
A
psychologist's
perspective
on domestic
violence

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, I've manned suicide, sexual abuse, and domestic violence hotlines; met rape, sexual abuse, and domestic violence victims at the hospital; worked with the police on abuse cases; and placed battered women and their terrified children in safe houses, shelters, and temporary hotel rooms. I have spent an entire day and night at a truck stop with an out-of-state woman seeking safety and sanctuary.

I have also met woman after woman who has walked into my consultation room and told me her story and shown me her bruises as a battered wife or girl friend. When these women cross an imperceptible threshold, there is huge shift in the balance of power in their lives. Now, it is about them and their children. No longer do they want to react; now, with shaking knees, dry mouths, and knotted stomachs, they are ready to take a stand for themselves and for their kids.

These women are ready – yes, they are petrified and, sometimes, paralyzed with fear – to make permanent changes in their lives. No longer do they want to be scared out of their minds and wait for the next crushing blow as their mind scrambles for the right response that would keep them unharmed. They are ready to take a deep breath, a full breath. They are ready to be free.

Domestic violence is universal. It crosses all socioeconomic and educational strata; no one is exempt. It has been a closeted problem. Throughout history, it has, also, been an accepted pattern of male behavior given the belief systems that men owned their women as chattel.

Within this context, I share with you some perspectives from my side of the desk.

ELENA'S RUN FOR FREEDOM IS SHORT-LIVED

Case History:

There is a young Hispanic woman, we'll call her "Elena"; she is quite lovely and very petite – at a distance you could mistake her for a child herself. She has two adorable daughters; the younger one (2) is playful to the nth degree, the clown of the family, and very regressed in her behavior. The older girl (5) is quite serious; she exhibits lots of hypervigilance and nervousness. She watches everything, and misses nothing.

Elena has grabbed her girls and run pell mell out of the house. Her husband had been drinking; he became enraged, increasingly loud, threatening, and, ultimately, physically violent towards his wife. This, unfortunately, was a common pattern, but, that day, Elena does an uncommon thing. She runs for help. Elena wants immediate safety and shelter for herself and her daughters.

From various donated resources, I am able to gather some clothes, personal items -- and diapers, too. The kids are hungry, so as we wait for the go-ahead for a safe place, the family gets a bite to eat and I arrange an emergency, after-hours shelter placement. Admission requires that you never reveal the shelter location – not only to protect yourself, but to ensure the safety of other residents as well.

At the shelter, Elena's kids literally hang on to me; they do not want me to leave. They are frightened and confused. This is the first time their mom has done such a thing. They don't understand sleeping in a strange house with lots of mommies and their kids. And, instinctively, the kids know their mom isn't ok. Not only, does she have large bruises and welts on her face, arms, and legs, she also has a nasty gash on her leg from running into something as she raced out of her home. Elena puts off any medical treatment that night; she just wants to get settled and get her kids to sleep.

Very early the next morning, Elena leaves her sleeping children and walks out of the shelter to call her husband. He appears outside the shelter an hour later, loudly calling for his wife and children. The shelter's cover is blown. Now, everyone in the neighborhood knows this is a safe house. Elena's freedom from violence and abuse is short-lived; she returns to her husband ...for now.

Commentary:

Alas, this happens all too frequently: the wife's fear and programming prevent her from making the break. She feels she has no options. She goes back to the devil she knows; she feels powerless to support and sustain her family. The unknown is terrifying, especially without support of any kind. Elena and her husband are from another country; she has the limited support of a few friends. No one knows what transpires regularly under her roof.

The primary reason women find themselves powerless is because they have little financial wherewithal, which means there are limited options. How can you afford to miss a day of work when a child is sick? Or how can you handle extra medical bills, daycare, or new shoes for growing feet when every nickel counts. Divorce studies indicate that divorce for a woman dramatically decreases her lifestyle. This makes sense given women, historically, have smaller earning power and dads frequently skip out on making their support payments.

