Twenve million women in the United States—a staggering 25 percent of all American women—will be abused by an intimate partner in their lifetimes, according to a recent article in the Hawaii Medical Journal. An estimated two million women in this country are assaulted by an intimate partner every year. The actual numbers are probably much higher because the victims (whom I also refer to as “survivors”) often remain silent, fearing both the stigma associated with abuse and the threat of further violence from the perpetrators. In addition, because verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse don’t leave physical marks, they may be overlooked or dismissed as “not that bad” by caregivers and even by victims themselves. But the pain caused by harsh, sexist language meant to break the spirit is just as real as the pain caused by fists.

Domestic violence is as ancient as the family unit itself. Over the past few years, however, professionals from numerous fields have begun discussing the connections between domestic violence and what victims and perpetrators are taught in their faith communities about the roles of women and men in the home and society in general. Some men claim that their abusive behavior is justified by a faith that has taught them that God gives them authority over their female partners. Similarly, some women tolerate abuse because of religious instruction to submit to male partners.

This was amplified for me not long ago when five women—all of them nurses—visited my office before the start of her shift, asking that I pray for her care of patients, their families, and our colleagues. She’s respected throughout the hospital and in the community for her compassion, dedication, honesty, and skills. She’s been married to her husband, Rich, for sixteen years. They both attend church regularly. Kara and Rich have a teenage son, and Kara describes her husband and son as “the great loves of my life.”

When Kara came to see me, she made a request that she hadn’t made before. “Reverend Al, please pray that I will become a better and smarter wife,” she pleaded in a strained voice. Immediately, I was filled with strong concern for Kara’s safety. My work with victims of domestic abuse caused me to suspect that someone (I guessed Kara’s husband) had been blaming her for his own inadequacies. I asked Kara to elaborate on her request.

Trying not to cry, Kara gradually disclosed that she thought her “stupidity” was causing her marriage to fall apart. She told me she felt she was to blame for her husband saying and doing things he didn’t really mean. She said that she needed to try harder, both as a Christian and as a wife, “to become more intelligent.”

I asked Kara to say more. Unable to hold back her emotions, Kara burst into tears, saying, “Last night I overcooked Rich’s steak. It was so stupid of me; I can’t do anything right. After sixteen years of marriage, you’d think a wife would know that her husband likes medium-rare, not well-done, meat.”

According to Kara, Rich then called her a “fat, stupid whore,” threw the steak in the trash, and left home to eat supper at a nearby restaurant. And this wasn’t the first time Rich had emotionally and verbally abused his wife. Kara said he’d often derided her for being overweight, and

One of these women has given me permission to share her story with you (although I’ve changed her name and certain aspects of her story to protect her anonymity). It’s her hope and mine that it will help you to empower victims of domestic violence who have internalized a faith-based rationalization for their abuse.

**Kara’s story**

Kara has been a medical-surgical nurse at our medical center for over twenty years. A devout Christian, she often visits my office before the start of her shift, asking that I pray for her care of patients, their families, and our colleagues. She’d respected throughout the hospital and in the community for her compassion, dedication, honesty, and skills. She’s been married to her husband, Rich, for sixteen years. They both attend church regularly. Kara and Rich have a teenage son, and Kara describes her husband and son as “the great loves of my life.”

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A sensitive response can make a huge difference to a survivor as she struggles to regain a sense of herself and trust in others. It may help to keep the following points in mind when caring for anyone who is being or has been abused.

- **Listen to and believe victims’ stories.** It takes a lot of courage for a victim of domestic violence to tell her story. The fear of not being believed, or of being blamed for the abuse, can be overwhelming. (Disbelief and blame are common reactions.) If you seem uninterested in or unbelieving of a survivor's story, she may feel even more fearful, isolated, and violated. It's often helpful to maintain eye contact while listening, and to reiterate that no one deserves to be abused.

- **Avoid asking a victim for more details about the abuse than she’s offering.** Questions might indicate that you don’t believe her story, or may appear voyeuristic.

