

THE WOUNDS OF ABUSE: Can We Do More?

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If ever we needed informed and accountable pastors before, we surely do need them now.

Mary had something important to tell her husband, John, but she had to build up the courage to say it. Finally, she told him that she had been thinking about going back to school for further education. “Why would you even consider that?” he yelled. “You failed the last courses you took, so you’re obviously not going to make it this time. You are stupid. You’ll never last through the program, and we’re not wasting our money on that.” While the conversation resulted in no thrown punches, it produced wounds. It was a classic example of emotional abuse in marriage. The sad thing is, spouses such as Mary may have no idea they are in an abusive relationship—let alone know what to do about it.

Pastors are the spiritual leaders of their congregations and have the responsibility to model what Jesus, the Good Shepherd, would do in ministering with compassion to survivors both in their church and in the community. There is scientific evidence that survivors may talk to their pastors before they talk to anyone else about their abuse. I have seen it firsthand. My brother is a pastor, our father is a pastor, and our grandfather was a pastor. Yet Justin Holcomb and Lindsey Holcomb state that while “many victims believe clergy have the most potential to help them,’ in fact ‘[clergy] are too often the least helpful and sometimes even harmful.’”¹

With their actions, pastors can either be agents of healing or unintentionally contribute to the continued perpetration of abuse, depending on how they respond. If they have a vision, they will (a) help build resilience among survivors by empowering them in their distress, and (b) assist in prevention by taking the time to learn about abuse.

TYPES OF ABUSE

Although violence affects everyone, women, children, and the elderly seem to bear the brunt of nonfatal physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Consider the rates of various types of abuse:

- One in four adults reports having been physically abused as a child.
- One in five women reports having been sexually abused as a child.
- One in three women has been a victim of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in her lifetime.
- One in seventeen older adults reported abuse in the past month.²

- Women report higher rates of lifetime exposure to rape, physical violence, and stalking than do men.³

COMMON YET UNRECOGNIZED

Even though the harm of physical and sexual abuse is immediately evident, psychological abuse is less recognized and discussed—and often downplayed. Someone may say, “But he or she never hits me. Is his or her behavior really abusive?” Well—yes, it is!

Psychological abuse is not only real but has lasting consequences. The scars of physical abuse may heal quickly, but the invisible ones of emotional abuse can take longer—if they ever heal. Emotional abuse can destroy one’s self-worth and result in shame and low self-esteem. Unfortunately, the most common form of emotional abuse is verbal abuse, and it often goes unrecognized as abuse.

RECOGNIZING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

When we talk about emotional abuse, we must take into consideration a number of important questions. Would you recognize emotional abuse? How would you respond if someone psychologically abused you? What does the Bible say about it? As we consider such questions, we must make it clear that although women tend to experience higher rates of sexual and physical abuse than men, research in the United States of America suggests that in the case of emotional abuse, the rates are similar for both genders.

In a survey conducted in the United States, 8,079 men and 9,970 women responded to questions about abuse they had experienced in the previous twelve months and also their lifetime exposure to abuse. Almost one-half (just over 48 percent) of each gender reported psychological aggression through verbal aggression or coercive control during their lifetime.⁴

Differences show up in the form of emotional abuse. More women than men experience verbal or expressive aggression from their intimate partner, but both genders reported coercive control by their mate at a rate of 4 in 10 people. The truth is that both men and women perpetrate high rates of emotional or verbal abuse toward their partners.

The study also revealed the forms of emotional abuse. The most commonly reported types of verbal aggression for both genders are being called ugly, fat, crazy, or stupid and being humiliated, insulted, or ridiculed. The most frequent type of psychological aggression used for both men and women is coercive control involving the demand to know her or his whereabouts at all times.

Women more often find themselves required to report their whereabouts to their mate, while men more frequently endure insults. They also report witnessing their partner becoming angry in such a way that it seemed threatening.