Every time a woman steps out of the abusive cycle, she takes one small step towards freedom. Elena was smart enough to ask for help and brave enough to leave. And it takes a certain kind of survival instinct to return to the vengeful wrath of her husband. Hopefully, one day, Elena will feel prepared to leave again, permanently.

JANET'S BREAKING POINT

Case History:

Janet and Frank have been married for 20+ years. They have two teen-aged daughters.

Janet dresses in a very colorful and coordinated fashion; she takes pride in her appearance. She is an attractive woman with shoulder-length black hair and a quick smile, who plays the piano at receptions, weddings, and her local senior center.

Frank manages a construction company. He is accustomed to everyone doing what he wants. Frank is a tall, handsome, perennially-tanned man who has always enjoyed success. He is also a bully and comfortable with using physical force to get what he wants.

Frank beats Janet regularly. He has for years. Janet usually forgives Frank for his “outbursts” and blames herself for his abusive behavior. Their girls know what is going on, but, these days, they side with their father and see everything as their mother’s fault. Their father rewards their allegiance with new clothes and a new car.

The last time Frank beats Janet is late at night in their bedroom. Frank wails on Janet in a blind fury. Janet is repeatedly beaten, smashed, battered, and pummeled with blows to every part of her body. The pain is exhausting; Janet just wants him to stop. She doesn’t care anymore. Frank storms away and leaves Janet in a coiled heap on the floor. Janet pulls the phone to her and whispers a call to 9-1-1 for an ambulance. Janet loses consciousness before the ambulance arrives.

Janet wakes up in the hospital in a full body cast. As she looks at the ceiling day after day, night after night, while trapped in the cast, Janet realizes she can never go back to her husband. It is over; this time, it is really over. He nearly killed her. Janet does not press charges. She does not have the energy to fight anymore. And she is certain Frank would literally kill her if she damaged his standing in the community. All Janet wants is freedom from Frank.

Before Janet leaves the hospital, she meets with an attorney and initiates divorce proceedings. When Janet finally returns home, Frank is no longer there; he has moved out.

Janet is now free. It is an entirely new feeling, and she knows it will take some time to get used to this new life. Coco, her little dog and most faithful friend, sleeps on the corner of the big marital bed, where Janet dreams of her new future.

Commentary:

There comes a time when a line is crossed or, in this case, the last bone is broken and a woman reaches a place where she chooses life -- and chooses herself. For Janet, this was a hard won battle over many years. She moved out of violence and created a new life for herself.

Janet's story gives hope. She inspires women that it is never too late to break free.

NO GUARANTEES

Case History:

A woman calls one evening; we'll call her "Zelka." She is terrified of her husband, who is on another of his many violent rampages. He has a history of physically abusing her, and threatening and shoving the kids if they are in his way. Zelka and her children frequently use the massive dining room table as a barrier. They turn the table on its side to block the doorway and to prevent her husband/their father from getting to them. It has allowed them some small comfort as the husband cannot immediately get to them.

The husband gets so infuriated; he leaves the house and heads to a local bar. Zelka and her children scurry for safety and sleep behind locked doors until the storm passes and her husband chooses to start speaking to Zelka and the kids again.

We explore options for short-term and long-term safety. Zelka feels trapped and hopeless. She is not open to any suggestions; she says she has tried everything.

In the past, she had turned to her family (Zelka is originally from an eastern European country) and told her parents about the abuse in her marriage, their response was "You made your bed." Zelka had (in the past, prior to our call) told her husband that she was going to leave him. Her husband, a successful corporate executive, managed to get a transfer to an Asian capital and told her that he could finagle his citizenship and salary in such a way that she would get nothing.

Zelka is financially dependent on her husband; she is terrified that she would have nothing. Zelka has grown accustomed to the lifestyle that has permitted private schools for her children and a country club membership. She does not want to lose the social gains she has made, nor does she want to experience poverty again. Zelka opts to stay with her husband and travels to Asia. Needless to say, the abuse continued in Asia as well as when they return to the US.

Commentary:

Zelka is an intelligent woman. She wants the best for her children. However, the abuse, her familial history, and her non-existent sense of self have locked her into a prison. Emotionally, she is unable to break free.

