

## **Safe, at Last**

### **How You Can Help a Friend in Domestic Abuse**

By Lucy Ann Moll

“I’M NOT GOING back to him, ever,” Sue\* sobbed.

Two weeks later she changed her mind, left the safety of a friend’s home and returned to Mike\*, her abuser. She brought back their three children, too. Several times she has left him. Every time she went back, believing in her heart that her husband of ten years would make good on his promise to never hit her or their children again or call them demeaning names. He broke each promise.

(\*Starred names have been changed.)

Sue fits the classic description of a woman who’s suffered domestic violence. Likewise, her husband, Mike, is a textbook case of an abuser.

### **What Is Domestic Violence?**

Domestic violence goes by many names: wife beating, battering, family violence, domestic abuse. They mean the same thing – the abuse by one person, almost always the man (in over 90 percent of domestic violence cases, estimates show) – toward another in an intimate relationship. He employs various forms of violence to establish power and control over her. (Here we’ll consider domestic violence between a man and a woman – married, cohabitating or dating. There are other types, such as elder abuse.)

The three main types of violence.

- Physical violence: hitting, punching, kicking, choking, burning, shoving, biting, pinching and other acts to purposely injure.
- Emotional abuse: name-calling; comments designed to shame, belittle, demean or mentally hurt another person; threats; stalking; lying; screaming; silent treatment; withholding money and affection; forbidding contact with friends and family; flaunting infidelity; hurting or threatening children or pets; ridiculing her most valued beliefs.
- Sexual abuse: forcing one's wife/girlfriend to have sex or participate in sexual acts that make she finds unpleasant or frightening; forcing her to have sex with others or watch others have sex; sadism; anything that makes her feel violated.

Let it be said from the outset that domestic violence is a complex issue. It affects poor and wealthy, highly educated and uneducated, atheists and evangelicals (like Sue and Mike), white and black, Hispanic and Asian. Yet women in abusive relationships share defining characteristics.

### **The Woman in an Abusive Relationship**

First, let's state the obvious. Women who suffer domestic violence do not want to be abused physically, emotionally or sexually. They are not responsible for the abuse. Abusers are responsible for their own actions.

Here are her defining characteristics:

- She truly loves the part of her partner that is not abusive.

- She believes and hopes he'll get better and that being committed to someone means you stay through the good and the bad.
- She feels sorry for him.
- She believes her children need a father.
- She cannot financially support herself and her children without his income.
- Staying is more comfortable than the unknown of being alone.
- She doesn't know how to get out and stay out safely.
- And, probably most important, she has experienced so little control over her life within the abusive relationship that she now feels powerless to change.

Most abused women who finally leave their abuser have left him several times. Yet many never leave. Some are killed. In fact, a woman's risk of fatal injury is increased by 1,100 percent after she leaves her abuser, according to one statistic. Death is the ultimate form of control.

### **The Cycle of Violence**

Professionals who work with battered women have identified three stages in the "cycle of violence" that typifies the homes of domestic violence.

*First, the tension-building stage.*

The woman and her children feel like they need to walk on egg shells as he begins to show signs relatively minor signs of violence (is irritable, cusses, yells, hits walls, throws objects). He blames something or someone else for his actions. He sees her at fault. She anxiously looks for ways to smooth things over, so he won't become violent.

In the story of Sue and Mike, name-calling and cussing were common in the tension-building stage, and she tried to keep the kids quiet and do nothing to aggravate him. Sometimes he punched a wall.

*Second, the acute battering stage.*

Though he has control over his behavior, he chooses to exert control over her in ways that may seem unpredictable to her. This is one way he keeps her off-balance. She doesn't know what to expect. She has no control over what he'll do to her or for how long. She senses that if she fights back, the beating will be worse. She is terrified and paralyzed with fear.

Mike grabbed and shoved Sue, hit her with his fists, slapped her and kicked her while yelling threats at her and calling her horrible names. Sue says even worse than the abuse she experienced was witnessing Mike hurt their children.

His favorite victim was Josh,\* who now is seven years old. Sue said a social worker noted that Josh shows signs of shaken baby syndrome. Another technique Mike used on Josh was holding his head under water until he passed out, then when he regained consciousness, Mike would do it again and again. "I felt helpless to do anything," Sue said.

*Third, the honeymoon phase.*

After the storm of violence, he apologizes for the beating and promises to repeat it and believes he won't. He tells her how much he needs her and loves her. He may be so convincing that she gives him another chance. The relationship feels right again, as it did when they first began dating. "What occurs during this stage bonds them together like glue," writes Susan Brewster in *To Be an Anchor in the Storm, A Guide for Families and Friends of Abused Women*.

She continues, “The cycle repeats itself again and again, usually becoming more frequent and more severe over time. In an ongoing relationship there is virtually no such thing as one violent incident.”

