

More than meets the eye: recognizing and responding to spousal abuse

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En bref

LES MÉDECINS PEUVENT JOUER DES RÔLES CLÉS dans la découverte de cas d'abus conjugaux, mais ils doivent se montrer proactifs parce que les femmes hésitent souvent à soulever la question. Ils peuvent utiliser notamment une liste détaillée de types différents d'abus que nous publions avec cet article. Les auteurs soulignent que les abus peuvent se présenter sous de nombreuses formes et ne pas comporter de violence physique.

Any physician who sees female patients may have occasion to help women who are in abusive relationships. If a woman has come to know and trust medical professionals she may confide to them that she is in difficulty, regardless of their specialty. Spousal abuse does not necessarily involve physical violence. Women who are mistreated in less obvious ways may need support in recognizing that their partners' behaviour is unacceptably controlling and constitutes abuse.

The list that accompanies this article (page 1557-8) was first compiled by an Ottawa men's group, New Directions. Many of its members had been convicted of assaulting their partners and were asked to list behaviours they had used to control or harm their wives or girlfriends. With further input from victims of abuse, women's-shelter workers and members of the Lanark County Coalition Against Family Violence, the list doubled in length. Many of the actions listed may be considered innocent when weighed in isolation. In combination and over a period of time, however, they may constitute a pattern of behaviour designed to break another person's spirit.

Presented at this year's annual meeting of the Federation of Medical Women of Canada, the list was received with enthusiasm and emotion. This response signalled to us that it could be a valuable tool for physicians in identifying domestic abuse. Workers at the Lanark County Interval House, a shelter for abused women and their children, consider the list their most effective tool. Women who come to the shelter often worry that the abuse they have experienced isn't serious enough to warrant a plea for help. Shelter workers give them the list and a highlighter, and ask them to identify incidents they have experienced. Many women are surprised by the number of abusive actions they have experienced and come to realize that physical assault is only one aspect of abuse.

The list categorizes abusive behaviours under 8 headings. Each type of abuse involves an imbalance of power in the relationship, whereby the abuser attempts to degrade, intimidate and thereby exert control over his partner.

Emotional abuse

Many women say that they would rather be hit than endure emotional abuse: when they are assaulted physically they *know* they are being abused. Emotional abuse is more subtle. It often begins or accelerates during pregnancy, when the man sees the fetus as a threat to what he perceives as his central position in the home.

Environmental abuse

In this type of abuse the woman is made to feel afraid in her home or environ-



Education

Éducation

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‡ See related articles pages 1539 and 1579

The list of unacceptable behaviours compiled by the Lanark County Coalition Against Family Violence follows this article.



ment. The abuser may attempt to intimidate her by punching walls, throwing objects or damaging items that are important to her: it is usually only the woman's possessions that are broken.

Social abuse

A key component of social abuse is the isolation of the woman from family and friends; the abuser's goal is to prevent her from having a social life that is not centred on him. The abuser may repeatedly cause scenes in public, such that the woman is too embarrassed to be seen with him outside the home and isolates herself.

Financial abuse

Money can be used to exert power. The abuser may attempt to control his partner by ensuring that she has no financial independence or by exploiting her earning ability. He may spend money without her agreement or refuse to spend money on special occasions or on things that are necessary for the family.

Religious abuse

This form of abuse can be particularly effective if the woman's religion or spirituality is important to her. The abuser may ridicule his partner's beliefs, or use religious precepts to justify abusive actions.

Physical abuse

Many women think they have to be hit with a closed fist to experience physical abuse. Any unwanted physical contact may constitute abuse; the contact is often repeated and follows a particular pattern. Physical neglect, such as responding inappropriately to illness or injury, is also abusive.

Sexual abuse

Women in abusive relationships sometime find themselves participating in sexual activities that they find abhorrent in order to pacify their partners. Abusive men may force their partners to have intercourse when they are ill or recovering from childbirth. Talking about sexual abuse is difficult for most women; many choose to call a crisis line anonymously to seek advice.

Ritual abuse

This type of abuse needs careful exploration. Physicians should be aware that it occurs, and that children and women are the usual targets.

What can physicians do?

Again and again, women have told workers at the Larnark County Interval House that going through this list of abusive behaviours was the catalyst that made them decide to leave an abusive partner. Several women who returned to a relationship to give their partner "another chance" said that the list helped them to recognize when abusive behaviours were starting to reappear. They were able to be more objective about what was happening to them and this made it easier to decide to leave again.

Physicians with a patient who suggests that she is in an abusive relationship can consider taking the following steps.

- Quickly schedule an appointment in which you can set aside the extra time that will be needed.
- Give the woman the list of abusive behaviours and ask her to highlight any that apply to her. Keep the list in her chart.
- Go over the list. Ask the woman to explain some of the items. For example, "Deliberately leaves a mess for her to clean up" may mean that her partner uncaringly and purposely walks through the house with mud on his boots, or that he deliberately sweeps food off the table onto the floor.
- Listen nonjudgementally.
- Ask the woman what she does to cope.
- If the woman wishes, set up a series of appointments so you can work together until she feels comfortable enough to reach out for other resources. Work out an explanation that she can safely present to her partner — perhaps that a series of tests is required.
- Help the woman to assemble the resources she will need. These can range from accommodation at a women's shelter to assistance from the police or a lawyer.
- Never take control or make decisions for the woman, and never arrange a meeting for her unless she first agrees.
- Document, document, document.
- Be clear about your limitations: there is only so much you can do.
- Be aware that the woman may be in a far more dangerous situation than she has stated. Most women minimize the violence they live with.

Physicians who give support to abused women sometimes feel frustrated when their patients are reluctant to do anything to change their situation. When this happens, it may help if the physician calls the local woman's shelter and "unloads." There may be compelling reasons why a woman chooses to stay in an abusive relationship. It is also important to remember that the danger a woman faces in her home may follow her if she flees; indeed, it may get worse. For many, confiding in a physician is a difficult first step and it may take time to build the courage and confidence to go one step further. ?

The eight types of abuse

This list is based on one made by men who were describing how they controlled or harmed their wives or girlfriends. It has been expanded by the Lanark County, Ont., Coalition Against Family Violence, on the basis of input from women in abusive relationships. A single act may not constitute abuse, but if someone is doing something to harm or control you then you are being abused. You have the right to be treated with respect and to feel safe in your home. A bullet (•) indicates actions that are clearly criminal acts, or may be criminal acts depending upon the circumstances.

Emotional/psychological/verbal abuse

- making her do illegal things
- false accusations
- name calling, finding fault
- verbal threats
- yelling
- intimidation
- making her think she's crazy or stupid
- overpowering her emotions
- disbelieving her
- bringing up old issues
- inappropriate expression of jealousy
- degrading her
- turning a situation against her
- brainwashing her
- laughing in her face
- silence
- refusing to do things with or for her
- insisting on always getting his own way
- pressuring her
- neglecting her
- expecting her to conform to a role
- real or suggested involvement with other women
- making her feel guilty
- certain mannerisms, such as snapping fingers at her
- threatening to get drunk or stoned unless. . . .
- manipulating her
- starting arguments
- withholding affection
- punishing her by not sharing in household chores
- never really forgiving, holding grudges
- lying
- treating her as a child
- having a double standard for her
- saying one thing, meaning another
- denying or taking away her responsibilities
- failing to keep commitments
- threatening her with the loss of immigration status
- deliberately creating a mess for her to clean up
- threatening to report her to the authorities
- making her drop charges
- telling jokes that belittle or indicate hatred toward women
- refusing to deal with issues
- minimizing her work or contribution
- pressuring her to stay while drugs or alcohol are being abused
- not coming home

- coming home drunk or stoned
- having pictures that indicate hate or violence against women
- egging her on, challenging her to engage in physical violence
- friendship or support of men who are abusive
- demanding an accounting of her time and routine
- taking advantage of her fear of something
- putting her on a pedestal
- ridiculing her food preferences
- threatening suicide unless . . .