Psychologically speaking, Zelka's psyche holds trauma. By that I mean, at a distance she understands what is going on, but in the moment (real or remembered) when her emotions are triggered, she becomes young and powerless. Core emotional aspects of her history are repeated time and time again. Further, each and every time, Zelka endures abuse, her brain records the emotional trauma and the grooves in her limbic system deepen. Each and every trauma experience becomes engraved in a part of Zelka's brain, and this influences Zelka's way of being and reacting.

Zelka coped with her abuse in the best way she could. She created protective strategies for herself and the children within their home. To her credit, Zelka regularly reached out for support and understanding through the domestic violence hot-lines. However, like many women in similar situations, Zelka was paralyzed by fear and unable to move forward in a bigger way.

BUT MOMMY PLEASE

Case History:

Mary Ellen is pregnant with her first child when her husband begins beating her. Mary Ellen feels like she has stepped out of her body and is watching a movie as her husband, Pete, swings at her head and stomach. Pete pins Mary Ellen on the floor and spews hate and vitriol along with his blows. Mary Ellen is stunned and embarrassed; she is terrified she will lose the baby. What did she do to bring this on? Mary Ellen calls home. Her mom tells her to ride it out; surely, this is a onetime thing. Her father says, “It’s your choice. You can come home if you want to.”

According to Mary Ellen, the one thing she and Pete do right is sex. That part of their lives is always good, even after Pete has beaten her. In those intimate moments, Mary Ellen believes that Pete really cares for her and her marriage can work. Mary Ellen stays with Pete. They have three boys.

Over the years, Pete beats Mary Ellen with increasing frequency. And, before Pete can even get to her, Mary Ellen looks in her bathroom mirror and regularly slaps herself in the face, repeating all the nasty and hateful things that Pete has said to her. Mary Ellen knows Pete is right: she is stupid, fat, and lazy. She is garbage; she is lucky Pete puts up with her. Truly, no one else would want her.

As the years go on, Pete lines up his boys and demands military precision as they move about the house and do their assigned chores. His first born son, Andy, bears the brunt of his father’s ire with imperfect children. Mary Ellen watches Andy shut down; he is no longer her happy, sunny son.

One night, the children stand in the doorway of their bedroom and watch in horror as their father beats their mother. Their dad holds their mom by her hair over the banister. Mary Ellen is kicking her legs in the air and screaming in terror. The boys are certain that their mom will fall to her death; they are hysterical. Their dad, then, pulls their mom back over the banister and drags Mary Ellen by her hair down the driveway. Pete throws a screaming Mary Ellen on top of the metal garbage cans. He tells her, once again, that she is garbage.

The boys plead with their mom to leave their dad. The house is under siege. Pete is getting more aggressive with Andy. Pete screams at and berates all three of the boys. He shoves them around and almost tore Andy’s arm out of its socket when Andy did not move fast enough for his father.

Mary Ellen decides to seek help through a community domestic abuse center. The terror of her boys has pushed her into taking action. She can no longer contain, or excuse, Pete's violence.

It takes a number of years -- lots of back and forth, attempted new starts, old habits, and false promises, but Mary Ellen and Pete divorce.

At the urging of her domestic violence center, Mary Ellen begins to speak about her situation to local groups; she becomes a face and a voice for domestic violence in her area. She is overwhelmed to discover that telling her story -- full of tears and survivor humor -- can help other women. Mary Ellen finally feels that maybe she can do something right after all.

One final note: After the divorce, Mary Ellen is driving home from her job at the florist's and wondering what she is going to feed her boys for dinner. She is mentally rummaging through her kitchen cabinets. It's the end of the month; there is little food, and, even, less money. On top of all of this, it is her birthday. She groans to herself. As Mary Ellen gets out of her car, she notices something at her back door. It is a bag of groceries with a bunch of flowers. There is an unsigned note: "I heard you speak last week. Thank you for helping me." Mary Ellen began to sob -- big, fat tears of gratitude.

