

Rise is a magazine by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 6, SPRING 2007

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Protecting Children from Domestic Violence

Many families come to the attention of the child welfare system because of domestic violence. Research shows that about half of male batterers also frequently abuse their children, and women who have been hit by their husbands are twice as likely to hit a child. In this issue, batterers, victims and children who witnessed violence describe the steps they took to find safety and their processes of recovering from the effects of violence.

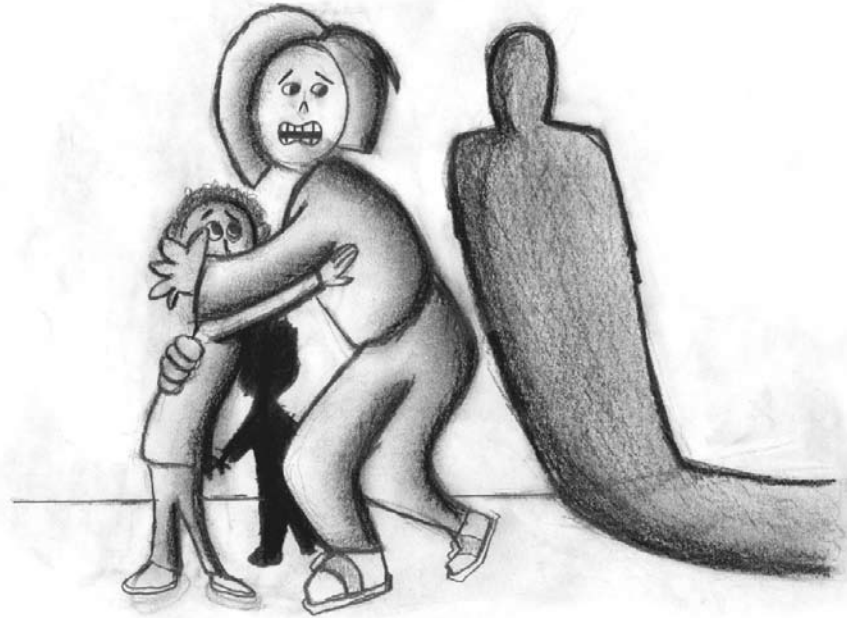


ILLUSTRATION BY TODD MELHOUSE

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'I Am Free Now'

The city stepped in to protect my kids and me.

BY ALICIA GABRIEL

Translated from Spanish.

Until a few years ago, I was living with a man who terrified me and our children with his jealousy and violence. I met him a few months after I came to the United States from Mexico, in May, 1992. The day after I arrived in this country I began to work in a clothing factory in New York City. There I met a man who I never imagined would become abusive.

I Felt So Helpless

Soon after meeting him I went to live with him. He prohibited me from everything. I couldn't have friendships with anyone. I couldn't linger at the store. I knew it wasn't a good situation, but by then I was pregnant.

When three months had passed, he began to beat me. I felt so helpless. At that time, my ignorance was so deep that I believed that I loved him and had to protect him.

Now I look back and feel guilty for having permitted the beatings by not leaving. I blame myself for being ignorant, for believing that he would change, for accepting him as my partner although he treated me badly. But in truth, it was not my fault he hit me.

Many times we argued over our finances, because he didn't like to work, although we soon had two children to support. When I worked, that bothered him a lot. On two occasions he grabbed me by the hair as I was leaving for work, and once he got in my face and told me, "I dare you to leave this house. If you do it, I am going to break your face."

"And why don't you get out of bed and go find yourself a job?" I said. "It's your responsibility as a father to go out and work."

"Who are you to tell me what to do?"

Why do you want me out of here—so you can go out with other guys?"

When I went to the check cashing place, he took the money right out of my hands. I'd say, "This money isn't yours!" But he hit me when I tried to keep it from him.

He'd say, "Shut your mouth. All you want to do is argue and argue about everything."

Hurting Our Children

Soon the abuse escalated, so that he wasn't hitting only me, he was also hitting our children. He was impatient with them, and when he was upset, he lashed out.

