Chapter 11

A Betrayal Trauma Perspective on Domestic Violence

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> *I started going to the domestic violence shelter for counseling. But I was just, ''Ehh. Why should I do this? I'm not going to sit here and tell you my business.'' I went to the shelter eight times. Eight! But there was always some reason that I went back to him. I wasn't ready. I was in denial. (Tanya M.)*

Tanya shared her story with the Iowa Voices Project,[1] explaining that her partner beat her until she bled, set fire to her bed while she was sleeping, and used every weapon he could find to harm her. She did leave on several occasions, but returned again and again to the same person who hurt her so badly. At first glance, it is hard to imagine why a victim of domestic violence who is repeatedly beaten, degraded, and violated would voluntarily remain in the relationship with the abuser. Thinking about why it may sometimes actually be adaptive to ignore abuse by a trusted person can help make sense of why victims of domestic violence often do not report abuse, underreport the severity of ongoing violence, and return to or remain in abusive situations.

Domestic violence affects approximately one in five women worldwide and one in four women in the United States in their lifetime. It leaves physical scars from broken bones and increases the likelihood of developing illnesses from living in an intensely stressful environment for a prolonged period of time. It leaves psychological scars from anxiety due to living in ongoing danger, and a shaken world view from having been betrayed by a trusted person. Among those whose lives are directly affected by domestic violence, the majority of victims eventually leave the relationship. But the leaving process can involve years of cycling out of, then back into, the relationship. When a person is abused by an intimate partner, she experiences a devastating betrayal committed by someone she once may have viewed as her closest ally. She may be further betrayed when the institutions and communities she turns to for support fail to validate her experience and fail to provide access to necessary resources. To begin to understand how difficult it is for domestic violence victims to leave a relationship characterized by betrayal, it is imperative to listen to what victims and survivors have to say.

In this chapter we use the terms ''victim'' and ''survivor'' when referring to the person being abused. We use victim when discussing the situations of people who are still in the relationship with the perpetrator. Survivor is used when referring to those who were formerly victims of abuse but have since left the relationship. Many victims have been survivors in the past and will again be survivors in the future as they make several attempts to leave the relationship. Although we recognize that these two categories are rarely clear cut, we will rely on them to avoid confusion. In our examples of those affected by domestic violence, we frequently refer to the victim/survivor as *she* and the perpetrator as *he*. We do this to reflect the higher rates of domestic violence against women than against men and because the most severe outcomes of abuse have been documented in heterosexual relationships. Of course, men also are abused by their partners (both female and male) and abuse against lesbians or persons who identify as transgendered is also common. In any given case, these violations can be just as serious as violence against women by male partners.

Although the reasons victims stay in abusive relationships are complex, there is a simple, albeit often overlooked, way of approaching the question: one can ask the victims about their experience. The more people are able to set aside preconceived ideas about what makes victims stay, the better equipped society will be to understand and to help. Often people turn a deaf ear to issues of abuse, not because they don't care but because it is emotionally challenging to be aware of intimate partner violence. Domestic violence involves a betrayal of trust that can incite deep feelings of shame and anxiety in the victim. As individuals recognize that a family member or friend is being attacked on an ongoing basis by a partner who seems to be nice enough, committed enough, or loving enough, they must recognize that no one is immune to being deeply hurt by someone upon whom they depend. If it can happen to a sister, or a best friend, it can happen to anyone. It can happen to them. This realization can be a frightening prospect. In theory, listening to the stories of domestic violence victims is a simple task. But in reality, because of the emotional challenges it poses, it takes courage to start asking questions. Perhaps it takes even more courage to hear what is actually being said in response.

TELLING THEIR STORIES

In the 1960s, a small group of courageous women in Iowa began a dialogue about domestic violence. Over the next two decades, the small group, echoed in similar efforts in other Iowa communities, evolved into the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a state-level nonprofit organization comprised of 27 direct-service domestic violence programs. Working with the Coalition, Kathleen Thompson, an author who herself had been victimized, interviewed 31 female survivors of domestic violence about their experiences. In broaching this topic on a personal level, some of the things she heard gave her nightmares. With the women's permission, she published their stories in newspapers and on the Internet and so helped give voice to experiences that previously had been silenced by abuse. The pain embedded in these women's stories illustrates why asking—and answering—is so hard. However, the telling of the stories allows the women to connect with others who still are being abused, helping to empower victims to likewise become survivors. The voices from the Iowa Voices Project inform how we answer the question ''Why doesn't she leave?''

PHYSICAL IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Violence committed by an intimate partner has numerous and sometimes devastating consequences for the victim. In addition, children living in an abusive household are affected by violence, even if they are not directly attacked. The damage can occur insidiously; victims are only able to free themselves from abusive situations after they are able to recognize the problem. Verbal abuse often precedes physical abuse. This slow escalation in severity can facilitate the victim's ability to adjust to an ongoing intimate betrayal. Unfortunately, the victim is not always aware that her partner is betraying her and that the betrayal may cause her physical and psychological problems.

> *I was drained. I started calling in to work. I was using excessive sick leave. (Teama)*
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> *The doctor told me, ''You have all of these physical conditions from the stress.'' It was killing me. Without a touch, it was killing me. (Kathy)*

The association of domestic violence with women's increased risk of injury and of developing a broad range of medical, mental health, and behavioral problems has been widely documented. Long-term exposure to violence magnifies these consequences. Physical and psychological symptoms sometimes subside when the abuse ends, but without treatment many deleterious health effects can persist, and the medical, mental health, and behavioral effects of abuse can reinforce each other. Mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress can weaken the immune system and increase the likelihood of physical illness. Compared with nonabused women, abuse victims and survivors disproportionately abuse alcohol, cigarettes, and other licit and illicit substances, particularly if they are already suffering the mental health effects of domestic violence. Much of this behavior involves attempts to self-medicate as a way to cope with the physical pain, depression, fear, anxiety, or otherwise distressing thoughts or memories associated with violence. Additionally, this behavior can further weaken the immune system, exacerbating health issues.