Commentary:

Mary Ellen's role as a mother is what propelled her to take the leap and make the final break from Pete. Mary Ellen was a product of a generation of women who stood by their men, regardless, and a church that views divorce as a sin. She broke through a number of conventions to be free of the abuse. It was a long and hard-won battle; Mary Ellen never looked back. She says there has been no regret.

Her boys have not forgotten what they endured firsthand; they witnessed the wrath and fury of their father. After the divorce was finalized, the boys refused to see their father for his court-ordered visitation. The judge heard the boys' case and did not force the visitation.

MEN AND ANGER

Men are more physical in the expression of their anger. They often do not tap into their words or emotions. The anger is a pent up energy in their body and calls for release. Some men have not learned how to deal with their anger, so they do what they have seen and/or experienced: they start swinging. There is release and satisfaction, initially; perhaps, even a sense of self justification and righteousness. They have not learned how to manage their anger, deal with their underlying and attendant feelings, and express themselves in non-violent way. These men are repeating the bullying and abusive behaviors that were modeled for them as boys. It is an insidious cycle that ruins lives.

SOCIOPATHS

Not all men who engage in violent behavior are sociopaths, but those with a pervasive and increasingly violent history certainly fit the profile. A sociopath is characterized by the inability to feel compassion, lack of remorse, and a history of manipulative, impulsive, and aggressive behavior.

From a young age, a sociopath will begin to inflict deliberate harm on others, usually starting with animals. Think of the terrible case where the boy put the puppy in the microwave.

Clinically, the sociopath's diagnosis is the Antisocial Personality Disorder (*American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the DSM-IV-TR.*) This disorder is characterized by "...a pervasive pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others that begins in childhood or early adolescence and continues into adulthood."

WHY ARE MEN VIOLENT?

Some possibilities, which, clearly, dovetail one another, include:

- Prior history: These men were on the receiving end of violence in their formative years. This is what they know by experience, hated, and endured. Now, these men pass on their history; they bully, threaten, and abuse the women, children, and pets in their lives.
- There is unresolved anger, lack of anger management skills, increased frustration, and lack of coping skills to deal with life. The world and, more precisely, his world, i.e., his woman, become the target for all his pent-up fury. Everything is a fight.
- There is poor self-esteem and a damaged sense of self which warps the violent man's perceptual view of life. He views everything through the lens of his wounded self. This man sees everything as a threat to his ego. He is always ready to react with some form of violence.
- There is significant substance abuse, especially alcohol, which lowers inhibitions, decreases rational thinking, and increases aggressiveness and impulsivity.
- There is ongoing psychological pathology, i.e., mental illness.
- There is an organic brain trauma, such as a brain tumor.

CHILDREN AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Children are the collateral damage of domestic abuse. Often, the defeated mom can turn into a lioness when her children are threatened. Conversely, there are times when the mom is so paralyzed with her own fears that she can do nothing. The child part of the mom is ashamed, relieved, and guilt-ridden that she is – at that moment – not the target of husband's abuse.

For both kids and moms, physical abuse is the culmination of massive verbal and emotional abuse and cruelty – all of which can warp a psyche for a lifetime. Further, domestic violence is passed down from generation to generation. It becomes the teaching tool to deal with anger, frustration, defeat, poor self-esteem, powerlessness, etc. It is often fueled by alcohol and drug use.

So many clients (both male and female) have told me that they swore to themselves they would never be physically violent with their children and one day, they find themselves in a white rage and see themselves being violent or about to become violent and they are appalled, ashamed, and shocked at their behavior. They hated what their father/mother had done to them. And, yet, that frequently cannot stop them from taking the very actions they hate.

Studies done on imprisoned male alcoholics indicated that the majority had experienced violence in their upbringing and, not surprisingly, these prisoners also had a personal history of being violent with others.

Violence knows no boundaries. By definition, domestic violence is not polite or considerate. It is self-centered rage, fear, and powerlessness exploding and emotionally leaking all over the family.

Bottom line: Abuse in any form (physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, substance) is generational. It takes education, healing, and a willingness to change deeply entrenched patterns and break the cycle. Breaking out of the abuse cycle is a journey of consciousness and extreme courage.