During the times when we weren't fighting, I talked with him about why he was like that. I told him, "Look, Pedro, you have to change if you want to be happy. You have to be loving with the children. You have to

worry about them and their future. Why don't you think about how this affects the little ones?"

He'd agree, but the next day he would return to the same behavior.

Taking the Punches

Once I called the police, even though I was afraid to because I'm an illegal immigrant and I thought I could get sent back to Mexico. But when they came to my house they didn't believe anything I said. My boyfriend's sisters were there and they defended him.

Domestic violence makes your strength turn to weakness. I felt there was nothing I could do. So I decided that life was unjust with me and I needed to live only for my children. I needed to be strong and take the punches. I felt that God was with me all the time and that no matter how difficult my life was I would survive.

Then one day a social worker from the foster care system arrived at my house to investigate what was happening to my children. That afternoon when I got home, I found a terrible notice—a letter that spoke about child abuse. Believe me, at that moment I wanted to die.

For a moment I stayed frozen, feeling like my life had come to an end. Then I said to myself, "My God, help me confront this big problem. Clearly, to protect my children, I have to do everything they ask of me so nothing worse happens."

Taken From Our Hell

I went to the agency and they asked me various questions. The worker told me, "Don't fear. We're going to help protect you and your children."

I asked them, "Where are you going to take me?"

"To a shelter that's secure," the worker told me. "If you don't want to cooperate with what we propose and you return to your husband, we'll have to bring your children to a place where they'll be safe and protected."

"What about my things?" I said.

"Forget your things," she told me. "You have to leave them. Our concern is that these children don't keep getting abused by their father."

I went with them. We got my children. They took us out of the hell that I couldn't leave.

When we arrived at the shelter, it was night. As I walked into the place I was crying silently. My son asked,

'My love, we can't return,' I said. 'We're going to start a new life in this place where we're treated well.'

"Where are we going?" He sounded like more of a man than he should've at age 7.

In the shelter the women met once a week with the counselors to talk about what it had been like living with our abusive partners. The counselors asked each of us how we felt about leaving home and living in the shelter. Did we feel protected or were we feeling fear? I felt fear and sadness, mixed with relief and hope. I cried a lot at night, and often asked myself, "Why did this happen to me?"

I was fearful about going out into the street. I feared that my ex would appear if I went out alone. But the counselor told me, "Don't fear anything. This is a good protected place." Even so, I told my worker that I couldn't get this image of him pursuing me out of my mind.

Traumatized and Shocked

After about a month the therapist sent me to a clinic to get therapy with a psychologist. She asked how I was doing emotionally.

"I feel very nervous," I told her. "In the first few weeks I felt as if life were a dark crystal ball." The trauma of what I'd been through and the shock of being moved to a new place was so much that I had a lot of difficulty talking clearly.

The therapist told me, "This is very important. Little by little you'll go on letting out all that you feel."

My Son Blamed Me

The hardest thing was that my son blamed me for separating from his father and leaving his father alone. It was hard to make him understand why we had to leave, even though he saw his father beating me. He was very small, and couldn't make sense

of the situation. I told him, "As you grow up, you'll realize the separation was not my fault."

But he continued insisting that he wanted to return to his father. "My love, we can't return," I said. Other times I asked him, "Do you want him to keep mistreating me?"

He told me, "No, Mama. He'll change. He's not bad. He's not going to do anything to you."

I had to change the conversation. "Mi hijo, let's talk about our new home. It's very pretty here. They give us everything, they give us food, and I can take care of you better here."

My daughter said to me, "Yes, Mami, I like this house. Nobody yells at us, nobody tells us nothing."

"Yes, my love. We're going to start a new life in this place where we're treated well."

As the days passed, I began feeling more tranquil, taking things more calmly. I gave a lot of attention to my son and treated him with love, and he began to feel better, too.