- **Refrain from telling a victim how she should feel about the perpetrator.** Allow the victim to express anger, hatred, love, rage, remorse, or any other emotion she may have toward her abuser, without challenging or questioning it. Otherwise, you may give the impression that you think what she feels is wrong, or that you’re defending or justifying the perpetrator’s behavior. At the same time, avoid offering personal opinions about the perpetrator. These judgments could stifle the victim’s ability to come forward.

- **Don’t try to pressure a victim into leaving her abuser.** Sometimes, concerned friends or caregivers will make statements like “The guy’s a jerk—if he were treating me the way he treats you, I’d have left a long time ago” or “Just think of what the abuse is doing to your children. You owe it to them to get out of that situation.” The intention is good, but often such statements add to the pressure victims already feel. Remember, most professionals in the field note that victims of domestic violence don’t want to leave their perpetrators. They simply want the abuse to stop. Research has shown that even when victims do want to leave, it usually takes several attempts to do so. Adding to the victim’s burden won’t help her.

- **Make referrals.** Establish a list of domestic violence resources in your area, such as crisis hot lines, women’s shelters, support groups, therapists, and clinically trained clergy. (If you want to learn more, they can help, as well.) (See “Resources,” p. 12.)

- **A final warning.** Scriptures are often misinterpreted; inappropriate “religious” advice may be given. Be aware of statements such as “Although this experience is terrible, it’ll make you a stronger Christian” and “All humans make mistakes; you must forgive your perpetrator.”

Had told her in abusive language that he no longer found her attractive. Kara admitted that her husband’s words hurt her deeply. Still, she blamed herself for his behavior.

“It’s all my fault,” she explained. “If I were a better wife, if I weren’t overweight and so stupid, Rich would have no need to say such awful things to me. Besides, he always apologizes afterwards and buys me orchids. He says that, as a Christian wife, I must forgive him.” Rich also told Kara that he preferred not to treat her the way he had, but that it was his “Christian duty to take authority” over her and to “correct” her when she was wrong.

“`My husband says the Bible demands a man to rule over his wife,” Kara concluded. “So when I’m out of line, or do stupid things, Rich has to put me in my place. Otherwise, he says, he’s not truly a man of God.”

**A chaplain’s response**

Unfortunately, Kara’s story isn’t unique. Most victims of domestic violence are blamed by their perpetrators or others for their own abuse, or they fault themselves—a problem that’s often exacerbated by skewed religious teachings.

In my experience as a hospital chaplain, I’ve known many survivors of domestic abuse who continue to affirm the overall value of their faith. Few, however, say that this faith has helped them overcome the abuse. In fact, several women have told me that responses from spiritual leaders and laypeople have interfered with their healing process. Statements like the following, often couched as advice, can echo the perpetrator’s justification: “Submit to your husband—he’s the head of you, as Christ is the head of the church”; “The wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does”; “God will never give more than you can handle”; “Divorce is a sin.”

I remained silent for several moments after Kara finished speaking, maintaining eye contact with her. She was crying, and, recognizing the therapeutic value of tears, I didn’t want to interrupt too quickly. Besides, I needed time to collect my thoughts. As a pastor, it’s important that I avoid coming across as judgmental of either victims or perpetrators. When I finally spoke, I thanked Kara for telling me her story, and said how sorry I was that she was suffering such emotional and verbal abuse from Rich. I chose my words carefully: Victims often feel as though they’ve done something to deserve punishment. Identifying the behavior as abuse and the perpetrator as an abuser often reduces a victim’s tendency to blame herself.

I told Kara that the abuse had nothing to do with whether or not she was a good wife, Christian, or cook; nor did it have anything to do with her weight or intellectual capacity. I said no one deserved to be called the hostile and vile names Rich had called her. As her minister, I felt I could tell her that his actions were in clear violation of how Scripture instructs husbands to treat their wives. I encouraged Kara to contact a colleague of mine who runs a shelter for abused and battered women. (See “How to Help,” above.)

Kara said she appreciated the referral; but she was initially hesitant to seek further help. She was afraid that Rich would find out, and she feared his response. Like many victims, she minimized the effect her husband’s abuse was having on her. Because Rich had never hit or raped her, she felt that what he’d done wasn’t really abuse. After several more episodes, though, Kara called the shelter. She currently participates in a weekly support group for domestic violence survivors, which the shelter sponsors.