WHY DO WOMEN STAY?

Let us understand this:

Psychology teaches us that we are influenced equally by 1) nature, i.e., our genetic predispositions, and 2) nurture, the context, or garden, if you will, in which we develop; in other words, our family of origin. Many abused women have been battered emotionally, physically, and/or sexually as children. Their sense of self, self-esteem, and self worth are non-existent. Often, their family lives have been chaotic, violent, and crisis-prone with a high incidence of addiction.

Women stay in situations of domestic violence for many complex reasons. There is usually no one reason, but a compilation of history and circumstance. Here are some of the more prominent reasons why women stay with abusive partners:

Security: What would I do? Where would I go? I can't support the children. We will be homeless.

Women stay because there is the foundation and infrastructure of a marriage – no matter how wobbly the marriage might be. There is some degree of financial support and some kind of housing. This provides a measure of comfort and security. A woman can appear normal and high functioning, even if all hell is happening within the four walls of her home.

A mom may think a divorce and the ramifications of a divorce will ruin her children's lives -- perhaps, the way her life was up-ended. She often feels financially dependent, powerless to create change, unable to sustain a lifestyle, and, most likely, defeated because of limited education and work-place training. Further, there can be language barriers and visa issues that can trap a woman into a locked-down, powerless, dependent position.

Learned Helplessness: What's the use? This is the way things are, always were, and always will be. You get used to it. I can handle it.

These women watched their mother or another loved one put up with various physical and emotional blows. They have lived a life of repeated crisis, devastation, and violence. As a result, they have retreated into the safety of their own shell. This type of woman has become numb and grown accustomed to making do with whatever horror has been placed at her feet. She sees this as her lot in life.

There is little sense of self. She is resigned, suffers a chronic, low-grade depression, and frequently a substance abuser. She robotically goes through the motions. She holds precious little hope, and there are certainly no dreams or expectations for a better life. Resignation and passivity are her ways to cope with the flood of ongoing life disasters. She accepts whatever comes her way and has learned to make do ... as she always has done.

Denial: It's not that bad. He didn't mean it. He said he was sorry. He promised he would never do it again. He loves me.

Once upon a time, their husband/partner showed them, in a rare moment, a peek into their vulnerable side. They have seen a glimpse of the core of their man. This woman feels connected to her partner's pain. She understands and believes deeply that her love can make her husband whole as heal his wounds.

This wife holds on to that tiny shred of emotional connection that she translates as love. She builds an out-of-balance and out-of-touch-with-reality picture in her head about her husband and their marriage. She needs to believe her husband. Her emotional safety is predicated on accepting that belief. Further, the woman in denial is unable to deal with the overwhelming reality of her situation. She minimizes the very real danger of her life to handle her fear.

Fear of abandonment: I'm alone. No one loves me. I can't survive alone. I need to be with someone, anyone. Being alone is worse than anything else. I will do anything to avoid being alone.

This wife will not be abandoned. If she is abandoned, it proves that she is basically not ok as a human being. She is flawed and imperfect and simply not loveable -- just as her mom/dad told her growing up. If this wife is abandoned, then, she is unacceptable.

(Abandonment holds true for men as well. They hold on with a vise-like grip and can go wild with jealousy and paranoia; they will not be alone, period. It can become territorial, competitive, and obsessive.)

Her husband says he knows her best, and she has come to believe him. This woman does not trust herself; she has given her power over to her partner. Most likely, she has been isolated from others and her husband has worked on keeping her dependent in all possible ways. She stays in his world and under his control. She becomes a mirror for his projections and a backboard for all of his disappointments and failures.

Broken -- disabled, addicted, or challenged

Beyond the abuse, this woman is disadvantaged in some way. She is physically disabled or damaged.

Or she might be addicted and the drive for her substance of choice overrides the abuse of her husband. All that matters is that her habit gets fed; then, she doesn't feel the pain anyway. The drugs or alcohol keep her mentally and emotionally underwater and, most importantly, dull the psychic and/or physical pain she regularly experiences.

