

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC ABUSERS¹

Domestic Abuse: Coercive Controlling Violence

Dynamics

Domestic abuse is ongoing, purposeful behavior that is aimed at dominating one's partner, and often one's children as well.² It is also referred to as coercive controlling violence³ or simply, coercive control.⁴

Context

Social norms and unequal distribution of resources (income, education, employment political power, etc.) lead some individuals to feel entitled to control their partner. In heterosexual relationships, the norms and inequality are largely, but not entirely, gender-related.

Gender of perpetrators

What coercive control looks like

Domestic abuse involves repeated, ongoing, intentional control tactics used by one partner against the other. Those tactics may be physical, sexual, economic, psychological, legal, institutional, or all of the above. They often include:

- ✓Unreasonable and non-negotiable demands.
- ✓Stalking – surveillance and unwanted contact.
- ✓Cruelty.
- ✓Destroying the partner's other relationships and isolating her/him from friends, family members, co-workers and others.
- ✓Restricting daily activities.
- ✓Coercion – a combination of demands, threats of negative consequences for noncompliance, and surveillance.⁵
- ✓Manipulation through minimization, denial, lies, promises, etc.
- ✓Threats and intimidation.
- ✓Excuses, rationalizations and blame.

1 Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, New York State.

2 Johnson, M.P. (2008). *A Typology of Domestic Violence: Intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

3 Kelly & Johnson, (2008).

4 Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, Oxford University Press, refers to this behavior as coercive control, p 387.

5 Dutton, M.A., Goodman, L. & Schmidt, R.J. (2006). [Development and Validation of a Coercive Control Measure for Intimate Partner Violence: Final Technical Report](#). National Institute of Justice.

- ✓Stifling the partner's independence.
- ✓Controlling partner's access to information and services.
- ✓Sexual abuse and violence; reproductive coercion.⁶
- ✓Economic control and exploitation.
- ✓Identity abuse.
- ✓Physical violence – which can range from minor to lethal. The physical violence typical of abuse is more frequent and severe than that typical of situational violence.^{7,8}
- ✓Deprivation of liberty, equality and personhood;⁹ treating their partner and children as objects.¹⁰
- ✓Extreme jealousy, possessiveness and ridiculous accusations of infidelity. (Abusers often imagine that their partner is cheating, and jealousy and suspicion are the usual motivations of men who murder a current or former partner.)
- ✓Punishing the partner and children for infractions (and imaginary infractions) of their rules.
- ✓Ignoring their partner's needs, opinions and feelings, and the harm that their behavior does to her/him.
- ✓Separation violence.

Note:

Domestic abuse is unlikely to end just because the victim ends the relationship. It often continues or escalates at separation, as a continuation of coercive control. In fact, many murders of abused women occur during or after separation, when the abuser feels the victim is escaping his/her control, and tries to re-establish it. But domestic abuse is not caused by separation,¹¹ and thinking that it is can lead us to grossly underestimate the danger to the victim. Unlike people who abuse their partners, those who engage only in separation-related violence are typically ashamed of what they have done, and stop after one or two episodes.

6 Moore, A.M., Frohwirth, L. & Miller, E. (2010). Male reproductive control of women who have experienced intimate partner violence in the United States, Guttmacher Institute.

7 Kelly & Johnson (2008).

8 “[N]onviolent control tactics may be effective without the use of violence (especially if there has been a history of violence in the past)... Johnson (2008) has recently argued for the recognition of “incipient” Coercive Controlling Violence (cases in which there is a clear pattern of power and control but not yet any physical violence), and Stark (2007) contends...that the focus in the law should shift from the violence itself to the coercive control as a “liberty crime.” Ibid., p 481-482.

9 Stark (2007), refers to this behavior as coercive control, p 387.

10 Bancroft, L. & Silverman, J.G. (2002a). *The Batterer as a Parent*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

11 Ibid. True separation-related violence is unexpected violence by a previously nonviolent partner – usually the one who is being left.

Consequences to victims:

- Injuries – minor to severe – are highly likely.
- Stress-related illnesses; long-term disabilities.
- Unwanted pregnancies.
- Lost work time, unemployment, poverty.
- Loss of children, harm to children, parenting difficulties.
- PTSD, depression, substance abuse.

Implications for intervention:

Victims need domestic violence services, safety planning, orders of protection, and support. Victims should not have to deal with their partner's domestic abuse all by themselves.

Abusers

How we *understand* domestic violence shapes how we *intervene*.

- If we see domestic abuse as simply problematic individual behavior, driven by mental health problems or substance abuse, we look for ways to respond therapeutically to the individual.
- If we see it as attitude-driven and socially reinforced, we look for social changes that make it less likely.
- If we see it as essentially a crime, we look for criminal justice solutions.
- And if we are not clear about why abusers act as they do, we are likely to take potshots at the problem – and risk doing more harm than good.

Why Would Anyone Abuse Their Partner?

Coercive control gives abusers many unearned benefits, large and small, at the expense of their partner and children.^{12 13} Gaining access to those benefits is abusers' goal.¹⁴

12 At a social level, privilege works in similar ways to maintain the power of men, wealthy people, able-bodied people, heterosexuals, white people, etc.

13 Bancroft, L. (2002). *Why Does He Do That? Inside the minds of angry and controlling men*. NY: Putnam's.

14 Jacobson, N.S. & Gottman, J.M. (1998) *When Men Batter Women*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Those benefits include:

- Being able to do as they please.
- Getting their partner to comply with their demands, cater to them, and let them have their way.
- Gaining unlimited access to partner's money, time, attention, caretaking, labor and sexuality.
- Stopping their partner from:
 - Hurting, betraying, or cheating on them.
 - Arguing with them; trying to have a voice in decisions, or expecting them to compromise.
 - Making demands on them (e.g., to do household chores).
 - Disclosing their abuse to others.
- Keeping their partner's life centered around them.
- Having a safe outlet for anger and other feelings.

People often speak of domestic abuse as “a choice” but, in reality, abusers make many choices over a long period of time – choices that stem from the belief that abusive behavior is a legitimate way to create and maintain their “rightful” position of power and privilege within their family¹⁵ - i.e., that they are *entitled* to act as they do. (Domestic abusers who have non-domestic criminal histories also often think using violence is legitimate in other contexts.) At its root, domestic abuse is motivated by the desire to gain and keep control,¹⁶ and the individual makes hundreds of small choices about how to continue controlling his/her partner. (One reason more men than women abuse their partners may be that men more often have power over a partner that they see as worth defending, but the feeling of entitlement is also influenced by other attitudes, values, perceptions and feelings, and by what the individual learned while growing up.)

15 Pence E. & Paymar, M. (1993). Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model, p 7.

16 Dasgupta, S.D., (2001). Towards an understanding of women's use of non-lethal violence in intimate heterosexual relationships.

Implications for intervention

Because domestic abuse is largely driven by attitudes and social inequality, therapeutic efforts to stop it are largely unsuccessful. Mental health and substance abuse treatment cannot effectively address either abusers' belief that they have the right to use violence to get what they want or the social inequality that supports those beliefs. Yet abusers, especially those who also have mental health problems, are often sent to some sort of mental health treatment, either individually or in a batterer program.

In addition, the subjects that mental health treatment is likely to address often have little or no relationship to domestic abuse:

- Factors the abuser can't control that "cause" the abusive behavior.
- The individual's feelings and needs.
- Conflict in the relationship.
- The victim's partner's faults, problems or provocative behavior.
- Incidents of physical violence – rather than the pattern of control.
- Coping skills and communication.

Many of the social underpinnings of domestic abuse, such as male dominance, can't be "treated" at all, as they are not the sort of individual problems that clinicians work on. For instance, you can't "treat:"

- A man's belief that he owns his partner and is entitled to run her life.
- The fact that someone sees their partner as an object.
- A man's belief that his partner is "less than" he is.

Entitlement attitudes are very hard to change – especially ones that are longstanding and culturally supported, and that benefit the individual who holds them. Treatment providers can, and should, challenge these beliefs, but they are not just matters of individual motivation or pathology.

Common Excuses for Domestic Abuse

All abusers look for *something* to blame their behavior on. Common excuses that abusers give for their behavior include:

- Anger
- Substance abuse
- Childhood victimization or exposure to violence
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Traumatic brain injury

Things to remember about these excuses

- These problems usually do not lead directly to physical violence, but even when they do, they don't cause anyone to engage in coercive control.
- Any of these concerns may need attention in their own right, but they do not excuse coercion and cruelty.
- If an individual's physical violence *really* results from one of these issues, not from underlying entitlement attitudes, it is likely that:
 - There will be other signs of the problem besides physical violence.
 - The individual does not feel entitled to be violent, and would stop if he/she could.
 - The pattern of behavior is very different from the pattern of coercive control. Because of this, it is misleading to label violent or aggressive behavior related to these factors "domestic violence."
- Family members are not specifically *targeted*, though they may be assaulted more often than other people simply because of their proximity to the individual. They may need safety plans, but they rarely need to *hide* from the individual for their safety.

Why do these excuses work so well for abusers?

- People who abuse their partners are skilled manipulators. Family, friends, police officers, judges and service providers get taken in and miss what is truly going on.
- Their partners are often looking for something – *anything* – that will help make sense of the abusive behavior.
- We don't distinguish very well between domestic abuse and responsive or **situational** violence.
- We mistake correlation (two things frequently happening together) for causation (one thing causing the other). For instance, because domestic abuse and substance use often occur together, many people mistakenly assume that the substance use causes the domestic abuse – and that attending to the substance use will stop the domestic abuse .
- We look only at physical violence, and ignore...
 - Abusers' non-domestic criminal histories.
 - Abusers' attitudes of entitlement – which easily co-exist with other problems that an individual may have.
 - How abusers behave when they are *not* experiencing the problem (e.g., when they are *not* intoxicated or angry).
 - How abusers use their other problems – and their engagement in treatment for them – as weapons of control.
 - The social context (peer support for attributing violence to intoxication, social attitudes about male/female relationships, etc.).

Implications for Intervention

Victims may remain in a relationship with an abusive partner longer than they otherwise would, if they think their partner is “getting help.” This can put the victim in further danger, and allow the abuser to avoid one logical result of abusive behavior – losing the relationship.

Some interventions miss the point, or frame the problem of domestic abuse in a way that hands the abuser an *additional* excuse for abusive communication with their partners is often skillfully manipulative and destructive; like most people, they become skilled at doing what they value doing. They also are good at convincing other people – including judges and therapists – to see things their way.

- *He/she fears abandonment.* When abuser's partner tries to leave, the abuser's behavior represents a reaction to loss of control, not just to loss of love. And he/she is likely to either quickly go on to abuse another partner, or try to get the previous partner back under control.
- *It's a dysfunctional relationship.* This phrase implies that the cause of the problem lies with both people, and unfairly requires victims to make behavior changes in order to not be abused. But victims try all the time to do what their partners want so that they will treat them better, and abusers seldom change their behavior in return. Victims choose to leave or stay with an abusive partner, get or drop an order of protection, or cooperate with prosecution or not, but none of these can be relied on to persuade the abuser to stop his/her behavior.^{17,18}

The bottom line is that any intervention can potentially increase the abuser's control and further endanger the victim (e.g., couple counseling).

17 Klein, A., Wilson, D., Crowe, A., & DeMichele, M. (2005). Evaluation of the Rhode Island Probation Specialized Domestic Violence Supervision Unit, National Institute of Justice.

18 Buzawa, E., Hotaling, G., Klein, A. & Byrnes, J. (1999). Response to domestic violence in a pro-active court setting, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.