The social workers and staff at the



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shelter treated us well, but you know something? After we'd been there for a while I began to feel as if we were locked up in a jail. The rules were strict: nobody could visit our family, and when we went somewhere we had to say where we were going and when we'd be back. Plus, none of the children could walk alone through the hallways or get wild with each other. It was hard to live under so much control.

My 'Mansion' in the Bronx

Finally, after five months they moved me to my "mansion" in the Bronx, an apartment that has become my home sweet home. Only God knows why we succeeded just at the moment when it seemed like our nightmares would never end.

I haven't forgotten the past, but I've learned a lot about fighting to keep moving forward. Now nothing and no one will deter me from ensuring that my children and I are protected and surviving. My life has changed because now I feel free to make my own decisions and I am not under anyone's control, not my ex-boyfriend's and not the shelter's.

I am taking classes to learn English, and I am involved in an organization of parents who have united to improve the schools in my neighborhood in the Bronx. I have helped the community, and I'm active in my children's education and growth.

'I Am Free Now'

I also joined a group of parents who have been involved with the foster care system and are fighting to make sure parents are treated fairly. As part of my involvement in this group, I had the opportunity to write my story. Believe me, I never could have imagined myself seated in a chair in a writing group, telling the story of my life.

Sometimes my daughter says to me, "Mama, why do you do so many things? You have us going to so many places with you!"

I tell her, "My daughter, you have to come with me. I am free now, and I want you to be free to know the world."

Stepping Stones

The system's role in keeping kids safe.

Many child welfare systems nationwide have hired specialists to help caseworkers handle complex cases involving domestic violence. Roxann Mascoll, one of six domestic violence specialists at the Massachusetts Department of Social Services, explains the impact of her work:

My role is to support and advise caseworkers to better understand the dynamics of domestic violence and to better intervene when a family dealing with domestic violence comes to the attention of the child welfare system.

Building a Road

Right now, my role is changing because the way the system deals with domestic violence is changing.

First, I see the Massachusetts system giving a little more space to families to increase safety, rather than deciding to remove the kids right away. The system has found that removing kids often does more harm than help. Often the abuse continues and the system can't figure out how to get the kids back home.

Second, the Massachusetts system is doing more to engage fathers. In the past, my role was really to advocate for the mothers, the victims. Now we're focusing on the whole family.

Most mothers and fathers are concerned about how violence affects their children but don't know how to change the dynamics in their families. We encourage social workers to talk with parents about how we can help them build a road, put stones in the ground to step on to reach their goals, one of which is usually ending child protection involvement.

That doesn't mean we're not telling families directly what we need to see change, but we engage them in a conversation about how to make that change happen.

The Impact of Violence

I encourage caseworkers to talk with each parent about their children's safety and the role they want to play in their children's lives. Caseworkers ask questions to bring out parents' strengths like, "How do you think the violence is affecting your children? What do you want to see happen in their lives? Do you know how to help your children reach those goals?" This approach helps parents take responsibility for their children's safety. We look for the parents' strengths and hopes and build on that. If the parents say, "I want my kid to go to college," the worker can say, "Tell me what you think he needs to get there."

Mothers in general seem more connected to their kids. Fathers—or the boyfriend or step-dad living in the

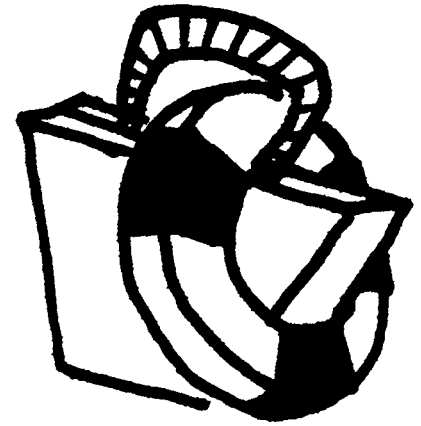


ILLUSTRATION BY YC

home—tend to be less sure of their roles, and some men who are committed to their children lack an understanding of the impact of violence on their kids.

At the same time that we're engaging the fathers, we also have to balance this with the needs of the mothers. It happens sometimes that when a caseworker interviews each parent separately, the abuser seems calmer and more in control, while the victim might be depressed and angry. For workers, there's a thin line between support and "collusion," which means taking the side of the abuser whose violence has made the victim feel so helpless and upset.

'What Do You Think?'

My role is to help caseworkers intervene safely, avoid collusion, and support the family. Even the most basic tasks may require careful planning. Recently a caseworker and I talked about how to make safe contact with the mom during an investigation. We'd been told the father had made threats that he would kill her and was almost always home.

We were afraid that showing up at the house would make the father so angry that he would hurt the mother. Just our presence could feel like a threat to the abuser's control over the family.

In this case, we spoke with the pediatrician, and the doctor's office called the mother. Then she called us herself, and she ended up telling the father before we came out, so that he felt prepared. She felt the safest thing was to tell him, "This is what's happening. I wanted to let you know myself."

We had no idea that she'd think it was safe for her to tell him. That's why it's so important to ask parents, "What do you think about this? How do you think you can help your children be safe?"

An Obligation to Protect

What parents need to know about domestic violence and child welfare law.

In 1999, New York City's foster care system removed Sharwine Nicholson's children solely because she was a victim of domestic violence. One night Nicholson's ex-boyfriend showed up at her house and assaulted her when she opened the door. While she was in the hospital, the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) took her children from a neighbor's home and charged her with "engaging in domestic violence."

Nicholson became the lead plaintiff in a class action suit against the New York City foster care system aimed at stopping the practice of removing children from victims of domestic violence solely because the parent had been abused. They won the case. ACS had to change how it handles cases involving domestic violence.

Jill Zuccardy, one of Nicholson's lawyers, explains what parents need to know about domestic violence and child welfare law:

Q: How have the New York City child welfare system's policies on domestic violence changed?

A: The most important change is that ACS can't, as a matter of policy, remove children from victims of domestic violence solely because they're victims. Obviously, that doesn't mean that it never happens. Some caseworkers make threats of removal inappropriately, but now it's the exception and it's against the law. As a result of the lawsuit, a committee of experts reviewed changes in the child welfare system's policies and training, and the agency directed more staff and funding to domestic violence programs and improved training. Since the lawsuit, it seems as though there is more of an institutional commitment to work with victims of domestic violence and to get them the help that they want or need.



ILLUSTRATION BY ROSA REIN

Children can be removed if the violence is repeated and serious, and the mother is offered meaningful help and decides not to take it, the children are clearly suffering serious emotional harm or the risk of physical harm.

Q: How do caseworkers decide whether to remove a child in a case involving domestic violence?

A: All parents have a duty to take steps to protect their children from harm. Research shows that about half of male batterers also frequently abuse their children, and women who have been hit by their husbands are twice as likely to hit a child. If, in addition to witnessing violence, your children are being neglected or physically or sexually abused, they can be removed.

In considering whether to remove children when a case involves only domestic violence, the casework-

ers and courts must look at specific evidence as to whether the child is being harmed. For instance: Is that child suffering emotional harm? Is that child scared or having nightmares? And, most importantly, is there a risk that the child is going to be harmed, even just by accidentally being caught in the middle of a fight?

Children can still be removed if the violence is repeated and serious, and the children are clearly suffering serious emotional harm or the risk of physical harm, and if the mother is offered meaningful help and decides not to take it.

The batterer parent can be charged

with "child neglect" meaning that he did not protect his child from violence or the threat of violence.

Q: How should an investigation proceed?

A: Caseworkers have to hold the abuser accountable, listen to the victim about what she needs, and offer services to the victim in order to reduce the danger to the victim and child.

Caseworkers and the courts can't assume the mother must take specific steps such as leaving her partner, taking out an order of protection or prosecuting, or going into a shelter as a condition of keeping her children. However, they can expect the mother to take steps to protect her children. For instance, a caseworker may suggest going to a shelter, while the mother would prefer moving to a relative's where the children will be safe, and she can do that.

