

A Rabbi's Introduction to Domestic Violence

What Is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence or abuse refers to a pattern of coercive behavior used to establish power and control over a partner in an intimate relationship. The abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional, or economic. It may be frequent or infrequent, severe or subtle. In general, domestic violence tends to escalate in severity and frequency over time.

What Are the Causes of Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a learned behavior. Historically, violence against women and children has largely been ignored or condoned by society. Common myths about the causes of domestic violence include the following:

- **Myth:** *Alcohol or drug problems are the cause.*

Although abusers may also have drug or alcohol problems, there is no causal relationship between the two. They are separate problems and each must be addressed independently.

- **Myth:** *Temporary anger and loss of control are the cause.*

The abuser may or may not be angry prior to the use of physical force or other coercion. Domestic violence is an established pattern of power and control exercised by the abuser to maintain dominance.

- **Myth:** *Problems in the relationship and/or the victim's behavior are the cause.*

The abuser may attempt to use relationship issues or behavior of the victim as an excuse for his violence, but the issue is his behavior. This is why couples counseling, communications workshops or marriage enrichment programs are not effective in ending abuse; they may actually increase the danger to the partner being abused.

Who Are the Victims of Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence affects people in all racial/ethnic, socio-economic, religious, geographic, and occupational groups. Women are victims of domestic violence more often than men. The U.S. Department of Justice statistics for 2001 reflect that women accounted for 85% of the victims of intimate partner violence.

Does Domestic Violence Exist in Jewish Communities?

For too long, the existence of domestic violence in Jewish communities has been a secret.

The importance of family values in Judaism, the widespread belief that no Jewish husband would harm his wife, and (until recently) the lack of publicity and awareness about abuse in Jewish communities have reinforced this silence and have further entrapped Jewish battered women. Studies indicate that domestic violence occurs in Jewish communities (within all streams of Judaism) at a rate similar to the general population. It is important to point out, however, that Jewish communities have begun to respond to domestic violence.

How Are Jewish Communities Responding?

There are over 60 Jewish domestic violence agencies in the U.S. For a listing, see www.jwi.org. Many synagogues are providing resources to assist women in obtaining help. Increasingly, rabbis are educating themselves about domestic violence so that they can play a leadership role in raising awareness, making appropriate referrals, and working with others to develop a community response.

What Can Rabbis Do?

Here are some suggestions that rabbis have found helpful in working with abused women:

- Listen to her and believe her. Support and respect her choices. Know that it is her choice whether to stay in the relationship or leave. Be aware that the risk of lethality increases as women disclose abuse to others and/or separate from their partner.
- Acknowledge that the abuse is not her fault and that no one deserves to be abused.
- Know your local resources and give her referral information. Primary resources are battered women's services or shelters. The National Domestic Violence Hotline can provide local numbers: 800-799-SAFE (7233) and 800-787-3224 (TDD).
- Encourage her to speak with a domestic violence advocate about safety. Safety planning might include her setting aside some money, copies of important papers, etc. in a safe place; a plan about how to exit the house the next time the abuser is violent; and considerations of what to do about the children if they are at school, asleep, etc.
- Help her with any religious concerns she may have. Remind her that abuse does happen in Jewish homes and that it is not her fault. Assure her of God's love and presence and of your commitment to walk with her. Pray with her -- offer prayers of healing such as the Mi Shebeirach. Support her in using traditional Jewish rituals as forms of healing from abuse. Support her in making sense of her relationship with God.
- Protect her confidentiality. This is key to ensuring safety for her and her children. Do not try to talk to the abuser or approach him to ask for "his side of the story." Do not give information about her or her whereabouts to the abuser or to others who might pass information on to him. Do not discuss this information with the congregation's staff, board members or committee members who might inadvertently pass it on to the abuser. Do not give information about her to *anybody* without her explicit permission.

- If she decides to separate and/or divorce, support her and help her to mourn the loss of the relationship. If she chooses, talk with her about obtaining a *get* (a Jewish divorce) and/or facilitate a ritual of release.
- Offer yourself and your community as a system of safety and support for her children.
- It is especially important that you not minimize the danger to her, nor encourage her to forgive him and take him back, nor recommend couples counseling.

How Can Rabbis Help Prevent Domestic Violence?

Rabbis can help by becoming educated about available community services, speaking out against domestic violence from the pulpit, partnering with other agencies and communal organizations, raising awareness in the synagogue, promoting curricula for youth groups that address healthy relationships, routinely offering pre-marital counseling that screens for the presence of domestic violence, teaching nonviolent conflict resolution and equality, and creating a community of justice and healing. For educational resources, see www.faithtrustinstitute.org.