

Notes on Abuse in Marriage

From Darby Strickland's "Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse & Helping Victims"

Intro Thoughts

"Abuse is easy to miss, but it is even easier to minimize." (15)

As spiritual leaders within the local church, we need to...

- 1- Learn how to *pick up on cues* that abuse may be occurring.
- 2- Learn how to *draw out stories* to get clarity on different situations.
- 3- Learn how to *provide wise and Christ-centered counsel*.

Important stats to remember:

- 90% of domestic abuse victims are female.
- 1 in 4 women experience severe physical violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.
- Domestic abuse rates are similar *inside* the church as *outside* the church.

Cautions as you get involved in abusive marriages:

- 1- Her communications may be monitored.
- 2- Any confrontation with an oppressor brings the potential for danger to escalate.
- 3- Some situations are so dangerous that law enforcement needs to be involved.

Defining Abuse

Christian marriage should reflect Christ's sacrificial love for the church (Ephesians 5). God commands us to love selflessly, not live selfishly inside marriage (Philippians 2). "*Abuse occurs in a marriage when one spouse pursues their own self-interests by seeking to control and dominate the other through a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors.*" (24) The controlling pattern of behavior is commonly called domestic abuse or domestic violence. The biblical term is *oppression*. There is no place for oppression in marriage.

Note: as we assess marriages for abuse, we must be accurate and careful. Labeling something as abuse when it is not will damage everyone involved. It is wise for spiritual leaders to go slow and compile stories and examples of power and control.

Everyone Involved:

- God (who protects the vulnerable, convicts the guilty, and executes justice)
- Helpers (who desire to help victims stay safe and escape oppression)
- Oppressor (driven by their selfishness and desire to dominate – always deceptive)
- Oppressed (confused, disoriented, afraid, repeatedly victimized)

What God Says About Oppression

- 1- The abuse is not your fault (Mark 7:20-23).
- 2- No one deserves to be treated unjustly (Hebrews 10:17).
- 3- God hates violence (Psalm 11).
- 4- Oppression violates God's design for marriage (Gen 2, Eph 5, Col 3, 1 Thess 5).
- 5- God sees your suffering (Eccl 4:1, Isa 53:3).
- 6- God desires to rescue you (Ezek 34:22, Ex 3:7-8, Luke 4:18).

The Helper's Calling

- 1- Listen carefully.
- 2- Show compassion.
- 3- Ask good questions.
- 4- Be patient.
- 5- Expect confusion.
- 6- Acknowledge your limitations.
- 7- Rest in the Lord.
- 8- Connect victims to Christ.

The Dynamics of Abuse

“Much confusion related to abuse comes down to misunderstandings about why a person acts oppressively toward another. It is vital to understand that toxic *entitlement* is at the core of oppression. Oppressors are so invested in their own needs that they believe that the primary reason other people exist is to fulfill their demands.” (65)

Key Belief #1: It's All About Me

Key Belief #2: You and I Need to Listen Only to Me

Key Belief #3: Rules are Not For Me to Follow: They are to Keep Me Happy

Key Belief #4: My Anger is Justified

Key Belief #5: Other People Attack Me

Key Belief #6: I Don't Have to Appreciate What You Do, But I Demand that You Appreciate What I do

At the core, entitled people have a worship problem.

Understanding the Impact of Abuse

“Someone who is married to an oppressor does not have a marriage that is characterized by trust, care, and honesty. It is characterized by domination and fear. This is not God's design for marriage; it is enslavement.” (82)

Common effects of being controlled by an oppressive spouse:

- Physical anguish
- Shame
- Faith struggles
- Hypervigilance
- Intrusions
- Avoidance
- Overwhelmed emotions
- Blaming the victim

Helping the Oppressed

Invite the victim to speak. Ask good questions. Follow these principles:

1. Express concern gently.

2. Acknowledge that her oppressor is not one-dimensional.
3. Keep to her pace.
4. Foster her agency.
5. Encourage her small steps of faith.
6. Help her to build a care team.
7. Believe what she tells you.
8. Take her abuse seriously.
9. Consider that she may be watched and monitored.
10. Handle her information with confidentiality.
11. Inform her about the limits of your confidentiality.
12. Help her to make a safety plan.
13. Check in periodically to see if the abuse is escalating.
14. Support her as she shares her story with others.
15. Be patient as she decides what to do.
16. Be careful not to push her to leave before she is ready.
17. Focus your criticism on her oppressor's behavior, not his person.
18. Do not excuse abusive behavior.
19. Remember that you are not an expert.

“It is more dangerous for a woman to leave abuse and then return to it. Abuse always intensifies after a failed separation.” (115)

FORMS of ABUSE

Uncovering Physical Abuse

Definition: “Physical abuse involves intentionally or recklessly using physical force in a way that *may* result in bodily injury or physical pain. It also includes actions that lead to harm – such as refusing someone sleep or medical care.” (127)

Physical abuse *is just one form of coercive control*. Physical abuse is not caused when a husband “loses control.” Rather it is a way to maintain control.

Helping the physically oppressed:

- Ask questions that uncover physical abuse
- Make sense of what you hear (take careful notes)
- Help victims see that the violence is purposeful
- Be alert after incidents of physical violence
- Watch out for false repentance
- Assess the severity of the abuse

“It seems harsh to say it, but it needs to be said: the tears and apologies of an oppressive husband are usually meant to exert further control.” (139)

Uncovering Sexual Abuse

Definition: “Marital sexual abuse is a broad term that can encompass many heinous and exploitive acts. The worst violations occur when sex is demanded, required, or taken by force. Sexual abuse can be manipulative and coercive.” (151)

Sexual abuse includes:

- Unrelenting pressure
- Callous disregard
- Unwanted acts
- Coercion and control
- Degradation
- Accusations of affairs
- Technological abuses
- Direct physical violations

Helping the sexually oppressed:

- Speak beautiful truths over her shame
- Lament together
- Connect God to her story
- Be mindful of your role
- Involve the necessary authorities*
- Connect her to resources

Uncovering Emotional Abuse

Definition: “Emotional abuse, which can also be categorized as *mental, verbal, or psychological abuse*, is a pattern of behavior that promotes a destructive sense of fear, obligation, shame, or guilt in a victim. Emotionally oppressive people seek to dominate their spouses, and they do by employing a variety of tactics. They may neglect, frighten, isolate, belittle, exploit, play mind games with, lie to, blame, shame, or threaten their spouses.” (178)

Emotional abusers most often use their words to...

- Reject
- Degrade
- Terrorize
- Isolate
- Exploit
- Accuse
- Oppose
- Deflect
- Belittle

Key forms of emotional abuse to watch out for:

- 1- Extreme neglect (opposite of love is not hatred or anger, it is indifference)
- 2- Gaslighting (making the spouse doubt their perceptions, memory, and even sanity)

Helping the Emotionally Oppressed

- Document what is happening
- Correctly identify the problem
- Assess the severity of the abuse (spectrum on pages 192-193)
- Look for the source of a victim’s anger
- Reorient victim to biblical truths

- Help victim to make the right connections
- Learn victims' story

Uncovering Spiritual Abuse

Definition: "Spiritual abuse occurs when an oppressor establishes control and domination by using Scripture, doctrine, or his "leadership role" as weapons. This form of abuse can be subtle because it can mask itself as religious practice. Spiritual abuse is a close cousin to emotional abuse, except it is more profoundly wounding, as it often leaves victims isolated from God." (212)

Spiritually oppressive husbands...

- 1- Overemphasize their authority
- 2- Are image-conscious
- 3- Are paranoid
- 4- Suppress criticism
- 5- Have unbalanced theology
- 6- Have lower standards for themselves than for others.
- 7- Are not teachable.
- 8- Are legalistic.
- 9- Often do not submit to authority.
- 10- Use fear as a motivation.

Uncovering Financial Abuse

Definition: "Financial abuse is a way of controlling a person by making her economically dependent or exploiting her resources. Forms of financial abuse may be subtle or overt. They include concealing financial information, limiting a victim's access to assets, controlling her ability to acquire money, exploiting her resources, or dictating how all family funds are spent." (235)

Financial abuse occurs in almost every domestic abuse situation. The Center for Financial Security found that 99% of domestic violence cases also involved financial abuse.

Helping the financially oppressed:

- 1- Be careful as you discover financial abuse (every couple argues about money)
- 2- Seek documentation of financial abuse
- 3- Help a victim to overcome dependence
- 4- Enlist help
- 5- Uncover a victim's fears
- 6- Restore her agency
- 7- Help her seek God's help

HELPING ABUSE VICTIMS

Helping Mothers and Children

Reminder: "We need to be alert to where a victim's children are and what they are doing when abuse is taking place in their home. More than that, we need to recognize that abuse always has an impact on children. Almost half of children who witness domestic violence try to intervene in some way." (254)

Here are some of the messages that oppressors might passively communicate to children:

- Violence solves problems and accomplishes goals.
- Men and women do not have the same value.
- Violence is normal and is a valid way to express frustration and anger.
- Leadership looks like domination and pride (not like leading and serving).
- Shaming another person is an effective means of getting your way.
- People are not to be trusted.
- Nonconsensual sexual contact is acceptable.
- Sex is a tool for negotiating safety and solving problems.
- Destroying the property of another is an acceptable way of expressing yourself and controlling that person.
- Appeasement helps you to survive and stay safe.

Domestic abuse has short-term and long-term impacts on the health and development of children.

Warning: “Children remain at risk even during a separation or after a divorce. Many abusive fathers have custody of their children and continue to parent them with an oppressive disposition. As their marriages are threatened, their desire for control often increases. Hence, during a separation, an oppressor’s abusive behavior typically increases.” (266)

Helping oppressed mothers and children:

- 1- Tend to the mother-child relationship
- 2- Ask and answer questions
- 3- Lead courageously
- 4- Emphasize that the abuse is not the child’s fault
- 5- Cultivate calm
- 6- Unburden your children
- 7- Protect your children

Supporting Steps Toward Freedom

As we help abuse victims find safety and freedom AND work to restore healthy marriages, we need to remember these impact dynamics...

- 1- “It is rare for someone to repent of oppression – it is hard to give up all the privileges that come with having your kingdom the way you want it. Even when repentance does, by God’s grace, take place, it is slow – often taking years.” (282)
- 2- “There is no fixed timeline for walking through these things; there is no flowchart to follow. Each victim is different, and each situation unfolds differently. *Victims often need lots of time in order to work out what they should do.*” (284)
- 3- “Abuse victims often think they are the ones who are destroying their marriages. But that is a lie. Their husbands’ unrepentant and oppressive hearts have already ravaged their relationship.” (284)
- 4- “Victims are the ones who have to live with the choices that they make. And the reality is that none of these choices come without great hardship. I often tell women, “you have to pick your pain.” That is not a great reality to face, I know; but it is honest.” (285)
- 5- “An abuser will often act in volatile ways in order to retain his power over a victim as she prepares to leave. She will need to be ready to take measures to enforce her physical safety.” (292)

Remember: God hates oppression and abuse in marriage. He promises to execute justice for the oppressed and to set the prisoner free. God is a righteous judge who loves his daughters and deals justly with wickedness.

What does *true repentance look like in the life of an abusive spouse?*

- He provides a thoroughly detailed confession of his many abuses – without blame-shifting, making excuses, minimizing the abuse, or questioning his victim’s memory. He continually makes new connections and adds to his list of confessions.
- As he attempts to change, he comes forward and confesses his ongoing missteps and mentions times when he returns to being abusive.
- He admits that the ways in which he related to his wife were wrong and without excuse. He acknowledges that his behavior was his choice and that he was seeking control.
- He can talk about the damage he has done to his wife and family in detail while exhibiting grief and empathy for them (not just sorrow over being caught or facing the consequences).
- He is able to list the things he feels entitled to and tie them to the behavior and the ways he has punished his wife. He is willing to give up his preferences and privileges in concrete ways over a sustained period of time.
- He actively pursues the fruit of the Spirit and seeks to live in a new way, even when he is frustrated, inconvenienced, and angry.
- He is willing to be patient with his wife, build trust with her, and seek to make amends with her for the damage he has done – no matter how long it takes. He is not pressure her because he wants everything to get back to normal.
- He is willing to be accountable to others and submit to church leadership. He stays in counseling and is willing to do the work that others think he needs to do. He does not try to control or manipulate the plan given to him.
- He commits to giving up the privileges that building his kingdom has brought him. He is willing to be a servant leader and Christlike in his home.

Practical Resources

- Abuse Victims need a Safety Plan
- Local women’s shelter (Hope Alliance)
- Detect abusive patterns in dating