THE PREVALENCE OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE AMONG CHRISTIANS

Unfortunately, Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, are not immune to this behavior. Although we do not currently have data on emotional abuse by an intimate partner among a large sample of Adventist adults, the Adventist Health Study-2 did conduct an analysis exploring the prevalence of emotional abuse during childhood among 10,283 Seventh-day Adventist adults in North America participating in the research.⁵ In this study, 39 percent of females and 35 percent of males reported experiencing emotional abuse by their parent (father or mother) before the age of 18. Exposure to such abuse had a negative impact on their physical and mental health regardless of their age, gender, social status, income, and lifestyle choices, such as healthy eating or exercise. Being a definite concern, it raises questions about the parenting practices that may be detrimental and long lasting.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE VERSUS CONFLICT

In order to recognize an abusive relationship, it is important to differentiate between abuse and normal conflict. Conflict is common in a marriage or in other relationships and does not necessarily mean abuse. People need to have their own opinions and be free to share them. But the way one expresses his or her opinion is key.

According to an expert, "It is not emotionally abusive to break up with a partner. It is not emotionally abusive to argue with your partner. It is not emotionally abusive when someone reacts to what you have done with hurt. People react out of their own perceptions, so their reactions do not define your behavior. It is also not emotional abuse to speak one's mind with blunt honesty. Perhaps the statement lacks tact, but it is not emotionally abusive. Again, just because someone reacts to what has been said with hurt does not mean that one has been emotionally abused."⁶

Emotional abuse, however, involves intentional dominance. The person chooses that behavior in order to have power and keep the other under control.

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE RESPOND IF THEY ARE BEING PSYCHOLOGICALLY ABUSED

It is important to confront the abuser kindly but firmly. Here are five ways someone experiencing emotional abuse can respond:

Study the emotionally abusive tactics and learn to be assertive. Abusers use abuse as a tactic to manipulate and dominate others. Focusing on the content makes one fall into the trap of trying to respond rationally, of denying accusations, and trying to explain oneself. Unfortunately, the abuser has won at that point and deflected any responsibility for the verbal abuse.

Set healthy boundaries. Even Christ felt the need to set boundaries in His life. We should do the same. God gave each one of us our own individuality, so we must not be afraid to confront abuse or to set limits as to how much we will tolerate. In some cases, we can best address verbal abuse with forceful statements such as, “Don’t talk to me that way,” “That’s demeaning,” “Don’t call me names,” or “Don’t raise your voice at me.” Should the abuser respond with, “Or what?” one can say, “I will not continue this conversation.”⁷

Build your self-worth and self-respect. Abuse can slowly chip away at self-esteem. Usually, both the abuser and the victim have experienced shaming in childhood and already have impaired self-esteem. It is important for the abused person to remember that it is not their fault. The Bible contains many wonderful reminders of how precious we are. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again” (Jeremiah 31:3, NIV).

Seek help from a professional counselor. If one is in immediate danger, calling the police or a crisis number is imperative. But if the situation is not so threatening, it is important to reach out to a trusted friend or family member, therapist, pastor, volunteer with an abuse shelter, or domestic violence hotline. Confronting an abuser, especially in a long-term relationship, can be challenging. Seeking individual therapy and counseling is key.⁸ But it is not advisable to start counseling as a couple at this stage because it can be unsafe for the abused to tell the counselor the whole truth with the abuser present.

Seek comfort, healing, and wisdom from God. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter and will guide us in all wisdom and truth. He can not only warm our hearts with God’s love in a healing way but also teach us what words to say to someone who is abusive. Because Jesus suffered all forms of abuse, including psychological and emotional, He understands. He says, “I know your tears; I also have wept. The griefs that lie too deep to be breathed into any human ear, I know. Think not that you are desolate and forsaken. Though your pain touches no responsive chord in any heart on earth, look unto Me, and live.”⁹

CAN WE DO MORE?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has for years led a public health campaign against violence and abuse called **enditnow®** (enditnow.org). It started originally with a focus on women and girls and has moved to a more global focus on violence and abuse against anyone: male, female, young, and old. Every year the church has in its global calendar an abuse prevention day called **enditnow®** Emphasis Day (women.adventist.org/enditnow-day), and faith leaders from many denominations have shared how these materials have been a blessing to them also. Yet, we are often reminded of how much we still can do as pastors and church leaders to raise awareness, prevent abuse, and help survivors.

Too many still live under the unhealthy control of an intimate partner, parent, child, boss, pastor, teacher, or someone else who employs sexual, physical, or emotional abuse without

recognizing it as such. Too many who do recognize it and try to get help by speaking to a pastor, church leader, or fellow member still may not find appropriate, well-informed help and, instead, may find themselves blamed for their situation or told to pray about it. Too many still remain indifferent, unaware, or unintentionally blind to the needs of survivors or perpetrators who are desperately seeking hope and healing for their brokenness.

What if every congregation had an **enditnow**® coordinator who is knowledgeable about abuse and, working with the pastor, could engage the church in prevention and assistance for those in need? What if every seminary student and pastor could receive training in basic knowledge about abuse and how best to help a survivor as well as a perpetrator? And what if in every church, pastors, leaders or members would hold an annual **enditnow**® Emphasis Day, using the resources prepared to bless not only church members but also the surrounding community?

There is so much more we can do, and every pastor, church leader, and member must assess how they can make a difference. Doing more takes leaders and members with compassion, intentionality, and a willingness to inspire and empower others. We must not grow weary but continue to make our presence felt in words and action as we learn together and bring to light forms of abuse that dehumanize others.

THE HEALTH FACTOR

Why should we do more? Many of God's children are either dying or suffering in their health and well-being as a result of violence and abuse. Health authorities tell us that 1.3 million people die worldwide each year as a result of violence in all its forms: collective (as in the case of gangs or war), self-directed (suicide), or interpersonal (such as domestic violence).¹⁰ Such deaths account for 2.5 percent of global mortality each year. During the first 15 years of the twenty-first century, about six million people perished worldwide from incidents of interpersonal violence alone.

But in addition to death, many are victims of nonfatal violence each day. They are survivors of interpersonal violence (physical, sexual, and psychological abuse or neglect). Nonfatal interpersonal violence is more common than homicide and has serious, lifelong health and social consequences. The wounds of interpersonal violence survivors may not be visible but are felt deeply and, consequently, can be crippling and long-lasting.¹¹

THE INCARNATION FACTOR

Perhaps the most important reason to do more is that we are God's hands and feet in this world, called to represent His love and healing power and serve others as He did. Jesus summons us to treat each other with love and respect when He says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34, 35, NKJV). In a congregation of believers that share His good news, the gospel urges us to be

agents of healing and support: “Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble” (1 Peter 3:8, NIV).

Therefore, it is our duty as pastors and church leaders to continue reaching out to abuse survivors with compassion—as Jesus did—doing what we can to prevent and appropriately deal with abuse and violence in all its forms. Jesus said, “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, NKJV). Can you do more?

NOTES:

¹ Rachel Marie Stone, “The Bible’s Unequivocal ‘No’ to Domestic Violence,” *Christianity Today*, May 22, 2014, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/may/bibles-unequivocal-no-to-domestic-violence.html.

² World Health Organization, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and United Nations Development Program, *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2014) vii,viii, who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/status_report/2014/report/report/en/.

³ See Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, “Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics,” accessed Oct. 7, 2018, www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence.

⁴ CDC National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2010 Summary Report, accessed Mar. 2, 2018, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf.

⁵ Katia G. Reinert et al., “Gender and Race Variations of the Intersection of Religious Involvement, Early Trauma and Adult Health,” *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 47, no. 4 (July 15, 2015): 318–327, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26077834. The 10,283 participants included 6,946 women and 3,333 men.

⁶ Andrea Mathews, “When Is It Emotional Abuse? Differentiate Between What Is Emotionally Abusive, and What Isn’t,” *Psychology Today*, Sept. 26, 2016, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/traversing-the-inner-terrain/201609/when-is-it-emotional-abuse.

⁷ See Darlene Lancer, “Forms of Emotional and Verbal Abuse You May Be Overlooking,” *Psychology Today*, Apr. 3, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/toxic-relationships/201704/forms-emotional-and-verbal-abuse-you-may-be-overlooking>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 483.

¹⁰ World Health Organization, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and United Nations Development Program, *Global Status Report*, 2.

¹¹ See *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014*, World Health Organization, 2, who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/status_report/2014/report/report/en/