Or, the mother may stay in her own home—like Sharwine Nicholson did—because she knows that the batterer is not coming back.

In cases where the children are removed, both the batterer and victim should be given case plans and offered services to help them reunify with their children.

Q: Should parents seek legal advice?

A: You should seek out legal advice if your child is at risk of removal. When I'm working with a domestic violence victim, helping her make a decision about what to do is the hardest part. I can't predict what a caseworker or judge is going to perceive. The law uses phrases like "reasonable efforts" and "minimum degree of care" and those are terms that are open to interpretation. The reality is, a lawyer can tell you your rights, but at the end of the day, if you're living with an abusive partner, you are taking a risk.

I Found My Voice

From victim to survivor to advocate.

BY MICHELLE ALLEN



The assistant came to fix the collar of my shirt and whispered that we would be airing in three minutes. I nodded and smiled politely.

My eyes drifted to the reporter who sat across from me. She was beautiful and impeccably dressed, sitting swathed in a huge, red plush couch. But she seemed anything but relaxed perched there on the middle of the Street Talk set in the Fox Five studios. The mayor's representative sitting beside me grabbed both of her hands together in her lap. Looking at me, her eyes seemed to ask, 'Why are you so calm?'

Silent for Too Long

The show was on domestic violence and I was there as a survivor turned advocate. I was not shaking or nervous because I had done enough of that dealing with my ex-husband.

Of course I was ready to talk; I had been silent for too long. Silent in shame, silent in fear, silent in pain, silent in anger. Silent while being emotionally and verbally abused by my ex-husband, who even after years

of separation found me to stalk me all over again, until I had to quit my job and college to go running with my son into a domestic violence shelter.

Starting Over

No, I was certainly not intimidated by the robotic cameras that moved in and out, attempting to get every angle. Those cameras were in no way as menacing as the stigma of having lived in a shelter or the many shameful times I had to go down to the welfare office and be polite as I could while being humiliated for my circumstances.

They weren't as strange as being unable to list my home address on job applications. They were no scarier than being unable to give the woman at the Board of Education a reason why I had not come sooner to enroll my son in school, certain that if I told her about my experience she would see me as admitting that I was an unfit mother.

I had my time to be scared and shaky when I left the shelter with the

lease to a new apartment and a final divorce decree, starting all over again all by myself.

Out of Darkness

Once I moved out of the safe space of the shelter and all the voices around me had quieted, I was left with myself and my own recollection of what had happened. Luckily, a counselor I had worked with back when I was just trying to leave my husband told me about Park Slope Safe Homes; she said I should call there if I ever needed anything. So I went for post-shelter counseling. I met an angel named Dana.

Dana reflected back to me what I didn't see in myself but what she saw in me—my good points. Although I hated to admit it, I still believed that I was unworthy and that nothing good would come of my life. Dana showed me my positive qualities, especially that I am eloquent and expressive.

panels, on the radio and in front of graduate classes. We hope to change how survivors of domestic violence are viewed, helped and treated.

As for myself, my work with VOW has made it clear to me that I no longer wish to pursue the corporate ladder but would prefer to work in social services, helping others.

A Needed Message

Gearing up for my appearance on Street Talk on Fox Five, I reminded myself to speak clearly and concisely.

The host's first question was, "What services are out there for women trying to leave an abusive partner?" I rattled off those that I knew of and had used, including Park Slope Safe Homes, New York Association for New Americans, and Safe Horizon.

I spoke about who I've become, how I am no longer crouched over and silent.

Somehow out there in TV land, there might be a woman crouched down in fear looking for a way out, ready to hear my message.

Advocating for Women

Dana also pointed me to the Voices of Women Organizing Project, an advocacy group comprised of survivors. VOW was the arm that helped to lead me out of darkness and silence into advocacy. I found my voice.

