, internal hemorrhaging, and a lacerated liver."

These are serious consequences of serious assaults. Another serious aspect is that once wife beating occurs, it is likely to happen again and again, with violence getting worse over time.

A Closer Look at How the Abused Woman Feels

A woman who has been abused over a long period of time is afraid. Not only is she afraid that she, herself, will be seriously hurt, but if she has children, she fears for their safety also. Her feelings of fear link her to all other women, from all classes of society, in similar situations.

Fear might be a woman's first and most immediate feeling during or after a beating, but other negative feelings may surface when she is not in physical danger. The abused woman is apt to develop doubts about herself. She might wonder if she is justified in fearing for her life and calling herself an "abused wife." Most likely, however, a woman who thinks or feels she is being abused, probably is.

Or, she may feel guilty, even though she's done nothing wrong. An abused wife may feel responsible for her husband's violence because in some way she may have provoked him. This has her placing the shame and blame on herself—instead of her abuser. The longer she puts up with the abuse and does nothing to avoid or prevent it, the less she likes herself. Along with the feeling of being a failure, both as a woman and in her marriage, may come a real feeling of being trapped and powerless, with no way out.

Why Do Men Abuse Their Wives?

Instances of wife abuse have been on record in the United States since the 1830s, but only every now and then does

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it arouse public concern. Generally, public opinion supports traditional family relations and male authority. The battering syndrome is both cause and effect of stereotyped roles and the unequal power relations between men and women. No social class is exempt. Wife abuse occurs in wealthy as well as in poor communities—in middle class as well as in working class families. Over the years it has been tolerated by those who govern community affairs, the courts, medicine, psychiatry, police, schools, and the church. History shows that the helping professions often protected patterns of family authority, unwittingly sanctioning wife abuse rather than condemning it.

In present-day society, violence in the movies, on TV, and in the newspapers is familiar and accepted. Many husbands who abuse their wives have learned that violence, especially against women, is okay. They often were abused themselves as children or saw their mothers abused. The battered wife most likely grew up in a similar environment.

There are other psychological reasons. A wife abuser tends to be filled with anger, resentment, suspicion, and tension. He also, underneath all his aggressive behavior, can be insecure and feel like a loser. He may use violence to give vent to the bad feelings he has about himself or his lot in life. Home is one place he can express those feelings without punishment to himself. If he were angry with his boss and struck him, he would pay the price. But all too often he gets away without penalty when he beats his wife. She becomes the target of his vengeance, and he gets the satisfaction he's looking for.

What about the victimized wife? If she accepts her husband's traditional male authority, she may be labeled as immature. If she fights back or if she refuses to sleep with him if he's drunk, she might be accused of being hostile, domineering, and masculine. These are complaints of abused women.

Patterns

Familiar patterns of wife abuse often develop in three phases: the tension-building phase, the explosion or the actual beating phase, and the loving phase.

The tension builds over a series of small occurrences such as a wife's request for money, her refusal to do all the household chores without her husband's help, her serving a meal not pleasing to him, or a similar incident. What follows is inevitable. She may become the object of any or all of the following assaults: punching with fists, choking, kicking, knifing, slamming against a wall, throwing to the floor, or shoving down the stairs. Sometimes even threats with a gun have been reported.

When the beating is over, the couple move into the third phase. The batterer feels guilty about what he has done. He is sorry and may become loving toward her. He assures

his wife that he will never do anything violent or hurtful to her again. At that moment, he may believe he will never hurt her again. She wants to believe him, hoping that he will change. However, even with professional help, the tension building and the beatings may continue.

Why Do Women Stay?

Women have learned that it may be their own feelings of fear, guilt, or shame that keep them in a relationship that is physically abusive. Often, social and economic pressures compel a woman to stay. Sometimes she stays for lack of somewhere to go for shelter and advice or because she feels that she loves her husband and lives with the hope that he might change, if only she can "hang in there." Tragically, in most cases, the abuse continues, for in fact her husband's behavior has nothing to do with her actions.

