

BULLETIN

Ending family violence

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Chances are, many of you know somebody in your personal or professional life who is the victim of spousal violence. An astounding fifty one per cent of Canadian women have been or are victims of physical or sexual abuse.

Violence against women in intimate relationships touches us all, and as a health care worker, you need to be aware of the potential signs of violence, and be familiar with how to respond appropriately ... in a way that will invite and encourage a woman to tell some of her story ... not in ways that will silence her.

Even though men can be abused in intimate relationships, the majority of spousal abuse victims are women. Spousal abuse or violence can be defined as any physical, emotional, psychological or sexual behaviour that controls, intimidates or hurts another. Any kind of unwanted physical contact can be seen as an assault, and therefore is illegal. Many women, though, report that emotional abuse is much more damaging.

Someone who is being abused by an intimate partner may not appear to be who we perceive as the typical - battered woman." She may appear competent in many areas of her life. Women who are being abused may be physically hurt, but most common are the emotional scars that some women feel never heal. These women feel tremendous shame, self-doubt, isolation and embarrassment. Women report that shame and fear of future attacks ... whether physical or verbal ... make talking about their experiences difficult.

Fear that the police will be called also stops many women from talking about the abuse. They want the abuse to stop; they do not want the abuser to go to jail.

They may also blame themselves for the abuse, and believe that if they were just a better wife or mother, then everything would be all right. Many women also doubt their own experience, and minimize or deny to themselves that the abuse is happening.

As a health care worker, you may hear statements like, -Oh, this black eye is nothing ... I just walked into a door," or -Its no big deal ... he was drunk ... he didnt really mean to hurt me." Statements of disbelief, such as, -I cant believe this is happening to me," are also very common.

Women also fear the judgments of others. Many women express concern that friends and family will blame them for their predicament. -You made your bed, so lie in it" • -What did you do to provoke him?" • -How could you let him hit you?" • -If any man ever laid a hand on me, Id be out of there."

In order to talk about their experiences of abuse, women need a safe environment to do so. And they need to know that whoever is listening to their story will believe them unconditionally, and respond in a nonjudgmental way. You need to be careful how you respond to a woman who is talking about her experience with abuse. She needs to be reassured that she did not cause the abuse, and that you believe her story.

Because most women are ashamed and find it very difficult to speak about the abuse, they may not voluntarily begin to share this information with you. Follow your gut instinct if you suspect that there is more to the woman's story. There are some things you can do to encourage her to talk.

Conducting an assessment with women experiencing abuse

1. Always interview the woman alone.
2. Reassure her about confidentiality ... tell her you will not discuss what she tells you with her partner.
3. Allow her to tell her story without disbelief, interruption or immediate pressure to begin problem solving.
4. Determine if there are children at risk. Let her know you will have to report to the Ministry of Children and Families if she discloses child abuse or indicates children may have witnessed abusive incidents.
5. Acknowledge the seriousness of abuse and tell her that assault against anyone is a crime.
6. Do not put her partner down. Many women love their partners and want the violence and abuse to stop, but they may want the relationship to continue.
7. Obtain consent prior to making any referrals (this includes contacting the police only if the woman agrees ... the exception to this is if a child under age 19 has been abused by their parent.)
8. Respect her choices and decisions. She may not be ready to make big changes in her life. Each time she talks to someone about the abuse or reaches out for help, she is making progress.

Remember, the biggest gift you can give the woman is to listen and believe! You do not have to fix it for her! Create an environment where she feels emotionally comfortable talking openly about her situation. The women we work with who have been abused say that the one most beneficial and helpful part of their healing was having someone believe her story. This is quite often a front-line health care worker or police officer. Here are some possible questions that you might ask in order to further encourage her to talk.

- -You seem uncomfortable about this situation. I'm open to hear anything else you want to say."
- -Are you feeling frightened?"
- -Are you afraid to go home?"
- -We know abuse and violence in the home affects many women and that it directly affects health. I wonder if you ever experienced abuse or violence at home?"

If the woman continues to deny that there is something wrong, you can still give her written information about local community resources.

For women who have told you about the abuse in their intimate relationship, the following are ways that you can offer help.

- **If there has been an assault**, ask her if she would like you to call the police.
- **Tell her about transition house services.** A transition house can provide a safe place for the woman and her children to live for a short period of time. They also have a wealth of knowledge about other community resources that the woman may need.
- **Tell her what you know about abuse in relationships.** Tell her that things usually escalate over time. Things usually do not get better on their own. Most abusers need outside help to stop their abusive behaviour.

- **Reassure her that she is not to blame;** she is in no way responsible for her partners abusive behaviour. No one deserves to be abused.
- **Ask her about a safety plan.** If she has to leave the home in a hurry, has she thought about how she could do this and where would she go? Remind her about the use of 911 and encourage her to call the police if she is feeling threatened or in danger.

Finally, a woman you speak with who has been abused by an intimate partner may appear not to be taking in all of the information that you have given her. Remember, she may be feeling very overwhelmed by everything that has happened.

Whatever information she does take in will make a difference for her. Studies have shown that women will come into contact with many service providers a number of times before they call the police or leave the relationship. Each contact provides the woman with additional information and support. As a health care worker, you can make a difference in this womans recovery.

Anita Bloy and Sally Halliday are counsellors in the Ending Violence Against Women program at SHARE Family and Community Services. They co-facilitate a womens drop-in workshop and a mens therapy group. For general referral to community programs, they recommend the BC Institute Against Family Violence (1-877-755-7055 or 604-669-7055, also at www.bcifv.org). For referral and counselling, phone the Battered Womens Support Services at 604-687-1867. Special thanks to Jude Marleau at Victoria Transition House for her contribution to this article.

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