VOW tells survivors something nobody seems to tell us but we need to hear: You can do something positive with your experience. You can advocate for other women, your words can have an impact. Our members speak at conferences, on

My experience does stay with me. I am cautious about men and their motives, and I am pro-active in ensuring my safety. I have more than the usual number of locks on my door and bars on my windows. My telephone number is unlisted and I do not accept calls from folks who block their numbers.

Nonetheless, I speak. Somewhere out there in TV land, there might be a woman crouched down in fear looking for a way out, ready to hear my message.

Dear God

Compassion and prayer did not stop the abuse.

BY EVALIZ ANDRADES

I started dating my ex-husband when I was 16. Within two weeks he told me he loved me. I was flattered but felt he was a bit too obsessive, so after a few weeks, I broke it off.

I remember that day clearly. After I told him we were over, I got into a taxi and he ran after the taxi screaming that he loved me. I felt so guilty.

For weeks after that he stalked me. He would show up at my house at all hours of the day looking for me. My mother was concerned. She found his behavior dangerous and, over the next two years, tried to break us apart. But I thought he must really love me to pursue me like that. I felt almost obligated to be with him.

Right Before God

When I was 18 I moved in with him. Then he asked me to marry him, but I had this feeling inside that I shouldn't so I refused.

Around that time, I found myself feeling empty spiritually. I was longing for a God who was up close and personal. On March 13, 1988, I had the personal encounter with God I was longing for—I became a born again Christian.

Converting gave me a deep desire to make things right before my God. I believed it was my duty as a Christian woman to be married to the man I was living with. I felt torn, but a week after my conversion, I got married.

A New Man?

A few months into our marriage, my husband started using crack cocaine. It got so bad his own mother told me to leave him.

As a young wife, I felt like he did not love me enough to stay clean and sober. I felt rejected. At other times,



ILLUSTRATION BY CEZARY LADOCIA

I wondered if I had failed him in any way. I fasted for him and many nights I stayed up praying, in tears, asking God to bring my husband home safe. I believed God could save him, change him, cleanse him, free him from this addiction.

Eventually, with the help of my pastor, I was able to persuade him to go to a Christian rehab. He converted and became clean and sober. Six months later he came back a new man, or so I thought.

I Was All Alone

We began to grow in our faith and in our involvement with the church. Two years later we conceived. I was so happy. I would often look at my belly in the mirror and pose, loving the changes that were taking place in my body, heart and mind. Unfortunately, instead of feeling closer to me, my husband rejected

me. He became emotionally abusive. He also got involved with drugs again. During one of the most important and vulnerable seasons of my life, I was all alone.

This time his drug use was so bad we lost our apartment. Pregnant and homeless, I stayed with my grandmother in Puerto Rico for several months until he got help from the church and got clean again. I felt it was my duty to forgive him and give him a chance.

My husband seemed broken and remorseful. I later realized that he was sorry for what he had lost, not sorry for what he had done, two very different things.

Screaming and Yelling

As the years progressed, he became angrier and angrier. When I crossed him, especially by taking a part-time

job and returning to school, he would intimidate and threaten me. The more I asserted myself, the more out of control he felt, the angrier he got.

He would get in my face in menacing ways, wetting my face with his saliva from all the yelling, and blocking me from leaving the room with his body. He would break my things and throw stuff at me, later saying he only threw things in my direction. One time he took my precious figurine collection and smashed it up.

He also humiliated me in public, screaming at me in church, in the supermarket, and even at my job. Co-workers and some friends and neighbors started to make comments to me about how he treated me, and I wished they would confront him about his behavior, but no one did. That reinforced my feeling that I was responsible for him.

Making Excuses

I also made excuses for him. In my quest to understand him, analyzing his childhood and disappointments in life, I kept myself in a hole. I kept trying to save him, believing that if only I loved him, surely he would change. But he didn't.

I sometimes thought about divorcing him, but I feared that might be unbearable for myself and my kids. Besides my church family, I had no family support in the United States. I felt trapped, emotionally, physically and spiritually. I was a young woman with a part-time job, no college education and young children to support.