Knowing how important Kara’s faith was to her, I asked permission to contact her pastor. Before referring either Kara or Rich to him, I wanted to meet with him in person. Spiritual leaders can give victims a tremendous amount of support as they challenge their abusers. Those with little knowledge of or experience in working with victims of
domestic violence, however, often say or do things that contribute to the blaming of victims and the excusing of perpetrators.

Fortunately, Kara’s pastor had training in working with victims of abuse. When he met with her, he reiterated that she’d done nothing to deserve the abuse Rich was inflicting. He assured her that God loved her exactly the way she was. He later met with Rich and confronted him about his abusive behavior, and strongly encouraged Rich to seek both spiritual counseling from him and psychological counseling from a professional therapist. Like most perpetrators, Rich was initially resistant. The pastor then told Rich that his actions not only hurt Kara and their son, but also went against the teachings of God. Reluctantly, after several more sessions, Rich consented to his pastor’s suggestions. He is currently receiving both psychological and spiritual counseling. Kara and Rich are still living together, but Kara remains cautious, knowing that it’s been only a short time since her husband’s treatment began.

**Separating fact from myth**

Many people have misconceptions about domestic violence. They may erroneously believe that:

- survivors exaggerate the extent of their abuse;
- adult victims remain in the home because they condone the violence against them;
- men are victimized as often as women;
- physical and sexual abuse are the only types of violence in the home;
- domestic violence is found only among certain cultural, racial, and socioeconomic groups;
- people who work with victims of domestic violence are too knowledgeable to be victimized themselves;
- perpetrators’ “bad days” or “bad moods” are the cause of their violent behavior;
- survivors need only prayer and God to be freed from domestic violence.

In truth, domestic violence occurs in all cultures, races, and socioeconomic groups. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “intimate violence” is primarily a crime against women—in 1996, three of every four victims of intimate murder and 85 percent of the victims of nonlethal intimate violence were female. The vast majority of abusers are adult or teenage males.

Physical and sexual abuse are the most frequently discussed forms of abuse; but when someone calls another degrading names, leers, threatens, makes negative comments about appearance or another attribute, tries to coerce another, or attempts to elicit guilt or shame, this is emotional or verbal abuse.

Victims rarely lie about domestic violence or exaggerate its scope. In my view—one that is supported by many experts—they tend to deny or minimize the abuse that occurs. Some people may feel guilt or shame about being in an abusive relationship; some are afraid that disclosing the abuse will lead to more punishment or even death. They expend a lot of energy concealing the abuse and trying to please the abuser. But survivors soon discover that the abuse usually doesn’t stop without intervention.

**“My husband says the Bible demands a man to rule over his wife. So when I’m out of line, or do stupid things, my husband has to put me in my place.”**

Many victims stay in abusive relationships because, over time, they’ve become financially and psychologically dependent on the abusers. They may believe that they’re the cause of the abuse, and the perpetrators may reinforce this thinking.

Abusers are found in every socioeconomic group. They look and behave (at least in public) the same as other people do. And they seldom take responsibility for their violence. Instead, they blame alcohol, drugs, bad moods, work, or their victims. Perpetrators are often so insecure that they attempt to control their victims with violence. They need help in order to correct their damaging behavior. If left untreated, their violence usually escalates.

**No more “righteous” excuses**

A survivor faces many complex issues. Often, she has to live with multiple effects of one or more forms of abuse—physical, psychological, sexual, verbal—by her intimate partner. She may also face the stigma associated with being in an abusive relationship; the feeling that she’s done something either to cause or to deserve punishment; and the possibility that she won’t be believed, or will be blamed, if she discloses the abuse. Pressure from her faith community to accept her situation instead of “breaking up” her home adds to this burden, and may contribute to keeping her in grave danger.

The sacred text has been the source of forgiveness, freedom, love, and reconciliation for countless people. Yet
there’s no doubt that the Scriptures are often misinterpreted, and that misguided religious views have added to the pain and hopelessness that victims feel. The time is long overdue for all of us to challenge any scriptural teaching that twists words in ways that encourage or excuse domestic violence.

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