Other reasons for staying with him may seem as compelling. A woman may feel that a divorce is wrong and that she should keep her marriage together at all costs. Perhaps she feels her children need a father. She may be isolated with no outside job and few friends. The friends and relatives she does talk to may give her little support, perhaps because her situation frightens them and they don't want to admit to themselves that such violence could occur. If she confides in a counselor, she may also be encouraged to "save the marriage." And, along with her emotional dependence, she may worry about being able to find a job to support herself and her children. If she has her husband arrested, he may not be able to support her. If she doesn't have him arrested, he may beat her even more severely for trying to leave him. Is there a way out? Most women suffer these attacks for years before they finally find the courage and determination to take steps to keep from being victims of further abuse.

What Can a Battered Woman Do?

The first step for a woman to take is to *admit to herself that she is being abused* and that she is not being treated fairly. She has the right to feel safe from physical harm, especially in her own home.

Emergency Action

A woman can do a number of things to protect herself. She can hide extra money, car keys, and important documents somewhere safe so that she can get to them in a hurry. The phone number of the police department should be handy. She should have a place to go, such as an emergency shelter, a social service agency, or the home of a trusted friend or relative.

During an actual attack, the woman should defend herself as best she can. As soon as she is able, she should call

the police and get their names and badge numbers in case she needs a record of the attack. Most importantly, she should leave the house and take her children with her. She may need medical attention, too, because she might be hurt more severely than she realizes. Having a record of her injuries, including photographs, can protect her legally should she decide to press charges.

Long-Range Plans

A woman needs to talk to people who can help. Good friends can lend support and guidance. Organizations that are devoted to women's concerns and not bound by society's traditions can assist her. They might help her explore her options in new ways. Emergency shelters for women, hotlines, women's organizations, social service agencies, community mental health centers, and hospital emergency rooms are all possible sources of support.

The following organizations have information about State contacts and shelters where a battered woman can go for help:

- Center for Women Policy Studies
2000 P Street, NW, No. 508
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 872-1770
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
1500 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Suite 35
Washington, DC 20005

Above all, a woman has to determine her own best course of action. Positive measures such as confiding in a relative on whom she can depend, talking seriously with a trusted friend, or consulting with a sympathetic counselor are steps in the right direction. With the help of informal and formal help sources, including individual counseling for the husband as well as herself, a woman may be able to bring an end to the problem.

It has been observed that abused women need to develop better feelings about themselves—that is, change their self-image. In her book *Stopping Wife Abuse*, Jennifer Baker Fleming says the following attitudes are positive and useful:

- I am not to blame for being beaten and abused.
- I am not the cause of another's violent behavior.
- I do not like it or want it.
- I do not have to take it.
- I am an important human being.
- I am a worthwhile woman.
- I deserve to be treated with respect.
- I do have power over my own life.
- I can use my power to take good care of myself.
- I can decide for myself what is best for me.
- I can make changes in my life if I want to.

- I am not alone. I can ask others to help me.
- I am worth working for and changing for.
- I deserve to make my own life safe and happy.

Prevention

Since there is no one cause of wife abuse, there is no easy way to prevent it. Until society rejects its tolerance and acceptance of violence for resolving conflict and expressing anger, meaningful changes in family relationships will not occur. Prevention starts with people changing their attitudes toward violence and women. No one deserves to be beaten or physically threatened, no matter what the excuse. It is a crime to beat anyone—a stranger, a friend, or your wife—and the law should be enforced. The tolerance of family violence as a way of life in one generation encourages family violence in another generation. Since the wife abuser didn't learn to deal with anger appropriately as a child, he handles his frustrations through aggression. He needs to know that it's human to feel anger, but inhuman to release those feelings by beating others. By learning to deal with these emotions through acceptable behavior, he can gain respect for himself and others. It's another positive step toward developing mutual respect in the husband/wife relationship where each sees the other as a worthy human being.

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