As so it was for Sue and Mike. He promised he would never hurt her again, she believed him and the cycle of violence continued, until finally one day, she had had enough. She was afraid the social services would take her children from her. “I couldn’t let him hurt the kids anymore,” she said. “Adam,\* age 9, begged me to leave him.” The youngest, Annie, was just 2 years old and cowered when Mike came near her. The police had been called to the house numerous times.

### **A Safe Hope**

With the support of family, Sue made a plan to leave. She consulted an attorney who works with domestic abuse victims and began separation proceedings. Then she secretly packed their clothes and hid them, stashed some cash, gathered their important papers, and set the escape date. She said she felt scared and hopeful – scared because she didn’t want to get caught by Mike, hopeful because she sensed a way out.

When the escape date arrived, she waited for her husband to leave for work; then she packed the car with their suitcases, put the youngest in her car seat, got her two older children from school, and drove her minivan straight to a friend’s home, where she was expected.

Now, eight months later, Sue says she and her kids feel safe. She is in counseling, as are her two boys. However, Mike has custody of the children every other weekend during their separation. This causes Sue anxiety. And for good reason. At a recent visit, although Mike did

not hit Josh, he took his one of his toys and slammed it against the wall. It broke to pieces. Sue said Josh cried and cried about it.

Sue also has faced the sticky issue of pursuing divorce, though she knows God hates divorce. This is how one Christian website approaches this dilemma: “Certainly, if your life or your children’s lives are in danger, the Lord would want you to protect yourself. The Lord desires peace not anger and strife in relationships, and He forbids people from endangering another person’s life. Leviticus 19:16: ‘Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the Lord.’ And Proverbs 22:24 says: ‘Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered.’”

However, if the husband sincerely desires change and works with a pastor or church leader on his control issues, then the wife may want to consider resuming the relationship, but only after several months, because batterers are known to be believable liars.

Sue says she feels peace in her heart that divorce is best for her family. Her husband shows little desire to change, and she wants to do everything she can to protect her children. She hopes the courts will grant her request that Mike have only supervised visits with the children when their divorce becomes final. However, her attorney has said this is unlikely, even though the violence against her and the children has been documented.

“I’m a wreck when they’re with him,” she says. “I try not to worry and believe that God is in control, but I don’t want them abused. The law’s not fair. I try to do my best to help them. And I pray.”

### **Ministering to a Battered Woman**

A battered woman needs an accurate picture of God. Unlike the abusive husband/boyfriend, God by His nature is completely trustworthy, loving, tender, gentle, caring, protective, and all-good. Unlike the abusive husband/boyfriend, God cannot lie, for He is Truth. Unlike the abusive husband/boyfriend, God is light. There are no dark deeds behind closed doors. No reason to fear.

She needs to be reminded of these truths often. The abusive relationship has turned her world upside down. She has believed lies for so long – “you can’t do anything right,” “you’re lazy,” “you’re nothing” – that she needs to hear the truth in Scripture, in the Bible, through music, in a Christian small group, from the pulpit and from her friends.

A helpful Bible story:

1 Samuel 25 – The story of Abigail, whose drunken husband, Nabal, pridefully refused to compensate David and his men for their work, endangering the lives of the household until Abigail intervened. A key verse in this passage is: “May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name – his name is Fool, and folly goes with him” (1 Samuel 25:25). Another is: “Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart failed him and he became like a stone.

About ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died.”

These verses show the benefits of being assertive, as was Abigail, and the sovereignty of God, who protected her.

Others verses that give hope and encouragement to battered women do not specifically address domestic violence. Among them are:

- “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” *Isaiah 40:29*

- “He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” *Matthew 9:36*
- “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” *Psalms 23:1*
- “You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall and like the heat of the desert.” *Isaiah 25:4*
- “The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.” *Psalms 9:9*
- “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” *Psalms 139:14*
- “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.” *Isaiah 61:1-4*

## **Other Ways to Help**

DO listen to her story and believe it. There may be inconsistencies. This is common among battered women, whose husbands/boyfriends purposely keep her off-balance emotionally.

Do ask open-ended questions. These open up communication rather than shut it down.

DO be patient. A woman whose been abused doesn't give her trust easily.

DO be consistent. Her world is unpredictable. If you're consistent, she'll be more likely to have a positive relationship with you.

DO expect the battered women to leave her husband/boyfriend and then return. This is the norm in these relationships.

DON'T overreact. This closes down communication and may add to her shame. Rather, respond calmly to her descriptions of the abuse toward her and her children.

DON'T tell her what to do. Her abuser already has systematically controlled her through his abuse. She needs you to respect her decisions even when you don't agree. We have Jesus as a model. He doesn't insist that we follow him; he shows us the way.