Emotional abuse surrounding reproduction, pregnancy and childbirth

- refusing to allow or forcing her to use contraception
- forcing her to have an abortion
- refusing sex on the grounds that her pregnant body is ugly
- denial that the child is his
- refusing to support her during the pregnancy
- refusing to support her during the birth
- denying her access to her newborn child
- not supporting her or helping out after she comes home with the baby
- demanding sex soon after childbirth
- blaming her because the infant is the “wrong” sex
- refusing to allow her to breast-feed
- sulking or making her feel bad for time spent with the baby

Environmental abuse in home or vehicle

Abuse in the home

- harming pets
- ripping clothing
- locking her in or out
- throwing or destroying her possessions
- slamming doors
- throwing objects or food
- denying her use of the phone
- punching walls
- mowing over her garden

Abuse in the vehicle

- driving too fast
- driving recklessly, pounding the steering wheel
- driving while intoxicated
- forcing her into a vehicle
- pushing her out of a vehicle when it's in motion
- threatening to kill her by driving into an oncoming car, etc.
- chasing or hitting her with a vehicle
- killing or injuring her in a deliberate accident
- hitting her while she's driving
- prohibiting her from using a vehicle by tampering with the engine, taking the keys, etc.
- putting his foot over hers on the gas pedal
- grabbing the steering wheel while she's driving

Social abuse

- controlling what she does, whom she sees and talks to, what she reads and where she goes
- failing to pass on messages
- putting down or ignoring her in public
- not allowing her access to family or friends

- interfering with her family or friends
- change of personality with others
- being rude to her friends or relatives
- dictating her mode of dress
- dictating her behaviour
- habitually choosing friends, activities or work rather than being with her
- making a “scene” in public
- making her account for herself
- censoring her mail
- treating her like a servant
- not giving her space or privacy
- insisting on accompanying her into the doctor’s office

Social abuse involving children

- assaulting her in front of the children
- initiating false child-abuse charges against her
- making her stay at home with the children
- teaching children to abuse their mother through name calling, hitting, etc.
- embarrassing her in front of the children
- not sharing responsibility for the children
- threatening to abduct the children or telling her she’ll never get custody
- putting down her parenting ability

Social abuse during separation or divorce

- buying the children’s affection with expensive gifts
- not showing up on time to pick up children or not having them back on time
- pumping children for information about their mother’s boyfriends, etc.
- telling children their mother is responsible for breaking up the family
- using children to transport messages
- denying her access to the children
- failing to supply a valid phone number

Financial abuse

- taking her money
- forging her name
- giving her false receipts
- cancelling her insurance
- sabotaging her efforts to attain economic freedom
- withholding money
- spending money foolishly or beyond means
- pressuring her to take full responsibility for finances
- not paying fair share of bills
- not spending money on special occasions
- spending on addictions, gambling, sexual services
- pressuring or controlling her working conditions
- keeping family finances a secret
- preventing her from taking a job

Ritual abuse

- mutilation
- animal mutilation
- forced cannibalism
- human sacrifices
- suggesting or promoting suicide
- forcing her to participate in rituals
- forcing her to witness rituals

Physical abuse

- any unwanted physical contact
- kicking, punching or pinching her
- pulling or pushing her
- slapping, hitting or shaking her
- cutting or burning her
- pulling her hair
- head butting
- squeezing her hand or twisting her arm
- choking or smothering her
- force-feeding her
- spitting on her
- throwing her or throwing things at her
- hitting her with objects or whipping her
- restraining her in any way
- urinating on her
- breaking her bones
- knifing or shooting her
- threatening to kill or injure her
- ignoring her illness or injury
- denying or restricting her food or drink
- pressuring or tricking her into alcohol or drug use
- standing too close/intimidating her
- hiding or withholding necessary medication

Sexual abuse

- any unwanted sexual contact
- forcing her to have sex; hounding her to have sex
- forcing her to have sex with others
- forcing her to have sex with animals
- uttering threats to obtain sex
- pinching, slapping, grabbing or poking her breasts or genitals
- forcing sex when she’s sick or after childbirth or surgery
- sleeping around
- knowingly transmitting sexual diseases
- treating her as a sex object
- being rough
- pressuring her to pose for pornographic photos
- displaying pornography that makes her feel uncomfortable
- using sex as the basis or solution for an argument
- criticizing her sexual ability
- unwanted fondling in public
- purposely not washing and expecting sex
- name calling (whore, slut, frigid, bitch)
- accusations of affairs
- degrading her body parts
- telling sexual jokes or making sexual comments in public
- demanding sex for drugs or alcohol
- demanding sex as payment or trade
- administering drugs or alcohol for sexual advantage
- insisting on checking her body for sexual contact

Religious abuse

- using religion to justify abuse or dominance
- using church position to pressure for sex or favours
- using her, then demanding forgiveness
- excessive spending for religion
- interpreting religion your way
- preventing her from attending church
- requiring sex acts or drug use as religious acts
- mocking her beliefs