

# FAMILY CONNECTIONS

## Domestic Violence about Power and Control over Victim

*“For it is not the enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me; Then I could hide from him. But IT WAS YOU, my equal, my companion and my acquaintance.”*  
– Psalm 55:12

by Paulette Geanacopoulos, LMSW

Domestic violence is about power and control. It is not about being out of control or losing control. It is a systematic pattern of coercive behaviors intended to punish, gain and maintain control of the victim. It frequently begins so subtly that victims may not realize what is happening.

Ultimately, these behaviors become the normal course of the relationship. Not only does it take less to bring on the abuse, but their frequency and intensity increases over time. Also known as intimate partner violence (IPV), it occurs in all segments of society, and takes many forms: physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or economic. Because 85 percent of reported cases are women, we refer to victims as women and abusers as men but we are mindful that men are victims as well.

IPV often starts with “I love you so much that I want you to spend all your free time with me” and a relationship that quickly becomes exclusive. Rather than view his behavior as obsessive, the woman thinks it shows how much he loves her. And because she loves him, she complies: she quits her job, sees friends and family less and less, slowly becoming isolated from anyone who may be able to help her.

Then, something happens to bring on the first incident – perhaps she says she is going out with a friend – without him. He tells her she can’t go. To stop her and make her afraid, he gives her a “look” and lunges at her as if he’s going to hit her. Oftentimes, this incident occurs when she first becomes pregnant.

### Shock and embarrassment

For many women, this first act will cause her to end the relationship, but for others, she is shocked, embarrassed ashamed – “This couldn’t have happened.” She cries – he says he’s sorry and vows never to do it again. He says he loves her, begs her forgiveness and lavishes her with gifts. She believes him, and for a while, they are happy. But it doesn’t last. The cycle begins again.

To keep her off guard, the abuser uses different behaviors at different times. He monitors her e-mails and tracks her through her phone. He hurts or threatens to hurt her. He says he will report a family member to immigration. If he physically abuses her (and many don’t) he knows where and how to hit so no bruises show. She tries to stop the abuse by doing what he wants, but it’s never enough. She convinces him to go to couples counseling, and although in session he cooperates, as soon as they are home, he uses everything she said against her. She tried leaving when the abuse first began, but he stalked her. She doesn’t leave now because she has no place to go and no money of her own as everything is in his name.

She thought about talking to someone, but is afraid nobody will believe her as her partner is a pillar of the community. She is depressed and constantly



under stress as his barrage of criticism has whittled away whatever self-esteem she had. She feels powerless.

### Our Community’s Role

As a church community, we can play an important role to help victims become survivors. Step one is to acknowledge that IPV occurs in our community. Step two is to create a church environment in which victims feel comfortable turning to for help. Step three is learning how to respond in helpful, not hurtful ways, either directly or indirectly.

### BEFORE you do anything

Examine your own views and preconceived notions about IPV.

Understand that many women stay or return to an abusive relationship because they love their partner and want the abuse to end, not the relationship. Recognize it is difficult and dangerous for her to “just leave” especially if children are involved. (On average, three women die at the hands of a current or former partner every day. National Network to End Domestic Violence)

Understand that you cannot “rescue” her.

### Indirect ways to respond

- Post a flyer about abusive behaviors and resources in the women’s room of your church

- Include such literature in your Sunday Bulletin.

- Invite a speaker from a local domestic violence program to address your community.

- Educate the next generation. Hold discussions with youth about healthy relationships, respect, compromise, fair fighting, and how they and their friends define gender and sex roles to raise their awareness about behaviors that are red flags.

These suggestions will anonymously provide information to women-at-risk. As importantly, the mere act of publicizing information in your Church gives victims the powerful message that we recognize the problem, do not condone violence, and are not closing our eyes to it.

### Direct Ways to Respond

(Excerpted from “When Love Goes Wrong” Ch. 13, by Ann Jones and Susan Schechter.)

The hardest part of talking to an abused woman is getting started. She may be ashamed she will be the focus of gossip. She may have been taught to ‘keep secrets’ and believes she will betray her family if she exposes him. If she’s not ready to talk, tell her you’ll listen when she’s ready.

If she wants to talk but can’t get started, carefully begin your conversation. Consider these questions, phrased to allow her to talk about what her partner does and how she feels about it.

### What’s it like at home for you?

Everyone in a relationship has arguments, but let me ask you: What happens when the two of you disagree or argue?

- How does he handle things when he doesn’t get his way?

- Is he jealous, hard to please, irritable and critical?

- Does he ever push you around or hit you?

- Does he ever make you have sex or do sexual things you don’t like?

As she speaks, be careful of your facial expressions and body language so she doesn’t think you are judging her for doing the “wrong” thing, or you doubt what she is saying.

Tell her you believe her, that the abuse is not her fault, that she has the right to be safe and that there are people and agencies that can assist her. Keep what she says confidential.

If she expresses concern about breaking her commitment to her marriage, let her know that while there is no question we enter marriage with the assumption it will last for life, no victim should believe that our Church values the sanctity of marriage over the sanctity of her life.

For all intent and purposes, the husband, by choosing to engage in abusive behaviors and choosing not to stop, has already ended the life of the marriage.

If she says that as Orthodox Christians, we are taught to forgive our enemies, let her know that forgiveness doesn’t mean she “forgives” his actions. Forgiveness is for herself – so she can move on in her life without being consumed by bitterness and anger.

Let her know that God is neither punishing her nor is He “allowing” the

abuse to occur. Pray with her, but let her know that while prayer will give her the strength to deal with her situation, prayer alone will not stop the abuse.

Only the abuser can stop the abuse, but only if he takes responsibility for his actions.

Let her know that you are available to talk to her when she needs to, but know your limitations.

Encourage her to speak to a victim advocate who can help her sort out what SHE wants to do and who can help her develop a personalized safety plan that addresses her situation so that if and when she decides to leave, she will be able to do so as safely as possible.

Do not recommend mediation or couples counseling as this will endanger the victim more, and, interpreting the abuse as a “joint marriage problem” implies the victim is responsible, which is unfair, invalid and very hurtful to the victim.

### Support needed

Overall, remember that your friend or family member needs your support and love, even when she doesn’t do what you want her to do.

You will be going home to a healthy relationship but she will not. So don’t get upset with her and don’t give up on her. Just keep trying and caring.

### For More Information and Help, Contact

**NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE** 1.800.799.SAFE (7233) • [www.theHotline.org](http://www.theHotline.org)

The Hotline is staffed 24/7 by highly trained expert advocates available to talk confidentially with anyone experiencing domestic violence, seeking information or resources anywhere in the United States, or who may be questioning unhealthy aspects of their relationship.

**NATIONAL PHILOPTOCHOS, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK** Confidential social work telephone: 212.977.7782 • [www.philoptochos.org/socialservices](http://www.philoptochos.org/socialservices)

For information and help in our community, including fact sheets about IPV. Some are in Greek.

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FACTS-AT-A-GLANCE:** 6,488 - Number of American troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2012.

- 11,766 ...Number of women killed during those years by a current or former intimate partner.

- Federal Bureau of Investigation: 1 in 3 American women, and 1 in 4 American men, in their lifetime, will be raped, assaulted or stalked by an intimate partner.

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 10 percent of high school students, and 22 percent of college students report experiencing physical violence in one or more dating relationships. *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*

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