Or this woman might be mentally challenged and easily manipulated. She lacks the mental and emotional wherewithal to negotiate the world alone. Her world is very small; this is all she knows. She is, alas, easy prey for a violent man.

TRAUMA

This woman was abused as a child and/or lived through some horrific experiences. Her sense of safety of what is real or unreal in the world has been seriously altered. She has been manipulated, unconsciously twisted, and her reality has been skewed.

Abuse, threats, bullying, and torture are all too familiar – on both a conscious and unconscious level – to this woman. She has lived through this before. The feelings of past and present overlap and are all too similar. It is difficult for this woman to differentiate between then and now. Is what she is experiencing now, real or a flashback of an old memory? Does she really feel pain or is this a body memory? Is the man who is hurting her now, the same man who hurt her in the past? For this woman, her wounded child aspects will be front and center. This is a painful replay of her past. The trauma sends her careening backwards to her child self. This makes it especially difficult to break out of the tortuous relationship.

There many reasons that men are violent and women stay. These reasons are rooted in generational patterns, psychological predispositions, traumatic histories, and survival fears. With increased education and heightened awareness, this horrific cycle can be healed. The work to move out of a violent relationship requires sheer will, extreme courage, and a belief that a new world is possible.

I applaud each and every woman who has taken the steps out of the violent, suffocating darkness and into the light of a new life and acceptance of self. You are uncommon heroes, and I sing your praises.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

- Protect yourself.
- Protect your children.
- Keep yourself safe.
- Keep yourself sane.
- Avoid crazy-making behavior and high drama.
- Create a plan for safety.
- Get out as soon as you can.
- Get help. No one needs to do this alone. There are community resources, hotlines, shelters, and experienced people who can help you get what you and your children need.
- Learn self defense. You will feel physically and emotionally stronger.
- Be gentle with yourself.
- Work on yourself. Heal the broken parts. Take as much time as you need.
- Speak up and speak out – in your own way – that abuse and violence are never the answer.

THE NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE

THE NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

Or

TTY 1-800-787-3224

- Education
- Resources
- Support
- Help

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adele Ryan McDowell, Ph.D., is a psychologist and writer who came to her current place in life through the frequent and not-so-subtle prodding of the gods. She likes looking at life through the big view finder and is a perpetual student who believes in the power of an open heart, and a good laugh.

Dr. McDowell is a psychotherapist with more than 30 years' experience; a teacher of meditation, intuition development, and psychospiritual issues; an international workshop facilitator; and energy healer. Adele was the director of outpatient treatment at Liberation Clinic, a substance abuse clinic in Stamford, CT. She was founder/director of The Greenheart Center, a holistic, psychotherapeutic, and psycho-educational center in Stamford, Connecticut; creator of Faithwalk™, A Psychospiritual Approach to Transformation; and founder/director of the Institute for the Study of Symbolic and Shamanic Energies.

Adele's work focuses on helping clients find hope and balance in the face of crisis, trauma, and grief. She has worked with suicide, domestic violence, and sexual assault crisis hotlines, survivors of Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, the Joplin Tornado, the Newtown shooting, clients struggling with addiction as well as those moving through profound life changes such as grief and health challenges. Adele's work integrates psychology with spirituality to help clients move through crises and restore balance by accessing core soul issues and to discover, and find comfort in, their authentic selves.

Adele is the author of the Amazon best-selling *Balancing Act: Reflections, Meditations, and Coping Strategies for Today's Fast-Paced Whirl*. Adele is a contributing author to the best-selling Shift Awareness anthologies, *2012: Creating Your Own Shift* and *The Sacred Shift: Co-creating Your Future in a New Renaissance* along with the Australian Alska's anthology, *Love and Oneness*. Adele's next book is *Making Peace with Suicide*.

Adele -- a Texan by birth, upbringing, and pioneering spirit -- lives in Connecticut where you will often find her driving along the highways and byways, singing loudly in her car.

You can learn more about Adele, her writing, and her thinking at www.AdeleRyanMcdowell.com.