DON'T make promises you cannot keep. You cannot ensure her safety. You cannot change her abuser.

DON'T overestimate your ability to handle the situation. Depending on your experience, time availability, knowledge and other factors, you may discover that while you can continue to minister to her, you need to refer her to other persons or organizations for assistance. Give her the name and phone number of a Christian counselor. If there are no Christian counselors in the area, ask the pastor at your church for a recommendation. The staff at a battered women's shelter can also help her.

Call the police if her life or the lives of her children are in danger. If she is suicidal, dial 911 or take her to the emergency room of a hospital.

### **Steps to Recovery**

Encourage your friend to obtain information about domestic violence. There are many good books, most of them secular; reading them may help her realize that she is not crazy and she is not alone. She can also gather information from websites. (These sites clearly inform the user that her online activity could be tracked by her abuser, and they give instructions on how to erase the tracks.)

She also needs to develop a safety plan. Her safety plan could include these features, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence:

*If she's still in the relationship*, she could determine a safe place in her home, avoiding rooms without exits (bathrooms) or with weapons (the kitchen); make a list of safe people to contact; keep change or a charged cell phone with her at all times; memorize all important numbers; establish a "code word" or "sign" so that family, friends and co-workers know when to call for help.

*If she has left the relationship*, she needs to have all important documents with her (her birth certificate and those of her children, social security cards, marriage license if married, her checkbook and charge cards, bank statements, insurance policies, proof of income, such as W-2's, and documents of past incidents of abuse, including photos, police reports and medical records); change her phone number; screen calls; document all new contacts, messages and injuries involving the batterer; change locks if the batterer has a key; avoid being alone;

develop a plan to get away if confronted by the batterer; if she must meet her batterer, have the meeting in a public place; vary her routine; notify work and school contacts; and call an area shelter for battered women.

Still another step to recovery is learning how to be assertive yet loving in new dating relationships. While every relationship is different, and some men may appear charming at first, experts in this area agree that when a woman clearly asserts that she will not accept abuse in any form (name-calling, a mild shove, sexist joke), it is highly unlikely she will enter another abusive relationship. Because a batterer operates on control, he will pursue a woman who accepts the first expression of abuse, then the second and the third, until he has her under his thumb. Thus assertiveness training may be needed.

Along these lines, she also needs to be aware of early warning signs of a potentially violent relationship. One excellent resource is *Ditch That Jerk, The Good, the Bad, and the Utterly Hopeless*. Its author not only outlines the early warning signs but also provides information to battered women so they can decide whether the man has any reasonable chance of stopping his violence. Some can; some show no signs of repentance.

Another important step to recovery, as the woman becomes healthier, is to forgive her abuser but not excuse his behavior. Obviously, this is very difficult and involves a process -- from "I'm not ready to forgive," to "I'll consider forgiving him," to "I'm ready to forgive," to "I forgive him." Forgiveness is an act of the will; it isn't dependent on feelings. Helpful scripture verses are Matthew 6:14, Mark 11:25, Luke 23:34, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13, I John 1:9 and Deuteronomy 32:35.

## **From Loss to Recovery**

As she moves toward forgiveness, the battered wife/girlfriend needs to recognize her loss. In domestic violence, it can be the loss of not having the loving relationship she had envisioned, loss of self-worth, to loss of freedom and safety, and so on. As she deals with loss, she will experience other signs of grief: fear, confusion and anger as well as physical changes like insomnia. She will likely have feelings of depression, shame and loneliness. She may enter a detachment phase, where she has a desire to give up and withdraw.

With support, the abused woman can finally recover. She recognizes the abuse for what it is: a crime against her and her children. She begins to have a more accurate view of her life. She builds new friendships and memories. She moves closer to forgiveness. By forgiving her abuser she will experience restoration.

## **Almost Safe**

Sue isn't ready to forgive, yet. She still experiences fear, anxiety, depression, loneliness, shame, anger and confusion. Her greatest pain now is Mike's court-sanctioned unsupervised weekends with their children.

Yet she is holding onto hope. "I can see God working in our lives," she said. "I am so proud of Adam [age 9]. He opened up to the counselor and made a picture of his feelings with soldiers and snakes at the sand table. The soldiers were by us, keeping us safe. The snakes were on the other side around Mike. Adam was in middle. He drew a small circle around himself. He, too, was safe. But the counselor said his circle needs to get bigger. He needs to feel safer.

“At least he’s healing,” Sue said. “We all are.”

Helpful Websites on Domestic Violence:

[www.abigails.org](http://www.abigails.org) (a Christian support group for battered women)

[www.counselcareconnection.org](http://www.counselcareconnection.org) (a Christian resource)

[www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org) (The National Domestic Violence Hotline)

[www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org) (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence)