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*Love Shouldn't Hurt*

UNDERSTANDING  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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BY SUE PIVETTA

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Library of Congress Card Number: 93-78333

ISBN 1-882960-39-4

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Printed in the United States of America

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**W**hat do you think when you hear the words ‘domestic violence’? Are you confused, frustrated, hurt? Do memories flood over you? Do you think of someone you know? Do you think of a call you once had, or calls you have had over the years. Do you have questions or does some other training, or your own searching answer them? Whatever the answer is to this question, we want to expand your understanding or thinking about one of the most important social problems.

There is so much to learn about domestic violence. There are laws, programs, things to say, things to do. There are calls to evaluate, there are excited utterances and much more that we can write about in training. What we narrowed this training down to was the human element — helping the student to understand why — if possible. Information about call taking and dispatching, what to say to a victim and laws can be found in many sources. The 911 Emergency Communications manual has an excellent chapter that guides the Telecommunicator in call taking. Our *Trainer's* PowerPoints have some vital best practices. We still believe the best learning comes from self discovery. Your self-directed learning for this topic will catapult your understanding even further.

We weren't sure if we should talk about the abuser first or the victim. After reading the information on the abuser, you probably wouldn't ‘need’ to read why the victim doesn't leave — however — we want you to be able to answer the MOST ASKED QUESTION about domestic violence — which is of course, “Why doesn't she leave.” We would prefer that people would ask instead, “Why would someone want to hurt their family?”

Those who don't understand say things like, “I'd leave him in a heartbeat if he ever hit me — it would only take one time!” In training in Colorado, a dispatcher asked us the same thing. He said this woman calls time and time again, and he sends officers time and time again. He felt judgment against her, he felt frustrated and confused. Not only did he blame her for her circumstances because she didn't ‘get out’ he blamed her for the burden *she* caused the public safety system. My short answer was to have compassion instead of judgment. Judgment causes the Judge to feel there is badness to her actions of calling for help. Would he feel the same for an asthma patient who calls when they can no longer breathe? But, we all judge others based on what we would do. Do you know what you would do under similar circumstances? Are there certain types of people who would leave and others who would not?

During our college course we had a battered wife in the class. Her husband took another course in the building and spent a lot of time watching her. She

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told us that before she became involved in this situation — she believed the same thing — she would just leave if anyone ever treated her this way. Now, here she was — frozen with self-doubt, fear and confusion.

And yet, despite repeated assaults — which included trips to the emergency room, irreparable physical damage, alienation from family and friends, deteriorating self-esteem, children who live in fear, repeated calls for police protection, and threats of death — she remained with the man who abused them.

### WHY STAY?

From our research we found there can be many reasons, with more than one contributing to the problem. The categories are not discrete, with many overlapping characteristics among the arbitrary divisions. Here from a book called “Pandora’s Box’ by Nancy Faulkner, PhD are some classifications of people who stay. This material speaks to women — who are the majority but certainly not the ONLY people who stay in abusive relationships. *I can also attest that I am personally know an abusive woman and her man - also emotionally ‘trapped.’*

Males are victims and there are same sex relationships that are abusive. Although the information may use ‘she’ - remember it just as well can relate to a HE or a she in a female relationship.

#### The Safety Seeker:

**It may be familiar, and oddly enough, a comfortable lifestyle.**

People tend to move toward relationships that are familiar and thus most comfortable. “Comfort” in this sense does not necessarily mean physical or emotional contentment; but rather “comfort” in the sense of having lived in similar situations. Superficially, it seems easier to deal with the “known” and “expected” than with uncertainty.

For brevity, this is necessarily a simplified explanation. To explain it a little further, if a spaceship landed in your front yard, the door opened, and funny little green people came out, you might be frightened.

What if I assured you that these were very friendly people, that they would take you to live on another planet in a stress-free paradise, but you could never return to what you now know as life on Earth? Would you go with the aliens?

Probably not. Because you haven’t been there, you don’t know if you can trust me, and you don’t know what to expect. You would probably stay where you are — despite creditors banging on the door, a leaking roof, your mother-in-law living with you, standing daily in the unemployment line, your daughter prostituting herself, and your son in jail for dealing drugs.

The unknown and uncertain can be too frightening for change, even when it is needed or wanted. Now at some level — even on a small scale we can all

understand this. Are there any of you who thought about leaving your Comm Center for a better opportunity but didn't? Do you know someone who has done this — should leave and didn't because it was comfortable?

**The Blind: Not realizing it is “abuse.”**

It might seem obvious that if a woman is being beaten to the extent that she is trying to cover bruises with heavy make-up and making occasional (or frequent) trips to the emergency room for treatment, that it would be clear to her that she is a victim of abuse. Our student knew she was, but somehow we had no effect on her when we spoke of the seriousness of the situation or our fears for her. “You could go to a shelter.” She may reply, “But those are for abused women.” A man may not want to admit he is a victim (weak). A gay partner may not want to admit it isn't ‘working’.

This is not an uncommon occurrence and can carry labels like “queen of denial.” But whatever the label, reason, or rationale, there are victims who do not apply the term “abuse” to themselves. These can be very intelligent women who may even have friends who have been abused, are aware that their friends are victims, and yet do not see themselves as “abused” — despite repeated confirming evidence.

This may be similar to a person who works in a setting where ‘toxic stress’ is allowed to persist. These people don't know there are agencies that value employees with good schedules, great pay, vacations, breaks, and wellness programs. They just aren't aware that good treatment is possible. Or you may link this to a child that thinks all fathers hit all mothers until someone can convince them it's not true.

**The Worthless: “No one else would ever love me.”**

People who remain in abusive relationships may feel undeserving of love or happiness. To compound these unworthy feelings, physical batterers also emotionally violate their victims.

This emotional violation generally takes the form of berating and degrading the victim with comments like:

“You're stupid”

“Nobody likes you”

“Everyone can see you're crazy”

“No one else would put up with you but me”

“You could never get by on your own” — and

“People who remain in abusive relationships may feel undeserving of love or happiness”

“The fantasies of “it won’t happen again” weave through most of the issues.”

“You’re damned lucky to have me.”

For a person who already doubts self-worth, these continuing and incessant messages can become a part of the person’s self talk and self-belief. Thus, the comments become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, victims live as they see self — useless and hopeless. You can link this to your own self defeating messages about losing weight, stopping smoking, getting what you want. We can all identify with false self-images. I can remember my first marriage when my husband constantly called me selfish for various reasons. It took another person to tell me that I believed it because he said it. He said it to keep me from doing anything I wanted (control). The new person reminded me that I was very giving and fought hard never to be selfish in any way — still it stuck for some time — even today I wonder if I receive anything if I’m being ‘selfish’. To understand another person’s distorted belief systems, look at your own smaller version of the same feelings or belief systems.

**The Defective: “I deserved it; I’ll do better.”**

This problem is an extension of “no one else would ever love me,” and involves issues of poor self-worth and heightened self-blame. Our student would become agitated if it rained and her husband wouldn’t like it as if it was her job to make the world right for him.

Some women blame themselves for being hit, believing it is something they did, or did not do, that brought on the assault. They may even believe that the beating was justified punishment. This can occur with the assistance of the batterer, who may be giving very distinct messages — “If you could just learn to do it right, I wouldn’t have to do this.” And it’s not only the women who believe this. My father in law said the other day that she deserved it if she stayed, she must like it. If he believes this — how outrageous is it for victims to believe it too.

Some batterers ironically attempt to keep their dysfunctional lives in control by compulsively ordering their environment. The movie, “Sleeping With the Enemy” depicted this type of abuser. If his wife did not hang the bathroom towels exactly as defined by him, or keep the kitchen cabinets expertly stocked and arranged, then he beat her. Some women batterers fall into this category.

Also, included in this category of abusers are those who are obsessively jealous, and most often without any justification. These unreasonably jealous mates continually imagine their partners are cheating on them. In these situations, the victims live in a type of fantasy world believing that if they are “good” then they will not be hit again. Or, even worse that they truly need to learn how to be a better wife, homemaker, husband — and generally a better person.