

Key Information about Family Violence: Partner & Child Battering

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[Adapted from *I Can't Get Over It*, by A. Matsakis, 2002, Oakland; New Harbinger Publications]

What is Battering?

Battering is any violation of a person's integrity, personal space, body, or mind within an intimate or bonded relationship where the victim has reason to believe or strongly feels that the power-holder is capable of maiming or killing him/ her; i.e., in order to be considered battering, family violence must involve life-threat.

Severe or chronic verbal abuse is so damaging that it has been shown to change certain physiological processes in the brain. However, a battering relationship is not one in which an individual simply feels unhappy due to lack of love, respect, or appreciation. Rather, the individual must have experienced at least one life-threatening situation and know that the abuser is capable of killing him or her.

It is not necessary for the abuser to continually beat the victim. What is relevant is that the victim has been terrorized or humiliated into a submissive posture by the threat of injury or death. Even threats of violence, accompanied by minimal physical abuse, are sufficient to establish a pattern of domination by force.

Once victims know that their partner or caretaker is capable of harming them, they come to live in fear of their abuser's anger. The behavior and threats of an abusive person can also come to control other family members because they are witnesses to the kinds of punishments this abuser **is** capable and willing to inflict on those who become the objects of his or her wrath.

How Many Times?

Almost any aspect of abuse can occur once or twice. But if it occurs three times and the victim is still in the relationship, the relationship is considered a battering one. Abuse occurring once or twice could reflect an isolated instance of lack of control or an extreme circumstance. However three instances indicates that the victim has become emotionally, socially, intellectually, economically, or otherwise entrapped by the power-holder.

The Many Aspects of Family Violence

Family violence is more than an isolated slap in the face. While such an act is abusive, the pattern found in violent homes is usually all-encompassing; i.e., it has not only physical, but emotional, economic, social, and sexual aspects.

Typically, the power-holder constructs a rather complete trap for his/her victim. Physical violence is only one aspect of this trap, but it is the aspect which enforces the social, economic, psychological, and sexual control the power-holder wields over the victim.

Physical abuse: pushing, shoving, slapping, biting, kicking, choking, hitting, punching, burning, making threats, throwing things at the victim, abandoning the victim in dangerous places, subjecting the victim to reckless driving, preventing the victim from driving, holding the victim down or locking the victim up to prevent the victim from leaving; denying the victim needed medical attention, etc.

Social battering: not allowing the victim to choose friends; attempting to isolate the victim from others (including family); subjecting the victim to verbal humiliation before, during, or after social events; refusing to attend social functions that the victim wants or needs to attend; using social events as a weapon (e.g., delaying in making commitment to attend, making attendance a reward for compliance to demands, etc.).

Economic abuse: refusing to work or share money; control over family finances, including victim's earnings; control over whether or not the victim works and choice of job; on-the-job harassment; calling the victim's employer and co-workers to make threats or demean the victim; control over the funds for health care, children's needs, family obligations, holiday events, attendance at funerals/weddings, etc.

Emotional abuse: ignoring the victim's feelings, ridiculing or insulting women (or men or children) as a group; insulting the victim's family, friends, appearance, cherished beliefs, religion, race, heritage, or social class or otherwise humiliating the victim; withholding approval or affection as a means of punishing the victim; criticizing the victim frequently; calling the victim names, shouting at the victim; punishing the children when mad at the victim; threatening to kidnap the children if the victim leaves; abusing pets to punish the victim; manipulating the victim with lies and contradictions; making all the decisions, etc.

Sexual Abuse: making demeaning remarks about the victim's gender or sexual desirability; insisting that the victim dress in a more sexual way than the victim wants; minimizing the importance of the victim's feelings about sex; criticizing the victim sexually; forcing sex (especially after a beating or verbal tirade); verbal tirade; withholding sex and affection; insisting on unwanted touching; publically showing interest in other potential sex partners; having affairs

with others after promising monogamy, etc.

Economic Factors

The stereotype of the battering male and abused woman or the abusive parent tends to be of lower income individuals. One reason for this stereotype is that lower income abuse victims come to the attention of social services and the courts more often than wealthier victims. Why? Because wealthier victims can afford private medical care and other help. Wealthier abused persons can also afford to miss days of work after a battering incident (or don't have to work at all), can afford to go to hotels or other cities for refuge, and can be bought off with lavish "honeymoon" presents.

Family violence is no respecter of social class, race, or religion. It occurs in wealthy neighborhoods, as well as poor ones, among the wealthy, as well as the unemployed. Upper class abusers, however, tend to use economic and social battering more frequently than physical battering. And when they do physically batter, they tend to wound their victims in areas of the body where the injuries do not show or where the injuries could be explained by accidents or other phenomenon.

Walker's Cycle Theory of Violence

(Lenore Walker, *The Battered Woman*, 1979, New York: Harper and Row)

One powerful emotional trap is the battering cycle. Lenore Walker, the first psychologist to systematically study violent homes, found that battering is neither random nor constant, especially when the abuse occurs in the context of marriage or a sexual relationship. Instead, in many but not all cases, battering occurs in a repeated pattern, a cycle with three distinct stages:

1. Tension-building stage
2. Acute battering incident
3. Phase of kindness and contrite, loving behavior—the "honey" stage

In Stage 1, the tension-building stage, tensions arise between the partners that ultimately lead to Stage 2, the acute battering incident. Then follows Stage 3, often referred to as the "honeymoon" stage. Typically, in this stage the abuser is loving and kind and promises never again to hurt the victim or in some other way implies that the violence may be over. The abuser's repentance is totally believable, and the victim has true faith that there will be no more violence.

Stage 3 is powerful. In the case of the abused spouse or lover, it is in this stage that the victim's dream of love and romance is renewed. Hence, in hopes that the marriage or relationship

is not really dead, the victim forgives his or her abuser and stays.

In the case of an abused child, it is in this stage that the child's dream of an attentive, affirming parent is revived. Feeling as if a miracle has occurred, the abused child excuses the parent and allows him- or herself to fully love and be open to that parent. Without the shield of hate and anger born of the abuse, the child is vulnerable to the abuser, who can use the child's vulnerability to psychologically manipulate the child for selfish goals.

Stage 3 accounts for the enigmatic ability of victims to minimize painful episodes or to quickly forget them, almost as soon as they occur. The battering cycle disproves the theory that battered adults are masochists who stay in abusive relationships because they like being beat or punished. Most battering victims stay for the kiss, not the fist—for the love and attention of Stage 3, not for the anxiety and physical and emotional pain of the first two stages.

Similarly, incest victims who have difficulty breaking away from their abuser or who have mixed feelings toward their abuser should not be considered "sick." Both abused partners and incest victims may have protective, loving feelings toward their abuser because of the Stage 3 affection the abuser has showered upon them.