The hallmark of domestic violence assaults is the frequency and the duration of abuse rather than the severity of injuries caused. Somewhere between one-third and one-half of all domestic violence victims suffer serial abuse, many beaten once a week or more. Although most of these assaults involve pushes, shoves, hair pulling, or other acts that would be considered minor if taken in isolation, the cumulative effect is a level of vulnerability and fear that can be paralyzing.

Despite the fact that the typical domestic violence episode is noninjurious, domestic violence is the most common source of physical injury for which women seek medical attention, even more common than auto accidents. In contrast to muggings, where the main injuries are to extremities, the injuries resulting from domestic violence suggest its sexual nature and are disproportionately located in the face or other parts of the head, chest, and abdomen and frequently result from biting, choking, and/or sexual assault. Blows to the head and choking, when resulting in loss of consciousness, can have serious long-term neurological consequences. Repeated attacks may cause respiratory problems. But even women who experience broken bones may be afraid of angering the perpetrator by seeking treatment and may fail to report the injury to the doctor, thus making proper healing more difficult or impossible. The presence of numerous old wounds at various stages of healing is a classic presentation of domestic violence in medical settings.

> *I did have regrets that I never fought back. He smashed my nose a lot. I had a lot of bloody noses. A lot of black eyes. A lot of lumps on my head, fat lips, kicked, he lifted me off the ground with his cowboy boots, you know those pointed boots, he kicked me from behind and lifted me off the ground with that. (Kay)*

The frequency of abuse increases the risk of injuries and some chronic diseases, such as chronic pain, osteoarthritis, and severe headaches. In extreme situations, physical injuries from violence can be fatal.

In addition to the number of instances of abuse, the amount of time victims remain in relationships with their perpetrators also can contribute to negative health consequences. Those who remain in abusive relationships experience more physical ailments, including allergies, breathing problems, pain, fatigue, bowel problems, vaginal discharge, eyesight and hearing problems, low iron, asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, and cervical cancer.

Gynecological problems are the most consistent physical health difference between women who are abused and women who are not. Perpetrators of physical abuse frequently (but not always) force sex on their partners. Because women who are repeatedly threatened or assaulted are unlikely to resist a partner's sexual demands, many victims reported feeling like they were raped even when no force was used. Chronic urinary tract infections, pelvic pain, painful intercourse, fibroids, and other sexual problems arise from a combination of forced sex and the ensuing shame and depression that may further weaken the immune system. When perpetrators refuse to use condoms, intercourse increases the likelihood of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease or having an unwanted pregnancy. An enforced pregnancy also may be used to sabotage a woman's access to independent sources of support or income (such as school or work) or to increase her physical and emotional dependence.

IMPACT ON PREGNANCY AND CHILDREN

Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse do not necessarily stop if a woman suffering from intimate partner violence becomes pregnant.

> *When I became pregnant with his baby he became even worse, more abusive. (Kay)*

During pregnancy, violence to the mother harms both her and the fetus, which may or may not survive the trauma. Babies exposed to an abusive environment before birth are more likely to be born prematurely and suffer a range of health problems. Exposure to abuse continues to have adverse consequences for children as they develop.

> *I thought my son was too young to remember that his father used to beat me. But he remembers. He goes, ''Do you remember when daddy used to hit you?'' I thought, at a year and a half that he was too young. At one point, he hated me. He hated his sister. He called his sister a bitch. He was five. He wasn't even a kindergartner. He would have anxiety attacks in front of school. He didn't want me close, but I couldn't leave the same room. He had nightmares. He wanted to die. (Elia)*

Mothers who are being abused by their partners are often torn between protecting their children by keeping the family intact and protecting their children by removing them from the violent situation. If she leaves, she worries that she is breaking up the family and depriving her children of a father. Furthermore, in many cases the mother is financially dependent upon the father of her children and thus if she leaves, she risks poverty and homelessness for her children. If she stays, she must consider how they will be affected by ongoing exposure to violence between the people they depend on for love and protection. Children exposed to violence between their parents not only suffer the immediate fear and uncertainty of the situation, but also may be more likely to experience difficulty adjusting as they develop into adolescents and adults. Children who are taught to view violence in the household as normal or acceptable also may be more likely to enter into abusive relationships themselves when they get older, as either victim or perpetrator.

> *If my kids end up not being abusive men, I will think I did a job well done. And I don't know if I have any hope of that because of what they saw in their dad. (Becky)*

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Victims often attempt to cope with violence by avoiding thoughts of the abuse or removing themselves psychologically while the abuse is happening. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as ''dissociation.'' When abuse becomes so severe that it is impossible to ignore, victims of domestic violence may turn to alcohol and other substances to push the thoughts and feelings away. Problems such as being chronically prepared for danger (hypervigilance), having difficulty concentrating, and reexperiencing moments of abuse through vivid memories are common experiences among people experiencing trauma. Cindy explains the enduring psychological consequences she struggles with even after she has left the relationship:

> *I'm still scared to death of the dark. You'll never find my house completely dark. Ever. I have to be able to see. I have trouble being in crowds. I don't wear any jewelry because my brother choked me, along with the boyfriend, who choked me. I couldn't sleep in my bed. It took me eight months, I think. I slept on the couch for the longest time. I will not sit with my back to a door. It creeps me out, because I can't see who's coming in. (Cindy)*

BETRAYAL TRAUMA THEORY

The widely documented harms caused by domestic violence make it even more imperative to explain the duration of abusive relationships and to ask the question ''Why does she stay?'' or, equally common, ''Why doesn't she just leave him?''

First and foremost, although domestic violence erodes the mutual trust and respect on which healthy partnerships rest and without which most relationships eventually dissolve, this erosion process is often slow and uneven and is often misunderstood by abuse victims. Although most victims can recall signs of abuse that occurred during dating, courtship, or in the first years of marriage, many did not recognize the behaviors as abusive at the time. This is particularly true in relationships in which the primary forms of abuse involve intimidation or control tactics rather than violence, or in which there are readily available rationalizations for a partner's abusive behavior, such as his drinking or ''stress'' at work. It may be months or even years of seemingly good times before things start to go awry. Jill and her husband spent more than a decade together establishing what seemed to Jill to be a loving, stable relationship before things became noticeably wrong:

> *My husband, ''X,'' and I have been married 14 years now. Everything was going fine. We had two careers, great stuff. Three boys . . . then in 2002, something switched. I was always on eggshells. I would take the kids to the department store at night just to get out of the house until it was bedtime. But I had no idea why our marriage was falling apart. (Jill)*

When partnerships erode slowly, the relatively minor instances of betrayal may not be enough to shake the victim's conception of the perpetrator as a good partner. Trust and respect also may erode slowly rather than all at once as a result of a single dramatic act of abuse or betrayal. Particularly for women in disadvantaged communities who may be facing any number of stressors and challenges in their lives, the abuse may not appear that serious or may be normalized as ''just life. In these instances, victims may appear to be minimizing or even denying acts of violence that may seem quite serious to an outsider and, as a result of these defenses, decide not to report the assault to police or health providers.

Another important reason why victims are prone to denial and minimization is that domestic violence is one of the most devastating forms of betrayal a person can experience. Precisely because persons depend on intimate relationships to be safe and cared for, they are most vulnerable in these settings. When violence occurs within intimate relationships, victims may find their basic needs for solace, refuge, protection, and respect cannot be met. Furthermore, this intimate violence may undermine the victims' world view, and with it, their moorings in reality. Acts of violence by intimate partners throw into question what can truly be trusted.

According to Jennifer J. Freyd's[2] theory of betrayal trauma, abused children are able to separate the trauma from their consciousness in order to preserve the relationship with the needed caregiver. This may occur during the trauma (i.e., the child does not recognize that his parent is hurting him), after the trauma (i.e., the child is unable to remember what happened during the abuse), or both. This dissociation from the abuse facilitates the child's survival by helping him remain connected with the person who provides his food, clothing, and shelter as well as his social support. He is able to ignore the pain and betrayal to maintain this important relationship. If the betrayal were fully 2 experienced, it would lead the child to withdraw from or confront the abuser, as these are the empowered responses to mistreatment and betrayal. But withdrawal and confrontation are likely to only make matters worse for the child by leading to an escalation of abuse and coercive control. Thus, by remaining fully or at least somewhat blind to the betrayal, the abused child is able to maintain behaviors that inspire attachment from the parent.

According to betrayal trauma theory, when an adult is abused by someone close to her, she is likewise prone to dissociate while the abuse is happening, or when she is reminded of it. She may also forget details or even forget the entire event and have trouble recalling it when questioned. The unawareness and forgetting are helpful to the victim who feels dependent on her abuser. These responses help her behave in ways that maintain the relationship rather than in ways that threaten it.

The next sections explore some of the ways in which numbing may help domestic violence victims. First, we turn to an example to illustrate the idea of a person disconnecting from pain in order to survive.

IGNORING PAIN

Freyd uses the example of two women on separate skiing trips to illustrate the notion of ignoring or becoming numb to pain. One woman breaks her leg while skiing with a friend and experiences such debilitating pain that she is unable to continue down the mountain. The friend leaves and returns with help so that she makes it down the mountain safely. The other woman also breaks her leg while skiing, but she is without a companion. She has no choice but to hobble downward to receive the medical attention she needs to survive. The first woman feels the intense physical pain, which inhibits her from further damaging her leg. The second is able to spontaneously block the pain. The difference between the two women is that, in the second case, survival is on the line. Although the second woman is not immune to leg pain, and in fact is likely to have worse pain in the future as a result of her trip down the mountain, her blockage of the pain is an adaptive response as long as she is alone and needs to move in order to save her life.

The same type of selective numbing is relevant to the case of domestic violence. In most instances, when someone is being attacked or degraded by another person, it is adaptive to flee from the situation to avoid continued assault. In other cases, it is adaptive to fight back. If a stranger verbally assaults a woman while she is walking down the street, for example, she might feel an instinct to run and likely act on that instinct, fearing a physical confrontation. If the stranger grabbed the woman, she would probably resist, possibly with violence, to protect her safety. However, when someone is being assaulted by a partner in whom they may be deeply invested and upon whose support they depend, the instinct to run or fight is thwarted because it is *not* to that person's advantage to behave in the normal way. This is particularly true in the case of intimate terrorism, a type of domestic violence characterized by one partner exhibiting behavior that is both violent and controlling. In this type of situation, men perpetrate the violence and their female partners respond nonviolently more than 90 percent of the time. Apart from the physical risks, running away or fighting can be seen as threatening a relationship that the person feels is crucial to protect. In other words, it is sometimes not a good idea for the victim to confront the abuser or to leave the abusive situation right away. Sometimes survival depends—or seems to depend—on staying with the abuser. In a relationship characterized by coercive control and violence, the victim risks enduring an escalation of abuse, the loss of her partner's financial support for herself and her children, and a host of additional challenges to survival if she fights back or threatens to leave.

By adaptive, we do not mean to imply that it is necessarily healthful to stay in a dangerous environment. Rather, we mean that it is a natural, survival-promoting response to act in ways that maintain the relationship under certain circumstances. To adapt means to make fit (as for a specific or new use or situation) often by modification.[3] Much like 3 a chameleon adapts by turning green to become less visible to predators when walking along a leaf, a victim of domestic violence may adapt by withdrawing and distancing herself from pain when she depends upon the perpetrator for survival in some way. The next section illustrates some of the ways in which becoming blind to the abuse may allow the victim to survive in her difficult situation.

MAINTAINING IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

> *I was married to ''X'' for 23 years. The assaults, the rape, started before we were married. The worst assault was in 1999. After the assault, after he was in jail for trying to kill me, my pastor at the time said I needed to make a whole account of what happened that night and mail it to myself. I followed his advice and did it and then I had never opened it. A few years ago, I read it again. And it is amazing to me how much reality that you can block out. Because I literally went in the bathroom and almost vomited after I read my own account of what had happened that night. (Becky)*

Becky said that she returned to her relationship with the perpetrator even after an assault that thinking about years later made her feel sick to her stomach. As long as her husband and triplet sons were all still living together, she was able to block out the abuse to keep her family intact. It was only after her husband had already divided the family by moving one of their sons out of the house that Becky was able to recognize the severity of the abuse and finally leave him.

According to betrayal trauma theory, ignoring a traumatic event is more adaptive when the event is social in nature. Of course, natural disasters like hurricanes and terrible accidents can be traumatic without the presence or influence of another human being. If a man's car swerves out of control while he is driving at night and hits a tree, and he is badly injured as a result, he may respond by having vivid nightmares of his car veering out of control. His heart rate may quicken when he drives a car, or he may avoid driving altogether or avoid driving at night. He may fear that he will die earlier than he expected and grapple with the realization that terrible things can happen at any time. Such difficulties are typical of posttraumatic or acute stress responses, which may result from an event evoking intense fear and horror. The victim may attempt to maintain distance from thoughts of the accident by avoiding driving, but he is unlikely to completely forget that the accident happened. In this case, it is probably best if he addresses the physical and psychological wounds, regains confidence in his driving, and moves on with his life. By facing the trauma, he avoids the impairment associated with the avoidance of driving, and he also opens the door to preventing the development of full-blown posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to the accident, or treating these symptoms if they do develop. In this case, it is adaptive for him to recognize the event rather than ignore it.

The adaptive nature of facing the trauma changes if we assume the car accident occurred under different circumstances. In the alternative scenario, the same man is riding as a passenger in the same car, but now his best friend is behind the wheel. The friend is driving a bit erratically, perhaps because he has been drinking. The passenger becomes alarmed and pleads with his friend to pull the car over and let him drive. Instead, the driver accelerates. The car swerves out of control and hits the tree. Both passenger and driver sustain serious injuries. Now, however, in addition to possibly facing intrusive thoughts of the accident and anxiety about driving, the man also must choose between forgiving his friend for betraying his trust or confronting him and possibly losing the friendship. If the friendship is really important to him, he may overlook aspects of the betrayal in order to protect the relationship. He also may ignore the betrayal because he cannot tolerate the sense of loss that the collapse of the friendship elicits in him. Although it may be adaptive for him to ignore the betrayal from the perspective of avoiding loss and maintaining a relationship, doing so also increases the likelihood that he will be hurt by his friend again in the future.

Both the car accident scenario that involves betrayal and the one that does not are single, one-time events. Now imagine the man as a little boy living with his mother. She is generally loving and caring toward her son but becomes very angry and overreacts if he misbehaves, calling him names and sending him to bed without dinner if he spills his juice at lunch. Occasionally, she is violent, throwing dishes or the remote control at him and sometimes causing injury. The little boy cannot survive without the relationship with his mother. He is aware of the fact, if only subconsciously, that he needs her love and protection to survive. If he responds to her behavior toward him with withdrawal or confrontation he is likely to push his mother away and perhaps invite more abuse. It is thus adaptive for him to ignore or minimize the violence and be the good little boy to whom his mother usually responds with care. By being good—by ignoring the betrayal and staying connected with his mother—the little boy increases the chances that she will provide him with food, shelter, and love. It is adaptive for the boy to ignore the betrayal, even though his betrayal blindness may later result in psychological and physical consequences associated with enduring ongoing abuse.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND BETRAYAL TRAUMA THEORY: WHY DOESN'T SHE LEAVE?

In the case of domestic violence, the victims usually do not enter into relationships utterly dependent on perpetrators for survival, as the little boy does with his mother. Victims may or may not become dependent on perpetrators over time. Additionally, these dependencies may be mediated by a range of social factors, such as a victim's access to an independent income or a support system that may reinforce any emotional attachment they feel. The closer the relationship with the perpetrator, and the more dependent the victim is on this perpetrator or on the relationship, the more adaptive it is to ignore or become blind to the abuse and betrayal. Over time, as relationship dynamics change, this adaptation can become more or less beneficial. She may be able to find ways to earn income, for instance, or to rebuild a support system among friends and family members. With these empowering shifts in place, she may be better able to tolerate the reality of the betrayal and use the memory to catalyze movement away from the abuse.

Most women do eventually leave abusive relationships, often many times before the final break. Thus, leaving is best thought about as a process rather than as a single decision and action. As mentioned previously, Tanya left eight times before finally leaving for good. Each time she left, she accumulated new coping skills that she could then draw upon in the future. Leaving also can be a bargaining chip that sends the message that the perpetrator must cease his violence or change other behaviors associated with violence (such as drinking) or the relationship will end. Gathering confidence, enduring and managing the violence, negotiating around control tactics, and acknowledging the abuse to herself and others—each step takes an enormous amount of strength and courage. The question ''Why doesn't she leave him?'' overlooks the staggering energy and resilience required simply to endure and acknowledge an abusive situation.

Tanya returned to her partner each time because she wasn't ready to make a final break. Whether this was because she hoped things would work out or because she feared she could not make it financially on her own, she describes being in denial during this period about the severity of the abuse. As we've argued, denial is adaptive in the face of a partner's betrayal because, in minimizing the risk present, it allows a victim to protect herself against an otherwise intolerable level of fear and threat. She becomes blind to a potentially devastating situation so that she can survive it until she is ready to leave.

DEPENDENCE THROUGH COERCIVE CONTROL

The perpetrator of domestic violence can manipulate his partner through patterns of coercive control as well with threats or violence. He may take away her power over finances, cut off her communication with loved ones, threaten her with retaining custody of the children, shut off access to other resources such as a car, a phone, or vital medication, and control her access to basic needs. In such instances, if she leaves the relationship, she will have nothing. If she stays, her life will be filled with physical and emotional pain and fear; but she perceives that not all will be lost. Financial control can be particularly devastating.

> *It just got more controlling. Cars couldn't be in both of our names: everything was just totally in his name. Checkbooks, savings accounts, home, you get $10 a week allowance.... What can you do? There you are with little kids, no vehicle. No money to go buy a car, no credit to go buy a car. What do you do? You go back. I went back. (Julie)*

Because the victim's dependence in this instance is rooted in enforced structural inequalities in the relationship, there are serious material constraints on her capacity to leave. Leaving requires that the victim have enough money for attorney's fees, for instance, to be able to support permanent housing, have access to transportation and possibly to child care, and have sufficient financial resources to meet daily living expenses for herself and the children. If her socioeconomic status is affluent or middle class with her abusive partner, she may have to adjust to living in poverty if she leaves. If she has been working at home, she may be unable to meet the most basic needs without the financial assistance of her abuser. In fact, a woman's employment status and income are the strongest factors determining whether she decides to leave the relationship.

> *But the house was in X's name. So the police officers wouldn't let me go in and get Brittany. Even though we're married, I'm not on the house. So I had to leave her behind. It was horrible, horrible. I had to leave my daughter behind. (Julie)*

In addition to taking their partner's money or keeping them uninformed about finances, perpetrators of domestic violence may establish control through a range of constraints. They may lock their partner into or out of the house and prevent her from accessing medication, limit her access to her children, and destroy her most valued possessions. Or they may make access to friends, family members, or vital resources contingent on meeting a personal or sexual need, or dole out ''favors'' (the right to go out with a longtime friend, for example) in exchange for ''being a good girl.'' Perpetrators often use child custody battles as a means of luring their partners back to the relationship (see the chapter by Stark in volume 2). The perpetrator also can threaten his victim with the loss of income or property that is rightfully hers. Unable to afford the legal fees and denied support from her partner, she returns to the relationship. Through his actions, she learns just how dependent she is on him to meet her needs. He may follow her wherever she goes, have someone else report on her whereabouts, or prevent her from going to work or school by demanding she sit still and listen to him lecture when it is time for her to go. Tanya explains the extent to which perpetrators go to exert control:

> *He used to cut my clothes up and set them on fire. Or take the keys so I couldn't go anywhere. He thought I was going to leave while he was in the tub. And I used to have to go sit on the toilet and wait while he was taking a bath, and I'd say, ''Well, this is a waste of my time.'' . . . I have respiratory problems from getting hit in the face so much. (Tanya)*

Coercive control destroys self-esteem and leaves the victim feeling helpless so that leaving the relationship becomes even less tenable. Tanya's partner attempted to make her feel as though she was unable to use a car to get herself from one place to another, that she had no control over her own clothing, and that she was not worthy of enough respect to decide when to go into which room of the house. Fortunately, Tanya recognized that his tactics were ''a waste of [her] time,'' but not all victims of domestic violence are able to maintain this sense of self-worth in the face of severe manipulation.

> *I wasn't ever allowed to talk on the phone with my friends. If he'd find out about it, there would be a big fight. It'd be huge. And the consequences of that was not worth making that phone call. (Julie)*

Communication is a powerful method of gathering the resources that eventually support leaving the relationship. It is a common area of interception by the abuser. Perpetrators frequently prohibit a victim's phone calls, rip out the phone, severely limit the time she can spend on the phone as well as whom she can call, monitor or listen in on calls, listen to the answering machine, hide her cell phone, and review the phone bills for signs she is calling people not on the approved list. He also may subject her to cyberstalking, tracking her Internet use, reading e-mail, and forcing her to check in and check out or answer her call, no matter what is happening, within a set time frame. He may steal her passwords, or put embarrassing information or photos on her MySpace site. The effect of controlling a victim's access to information or communication is that her partner becomes the major source of her connection to the outside world and even of how she understands the abuse. He is in a position to tell her that nobody will ever love her like he does, that she deserves to be hit, and that no one will believe her if she talks to them about the abuse. She internalizes these messages because she has nobody else to listen to, and so has no means of disproving his statements.

> *Why did I stay? Fear and insecurity. I had nowhere to go. I had no money to just go buy my own house or get another apartment. They beat you down to the point where you believe what they tell you. ''You can't make it. You're fat. You're ugly. You're never going to be anything.'' You start believing it. (Kris)*

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Cultural factors often influence patterns of coercive control in abusive relationships and the reasons it may be adaptive for the victim to ignore the betrayal.

> *I think there are more cases with the Hispanics. Hispanics, they feel more macho. They feel if they marry, the woman is their property. (Marina)*

This sense of machismo may depend on acculturation status and likely varies between relationships. Moreover, as Hispanic women are increasingly demanding a more equitable distribution of household responsibilities, the traditional Hispanic sentiment that a woman's place is in the home is shifting. Still, disagreements over women's proper role remain a frequent stimulus to violence in Hispanic relationships. Verbal and physical violence are not typically seen as acceptable means of conflict resolution in the Hispanic community, but the issue of sexual equality often triggers the abuse when it does occur.

A woman's immigration status is often a target of a perpetrator trying to coerce her into staying in the relationship. For instance, he may tell her, ''You will be deported if you call the police.'' This threat has a realistic basis for illegal immigrants and those who need to remain married to the perpetrator to retain their citizenship. Although the Violence Against Women Act extends protections to immigrant women, this only applies to legal immigrants and only to couples who are married. Moreover, if she turns to the police for help, it is quite possible they will turn her over to immigration authorities if she is illegal. If the victim has children, deportation will pull the children out of school and into an unknown future. Again, therefore, their objective circumstances make it adaptive for victims with a tenuous immigrant status to become numb to the pain of the abuse while establishing a plan to deal with the threat of deportation.

People who are members of oppressed groups in terms of ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or gender identity face additional challenges when deciding whether or not to leave an abusive partner. For example, a victim who is a member of a minority group (particularly a group with a shared visible characteristic like skin color) is often burdened with the expectation that she speak and act on behalf of her entire group. As a result, if she calls the police in response to abuse by a partner who is a member of the same minority group, she may feel that she is putting her entire group on trial. If the victim is being abused by a nonminority partner, she may be justified in her concern that nobody will listen to her if she attempts to leave the relationship and seek help. In either case, societal prejudice and fear of betraying other members of her cultural group compound the already daunting consequences associated with leaving an abusive relationship. Until she is able to confront the enormous challenge of this situation, she saves herself by numbing to the abuse.

People who speak little or no English are afforded little power in abusive relationships, especially if their abusive partners are English speaking. Additionally, those who do not speak English often have limited access to support groups, including shelters. An abused woman who decides to phone the police may have to ask her child or a neighbor to interpret the call for her, exposing her son or daughter to all the details of the abuse. If the perpetrator has isolated her from her friends and family, there may simply be no one for her to talk to in her own language.

> *I never spoke any English, because in California, everybody spoke Spanish. When I went to the doctor, at the doctor they spoke Spanish. So I didn't speak any English, but he did. I moved out. But all the time he came around with the same story: ''I'm going to change, give me another chance.'' And I came back all the time. (Marina)*

Marina kept returning to an abusive situation because she depended on her partner for survival. Her inability to speak English made it very difficult for her to find a job. She depended on her partner for financial support from the beginning of their marriage. She moved out for one month to get away from the abuse, but when all of her belongings were stolen after an earthquake she moved back in with him so that she and her children would have enough money to survive. With no resources of her own, and a language barrier to obtaining resources, staying in an abusive relationship seemed to be Marina’s best option at the time.

Like members of racial and ethnic minority groups, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people face additional obstacles when seeking help. A lesbian woman who is abused may hesitate to move into a shelter for fear that her partner will move into the same shelter, posing as a victim. For lesbians, the perpetrator may warn the victim that there is nothing stopping her from following her wherever she goes, even if she attempts to flee to a shelter. For gay men, the abuser can manipulate his partner by telling him that ‘‘nobody will listen to a fag’’ if he tries to get help. Sadly, in both cases there may be some truth behind the abuser’s threats. ‘‘Outing’’ a gay, lesbian, or transgendered partner at work or with family members who may not know about a victim’s sexual identification is also a common means of control. Both lesbians and gay men who are abused may decide to overlook the violence because acknowledging it may mean facing additional prejudice or hostility from a society already nervous about sexual minorities.

For people who are members of a minority cultural group, oppression by the dominant cultural group (e.g., whites, heterosexuals, or English-speaking people) is interwoven with all aspects of domestic violence. In the African American community, for example, hopelessness fueled by negative stereotypes, marginalization, and decreased opportunities contributes to daily microtraumas that may, over time, trigger domestic violence (as well as other types of violent behavior). Exposure to ongoing homophobia sometimes leads to the displacement of fear and anger onto the partner, thus resulting in violent behavior. Although the victim is oppressed by his partner, he also needs his support in the daily struggle against oppression. He can ignore the violence and hold on to his one ally against oppression, or he can leave and face oppression alone. The victim may also deny the abuse because it seems so ‘‘understandable’’ given the oppressive circumstances to which a perpetrator has been subjected. Here, as elsewhere, preserving the relationship means becoming blind to his partner’s betrayal.

BETRAYAL WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Within all intimate relationships, each partner is affected not only by the other but also by the larger community context in which abuse occurs. Relationships involving domestic violence are no exception to this rule. It seems obvious that violence in intimate relationships betrays the trust and expectations in these relationships. But trust and betrayal also come into play in the larger world in which women participate and help to construct: their neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and places of worship. It is important to understand how cultural and socioeconomic factors influence the choices women make about whom to talk with about the abuse in these settings, how these social settings become part of an intimate sphere of influence, and whether and how they bridge the gap between the abuse in the relationship and the institutions expected to provide health, protection, or other forms of help.

> *With the African American women, you don't go and tell anybody. You don't put your man in jail for stuff like that. Your family handles it. You deal with it within the family. That's just something you don't talk about. (Tanya M.)*

People trust the institutions that surround them to perform the social functions for which they are created. For example, religious institutions often provide not only spiritual strength but also a nurturing faith-based community. However, when an institution such as a church makes value judgments based on relationships, it can betray the faith placed in that institution. For women in situations of domestic violence who also are members of religious communities that place a high value on marriage and stigmatize divorce, there is a disconnect between what they need from a religious institution and what it provides. This lack of support for a woman in a domestic violence situation is a betrayal of the promise that was made by the church to that woman: to support her in part by providing refuge from life's difficulties. Similar disconnects and betrayals can occur when obvious signs of abuse are ignored by coworkers, by classmates, or in other social institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL

There are also sociocultural systems in which people do not actively participate on an intimate and daily level but that impact their behaviors and worldviews. For a victim who works as a teacher at a public school, her workplace is a part of her intimate system. By selecting which colleagues to befriend and which instructional materials she will display in her classroom, for example, she helps to construct her world at the school. Whatever the situation at home, she has agency in this setting.

By contrast, when this same woman seeks assistance from the police, child protective services (CPS), or health care providers, she enters a world in which her agency cannot be taken for granted. She has no personal role with respect to decision making by police, CPS, or the hospital and so is particularly vulnerable to objectification or betrayal. These experiences then impact her life in intimate settings, like the family. Perpetrators often exploit these institutions to extend their control over victims. For instance, a perpetrator may threaten to call CPS and have the children taken away if the victim does not agree to his demands. When these institutions betray victims of domestic violence, the ''secondary trauma'' from this experience can amplify the feelings of helplessness and loss of control elicited by abuse.

> *Sometimes I rescinded the charges, when (he and his family) said they were going to call DHS to have my kids taken. They told me if I didn't agree they were going to call me in to DHS. So I went up and signed affidavits to drop the charges. (Tanesha)*

Betrayal in these situations may be more abstract than the betrayal by an intimate partner. But the violations of promises implied by their standing in the community—the promise to protect, or heal, or provide for children's welfare—are no less devastating than a partner's betrayal. Despite the enactment of mandatory arrest policies in most U.S. jurisdictions, police frequently fail to make an arrest, or subvert the intent of these policies by arresting both parties because a victim has defended herself.

> *I came home and my house is empty. The kids are gone. Bank accounts are cleaned out. He even took my religious belongings. My rosary, he took everything. I am standing there with the clothes on my back and what little was left that he could not take in the haste of leaving, wondering, ''Where in the hell are my kids?'' I just go into a panic, absolute panic. I call the police, and they're like, ''Huh, they're his kids too.'' (Ronnie)*

Responses like this, whether rooted in bias, a lack of training, or preconceptions about the nature of domestic violence, become part of the decision-making process, including a victim's decisions not to report abuse or to remain with an abusive partner.

If a perpetrator is arrested, victims must then confront the legal system, another site where betrayal is commonplace. In criminal cases, or if victims pursue an order of protection, they are faced with dividing their energy between recovering from abuse and fighting for their rights within the legal bureaucracy. Although the general expectation is that the courts will mete out justice, this battle often begins with getting prosecutors to pursue cases of domestic violence. In family court, meanwhile, abuse victims are frequently forced to share custody with an abusive partner or actually have children removed because they ''exposed'' the children (by being beaten) to their partner's violence. Although there have been many reforms to the legal system in the area of domestic violence, the chance that this system will once again betray a victim of domestic violence remains high.

SOCIOCULTURAL BETRAYAL

In addition to intimate betrayal and institutional betrayal, victims of domestic violence also can be betrayed by societal attitudes and value systems. Myths about domestic violence are widespread. Because one pervasive myth is that domestic violence only occurs in poor, urban areas, for instance, there is a tendency to discredit white, middle-class victims of domestic violence when they come forward as victims, particularly in custodial proceedings. Another myth is that abuse cannot have been serious if a woman has not been injured, has not called the police, or has remained in an abusive relationship. As we've seen throughout this chapter, the significance of violence lies in its frequency and duration rather than in its severity. There are many reasons why women remain in abusive relationships other than the fact that the abuse is minor or has ended. These include the fact that leaving may be prevented by coercive control, and that effecting a permanent separation often can be an extended and complicated process. Like the mistaken belief that domestic violence is primarily a problem for disadvantaged groups, myths about leaving often lead courts and other institutions to trivialize the experience of domestic violence victims. This minimization of their experiences makes it even more difficult for them to seek and obtain help, further contributing to their sense of betrayal.

Sociocultural betrayal is rooted in the tension between the values our society purports to embrace—life, liberty, and the pursuit of independence and personal responsibility—and the lived experiences of domestic violence victims. The United States places great emphasis on so-called family values. Although people have their own understanding of what valuing family means, the media and other institutions have created an ideal family to which everyone is expected to aspire. This socially constructed ideal family is most often able-bodied, white, and middle to upper class, and consists of a married man and woman and children. This ideal may pressure a victim of domestic violence to keep her family intact, despite ongoing abuse. In a better world, valuing the family would mean valuing well-functioning, healthy, mutually collaborative and respectful relationships whatever the composition or sexual identity of the parent(s).

There are additional ways in which this value on an ideal family betrays victims of domestic violence. First, it creates the illusion that there is a perfect family, and that this perfect family is singularly defined. If a victim of domestic violence does not have this perfect family, then any negative consequences that occur within her family can be blamed on her inability to achieve this goal. Second, when family values are emphasized, but then functional resources and support are not provided, attainment of the goal is unlikely. Struggling to achieve this perfect family, blamed for what it is not, lacking the resources to effect change, victims of domestic violence are once again betrayed—this time by a cultural value that appears to be innocuous, even wholesome.

> *I thought he loved me. I was young. 17. I was pregnant. I wanted that happy home, me and my daughter, my baby's daddy. Am I an optimistic person? Yes. Very. (Natasha)*

DEVELOPING HELPFUL RESPONSES

Taken together, intimate, institutional, and cultural betrayals create an environment in which it can be difficult or impossible for domestic violence victims to acknowledge the level of violence in the home. As we've seen, these betrayals can define a victim's life course, creating a climate that makes betrayal blindness an adaptive response to persistent abuse. Against the risk of these betrayals, disclosing domestic violence is an act of bravery, a public acknowledgment that the victim's interpersonal life is not as society says it should be. When these courageous acts are discounted because of institutional betrayal, the psychological effects can be devastating.

> *Did I tell anyone? You don't tell anybody, because what does that say about you? I ended up going to the hospital from the stress. (Loretta)*

It is important to remember that persons function not merely in intimate partnerships but also in a network that extends through myriad institutions and includes a host of cultural, religious, and societal beliefs. Responding helpfully to domestic violence situations requires taking all of these interacting systems into account.

At the most personal level, people turn first to family and friends for support, encouragement, and advice. To this extent, family members and friends can be considered first responders to domestic violence. Because her subsequent actions are shaped by the response that a domestic violence victim gets when she discloses to family or friends, an appropriate response can give her the strength to remove herself from the situation, and begin the process of change required to heal.

Appropriate responses cannot be scripted, as they will change based on the cultural and personal situations of those involved. However, it is possible to set out some general recommendations.

LISTENING

Most importantly, the voices of domestic violence victims must be heard. Given the risks entailed in domestic violence relationships, it is natural to urge action or move to action ourselves without fully understanding the situation. But this approach can silence a victim who has yet to be heard. Domestic violence is complex and surrounded by conflicting thoughts and feelings. These can only be resolved if they are allowed to surface by giving a victim the freedom to explore the full range of her emotions and experiences. A critical component of this listening process is the capacity to respond nonjudgmentally. Cultural context is another critical aspect of this ability to listen well. This means working to put what is being said in the context of the social pressures felt by those within the subculture to which the victim belongs. Allowing victims to explore their conflicting feelings rather than imposing a societal expectation that she must leave gives her a better chance of regaining and maintaining her own sense of value and worth.

This may seem counterintuitive. One might think that if a victim knew that the situation were destructive, she would quickly exit. If she hasn't, it is because she does not understand the nature of the situation, and this misunderstanding should be corrected. In fact, telling women their situation is destructive or what they *should* do without fully understanding the context puts them in the same position they are put in by the perpetrator. It disempowers them in the same way by keeping them from defining their own course of action. The challenge is to support and respect the victim while also modeling a personal intolerance of abuse.

Domestic violence does not magically set victims apart from the rest of us. They remain colleagues, classmates, and fellow congregants at places of worship. Additionally, anyone in these settings can be victimized. This means that encouraging disclosure and help-seeking is everyone's responsibility, not merely the job of specialists. Something as simple as a flyer advertising services to victims of domestic violence placed on a church bulletin board may be encouragement enough for a victim to seek help. Additionally, it is in these larger social contexts that programs can be developed to teach people how to react appropriately to those who disclose information regarding domestic violence.

> *My friend, a police officer, made me go to the crisis center the first time. He was like, ''Just go once. If you never go back, I won't say anything. But promise me you'll go once.'' . . . My friend, he's proud of me for doing this. He thinks it's the bravest thing anybody could ever do. He's my biggest supporter. He really is. (Melissa)*

ASKING

Just as people must not be afraid to listen, they must not be afraid to ask. Both interpersonally and institutionally, there must be an ongoing dialogue regarding domestic violence. By remaining silent, in particular when faced with direct evidence of a violent act, individuals align themselves with the perpetrators. This silence can be considered another betrayal of victims of domestic violence. For example, a large percentage of women who seek welfare assistance are victims of domestic violence. There are state and federal policies in place that encourage (and in some areas, require) social workers to ask whether those seeking welfare are victims of domestic violence. Despite these policies and mandates, recent research showed that only 9 percent of women seeking assistance were screened for domestic violence, and only 1 percent received effective screening that actually resulted in disclosure.[4] 4

Although changes in policy are critical, they are not sufficient to combat domestic violence. The myths surrounding domestic violence also must be addressed, requiring a change in social consciousness. Many of these myths reflect the gender roles and scripts that are part of a larger cultural context. For example, women are expected to have sex with their partners, and if they refuse they are not being good wives. In reality, over one-third of women are victims of sexual coercion by husbands or intimate partners in their lifetimes. If the social script dictates that women be good wives to their husbands, and this script includes being available for intercourse at the husband's demand regardless of her own wishes, marital rape will continue to be denied as a form of domestic violence.

> *I had been staying there because of the kids. But now, I had already lost my oldest son, and I was still married to the abuser. I don't know if there was just something about me that day. But let me tell you, I would have died that day before I was going to have sex with him. And that was it. I was done that day. (Becky)*

An awareness of individual and cultural contexts can help increase knowledge of domestic violence. At the same time, the underlying value system that allows domestic violence to continue also must be addressed. Although redefining social values can pose a formidable challenge, consider how dramatically women's status already has changed since the time, less than a century ago, when women couldn't vote. Broadening our understanding of the family to emphasize respect for autonomy, equality, collaboration, and love would relieve considerable pressure on women to preserve their current family arrangements even in the face of violence.

Betrayal of a basic trust is one of the more profound harms persons can suffer. Victims of violence in intimate relationships are profoundly betrayed by someone they depend on. If they confront or withdraw from their perpetrator they risk losing the relationship and/or further abuse. Fully acknowledging the abuse may significantly risk their survival. It is not surprising, therefore, that many domestic violence victims adapt to or defend against these harms by denying or minimizing their abuse. Furthermore, as we've seen, institutional and cultural betrayal can build on intimate betrayal, compounding a perpetrator's attempts to entrap his partner. We have tried to bring the voices of those affected by domestic violence to bear on the problem of betrayal. When victims garner the strength, resources, and support, they may disclose what is happening to them and seek help. Whether they do this to friends and families, to co-workers, colleagues, or to helping professionals, there are two possible responses. One of these extends the betrayal initiated in the abusive relationship, implicitly supporting the perpetrator. The other reinforces the human connection between people, and helps domestic violence victims make the transition from victim to survivor.

NOTES

1. Iowa Voices Project, ''The Iowa Coalition against Domestic Violence,'' 2007, http://www.icadv.org/Iowa%20Voices%20Project.htm (last accessed February 1, 2008).

2. J. J. Freyd, ''Betrayal Trauma: Traumatic Amnesia as an Adaptive Response to Childhood Abuse,'' *Ethics & Behavior* 4, no. 4 (1994): 307–29.

3. Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2008.

4. T. Lindhorst, M. Meyers, and E. Casey, ''Screening for Domestic Violence in Public Welfare Offices: An Analysis of Case Manager and Client Interactions.'' *Violence against Women* 14, no. 1 (2008): 5–28.