

MINISTERING TO WOMEN EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC ABUSE

A Paper

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Domestic abuse in the home can exist unseen in the lives of friends and families. The victim is left with a perplexing range of emotions that keep her tied to the one who is hurting her and often times prevent her from reaching out. As a part of the body of Christ, it is vital to be aware of the reality of domestic abuse in families both inside and outside the church community. Having an understanding of the characteristics of domestic abuse can be extremely helpful in seeking to minister to women and families who are affected.

Abuse is the single major cause of injury to women in the United States (Womack). Recognizing domestic abuse and ministering to those involved is not easily apparent. In some situations, it requires a trained eye. Contrary to a common understanding, domestic abuse is not simply battering physically. It can also include verbal, psychological, financial, sexual, property, and spiritual abuse (Womack). Basically abuse comes down to one person exerting a measure of power and control upon another person (Womack).

In studying this situation, I found that many of the resources involved case studies, sometimes quite lengthy and detailed. As I reviewed them, I began to detect patterns. Often the stories of the different abusive relationships did not begin with violence. Warning signs may or may not have existed and if they did, they were not recognized.

As the abuse begins, the victim often experiences denial that abuse is truly

occurring (Strom 43). This denial and confusion is intensified due to the cycle that is characteristic of domestic abuse. Understanding the cycle of abuse is very important for one attempting to minister to a woman in this situation.

The cycle of abuse can be described with differing amount of detail depending on what resource is consulted. I will use Stacey Womack's presentation in class to outline a more detailed cycle of abuse. The cycle begins with the act of abuse in which the abuser exerts power and control over the victim. After the abuse, there is a stage of guilt in which the abuser may feel remorse or concern in being caught. Often it is this that convinces the victim to stay, forgive, and give another chance. After this phase, the abuser will begin to rationalize the abuse, placing some of the fault onto the victim for doing or not doing something. What follows is a "normal" phase in which the couple exists in a tense state of pretending everything is okay. This normal phase can seem somewhat peaceful, but it truly not normal because certain subjects still cannot be dialogued with the abuser (Womack).

The normal phase ends as the abuser expounds on the rationalizations preciously made to build a case as to why it is permissible to enter into the same abusive behavior. After building a case, the abuser moves forward to plan how he will respond if the victim steps over the lines he has rationalized. Sometimes, there will even be a setup in which the victim has no choice but to act in ways that will start the cycle over again with the abusive act (Womack).

Lenore Walker in her text Battered Women presents 9 common characteristics of battered women based on a study taken in preparation of writing the book. The characteristics include low self-esteem, believes myths about a battering relationship,

believes in traditional sex roles in marriage, accepts responsibility for the batterer's actions, feels guilty and denies terror and anger that she feels, presents passive face to the world but has strength to manipulate environment for prevention of violence, has severe stress reactions, uses sex to establish intimacy, and believes that no one can help her resolve the predicament except herself (Walker 31). Based on my research, I agree that these characteristics are evident in the case studies reviewed.

The emotions that a woman goes through during this cycle are complex and difficult to understand without having a background in the domestic abuse cycle. They include feelings of helplessness, shame, responsibility, and suppressed anger (Strom). While there are certainly complex and unique reasons why women stay in each situation of domestic abuse, Ginny NiCarthy writes of the cycle of a woman taking on the responsibility to give of herself to help her abusive husband (NiCarthy 11). This is a powerful reason that women stay in abusive situations. It also helps us to understand women's emotions behind the cycle of domestic abuse. In particular, when the spouse is in the rationalization phase, the woman is apt to have these feelings of responsibility intensified.

As was the example of "Claire" in Esther Lee Olsen's book No Place to Hide a personal value of the importance of keeping a marriage together influenced the victim's hesitation in seeking help and taking safe options for the victim and the children. In the ministry to a woman and her husband who are active church attendees, there are some things that must be addressed. With good motives, a fellow believer may approach the situation with an emphasis on the woman's biblical role of submission to her husband. Ephesians 5 does speak clearly about the differing roles of men and women in a

marriage relationship, but this passage must be handled carefully when dealing with a situation in which the woman's life may be at stake.

Lessons from Hagar

Someone ministering to a woman involved in a domestic abuse situation might turn to the story of Hagar to find help from Scripture in how to minister God's love and help. Hagar's story is found in Genesis, an Egyptian slave who was the mistress of Sarai. Sarai gave Hagar to Abram to become his wife and to bear him a child. After the child was born, Hagar was treated very poorly by Sarai. Abram, whose child she bore, did not protect her. Instead, she was given over to Sarai to treat as she would so choose. A pregnant Hagar ran away due to the poor treatment she received from Sarai, but after an encounter with God, returned to live with Abram and Sarai until the birth of Isaac. After Isaac's birth, Hagar was permanently sent away with her son Ishmael.

Hagar was in a very difficult position and likely experienced a range of emotions similar to that of a woman in a domestic abuse situation. Perhaps these emotions included feelings of hopelessness, frustration, anger, loneliness, isolation, and pain. What is of incredible significance to she who seeks to minister to a woman in a domestic abuse situation is the way in which God interacts with Hagar throughout her painful experience.

When Hagar left the first time, the Lord found her in the desert and comforted her with the angel of the Lord. She was given a promise that her son was to be called Ishmael. In the words of Hagar, God *saw* her and *looked after her* (Gen 16:13). God saw Hagar who was mistreated and abused and without a voice of her own. We can make the connection that God is a God who sees our condition, even when no one else

understands. In ministry, what encouragement can be found to both the victim of domestic abuse and she who is ministering that God sees and looks after those who are mistreated.

Later when Hagar is sent away the second time after the birth of Isaac, God not only saw Hagar and Ishmael, but provided for their needs. It is also noted that God “was with” the boy Ishmael as he grew (Gen 21:20). Again, these are two important attributes of God’s character that can be of encouragement. God provides and God is with those in need who look to him for help.

How to minister to women in domestic abuse

In researching this topic, I read three texts, two of which emphasized a woman’s personal experience with domestic abuse. I would highly recommend reading a book that narrates a woman’s personal experience. In particular, No Place to Hide by Ester Lee Olson was a vivid and authentic narrative of a woman’s personal journey to finding a solution to domestic abuse.

When I read these case studies, I feel that I stepped away with not only an understanding of what a woman experiences, but also an ability to empathize with a woman enduring such abuse. The case studies connected me to some of the emotions that a woman must experience when walking in such a circumstance. In addition to the empathetic perspective that came with reading case studies, I found that they also provided the paradigm to understand the cycle of domestic abuse.

Receiving the information that a woman is dealing with domestic abuse can be overwhelming. Stacey Womack gave excellent tips on how to approach a woman who is in domestic abuse. I found them to be practical, sensitive, and accurate to the

additional texts I consulted for research on domestic abuse. First and foremost, one ministering to a woman in pain must understand that listening carefully and believing what she says is an incredibly helpful approach strategy. It must be understood that a woman in domestic abuse is likely fearful and perhaps conditioned to not believe the situation herself. One ministering must be careful to encourage communication of the situation rather than cut it off (Womack).

If the minister is quick to enter into the emotions, it may perpetuate the helpless feeling of the victim. It is more helpful to remain empathetically calm so that the victim feels safe expressing her emotions without being carried away in them. The victim will be looking for answers. Especially if the situation has gone on for a long time, the victim will likely do quite well with instructions she is to follow or a person to whom she is to submit. This must not be the case in the ministering. It is essential that the woman be given options for *her* to make the decision. With the decision making there is a sense of empowerment that comes which will increase her ability to continue to make decisions for her well-being. Respect must be shown for the women in domestic abuse. When she makes a decision that perhaps is not wise to the onlooker, cease to heap judgment on her, for what she is experiencing is very difficult. She needs a steady support more than someone who criticizes and backs away in reaction to her “wrong” choices (Womack).

It is of great importance that the responsibility is not placed on the wife to submit more or to change her actions. The act of abuse is not the victim’s fault. It is the use of force by the abuser to establish power and control over the victim. Listen and encourage the victim to share, but do not seek to judge the situation or get the

husband's side of the story. Domestic abuse is more than marital conflict. It is an issue that requires careful protection of the victim as she struggles through how to make a good decision (Womack).

Likely the most important part of ministering to a victim of domestic abuse is the act of being there for her. More than good advice, she needs the presence of supportive individuals. Kay Marshall Storm in her book In the Name of Submission suggests the victim to seek out the counsel and prayer support of 2-3 people.

Based on the preceding "Do's and Don't" reviewed from Stacey's presentation, I believe that the first step to take when you suspect domestic abuse is to build a trusting friendship with the woman and then to ask questions and listen. If she denies it, remain calm and reinforce that if she ever wants to talk about it, you are available and want to be a support in the best way possible.

The primary focus that must be taken is to ensure the safety of the woman and if applicable, of her children as well. Every text I reviewed recommended separation as a good option for women in a domestic abuse situation. Separation does not mean divorce. It can be the safest step for women in danger and often makes way for changed behaviors that may not be able to occur otherwise. Establishing a safety plan is essential with information about the safe place that the victim will go to and what she will take. Having a written out plan is an important step in establishing a realistic safety plan (Womack, NiCarthy).

Significant issues confront a woman in domestic abuse and it may become important for a woman to seek out not only the support and advice from friends, but the help of a professional counselor. In whatever form of abuse the woman is

encountering, the psychological ramifications are significant. If the woman does seek out counsel, it will be important for the woman to assess if the counselor is trained in counseling victims of domestic violence (Storm 45).

The book Getting Free by Ginny NiCarthy provided very practical step that can be taken to ensure safety. NiCarthy states that when the abuse occurs, the victim ought to seek out medical treatment so that the evidence of abuse is documented. Also, the victim is to utilize the help of the law enforcement. A restraining order can be sought out to protect the woman from further attack upon separation (NiCarthy).

The progress of the victim and the abuser can vary greatly. Can the abuser truly change? It is possible as the real life example that Olsen gives in her book No Place to Hide. As presented in class, the ministry of ARMS (Abuse Recovery Ministry and Services) has a branch that works with the abusers as part of a court ordered service. An important step for ministry to the abuser is holding him accountable, not allowing the focus to be on his partner's faults, and encouraging regular weekly meetings with a mentor (Womack).

After taking into consideration and observing the specific recommendations as appropriate for ministering to a woman experiencing domestic abuse, it is of the utmost importance that there be fellowship, support, and prayer to help the woman heal. The road to recovery for the abuser, the victim, and if possible the marriage is neither simple nor without complications. It can be, in fact, a complex and demanding process. We can be assured that God cares about those in need just as he cared for Hagar in the desert and that He has chosen to not only provide ministry through His Holy Spirit, but through His body, the church to bring about restoration and healing.

References

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