I also didn't want my children to grow up without their father. I grew up without a father and it hurt. And since he had not been physically abusive to the children, I felt they were safe.

Honeymoon Periods

At times, my husband prayed and promised to change. We had what I called "honeymoon periods." After a big fight, I would say I was going to leave him, and he would become a teddy bear full of remorse, begging me to stay. We had getaways, mini-vacations.

Then we would go to counseling with my pastors and church elders and I would dare to dream again. I didn't want to believe that my God could not fix this situation. Faith was my way of coping with despair.

Of course, the honeymoon would only last a few months. He refused to go beyond the step of acknowledging his "anger problem" to doing something about it.

It Was Abuse

Eventually we got couples counseling with a psychologist who called it like it was, confronting my husband about his abusive behavior. After witnessing one of my husband's episodes, the psychologist told him, "If I were her, I would not care to live with you either."

Seeing a doctor confront my husband about his abusive behavior, I started feeling less trapped and more sure of myself. I stopped wondering if I was exaggerating.

Unfortunately, that same year I became pregnant with our third child. Although I felt certain I needed to leave, I was soon on bed rest and dependent on my husband.

Shocking Violence

Then, when I was six months pregnant, I found out my husband was having an affair. I was deeply hurt and felt great shame. It was as if everything I had endured came to naught.

When I confronted him, he started to scream at me, denying the whole thing. Then he put his hands around my neck and choked me. As I struggled to get away, I looked at him in shock, and he let go of me. Amidst tears I kept saying, "I can't believe you choked me."

I immediately filed a police report, but the cops said since there was no evidence, they couldn't make him go. He refused to leave. I believed I had nowhere to go with my two little girls, so I stayed under the same roof with him.

'This Too Shall Pass'

Finally, after two more incidents, my neighbors called the police, and three days before I gave birth, they made him leave permanently. I am so glad that I was able to stay in our home with my children, and he was forced to leave.

Since my husband had not been physically abusive to the children, I felt they were safe.

Between caring for a newborn, raising two little girls and dealing with eviction notices (because I could not pay our rent), I was truly overwhelmed for the next few months.

I drank my tears daily. The pain would hit me like a wave. I would be walking down the street and suddenly a memory of him, of us, would hit me, and I would feel like

just sitting on the curb and crying. I would be on the bus and a small tear would slip down my face, escaping my sunglasses.

The nights were especially hard. As soon as it got dark outside, a shadow of sadness would come over me as well. I would call upon my few close friends for prayer. The Bible kept me sane. Scriptures, like the one that says, "This too shall pass," birthed incredible hope in me.

My children were a comfort to me as well. Once my 6 year old looked

me in the eye and said, "It's OK, Mommy, we could still be a happy family without Daddy." This touched me profoundly.

A Bad Dream

It's been five years since I left my ex-husband. Now, as I look back, it all seems like a bad dream. Despite the financial cost, and the grief I felt when my marriage ended, getting out of that relationship has been only posi-

tive for me. The children seem to be adapting well. It has not been an easy road for them, but they are resilient.

I got help from several programs. Section 8 helped me with the rent and the money to relocate, giving us a brand new start. Joining Voices of Women, an organization of domestic violence survivors, gave me community. Counseling and advocacy helped me understand the dynamics of domestic violence and deal with the guilt laid upon me for years. I came to believe that I was not put on this earth to serve as anyone's doormat, or to be drained emotionally by someone's abusive behavior.

School also became a tool of healing. Pursuing an education was a dream of mine I used to weep about in prayer, a secret desire I dared not share for fear of being ridiculed. But I've finished my bachelor's degree and am now pursuing a Master's in Social Work at Columbia University.

By the grace of God, today I am a new woman, continuing to heal daily. The same hope I once invested in my marriage, I now invest in my own life. I've turned my hope towards me.

A Double-Edged Sword

The connection between domestic violence and child abuse.

Child welfare officials are particularly concerned about domestic violence because children living in homes with batterers are more likely to be physically abused. Here are some facts on domestic violence's impact on children from the Family Violence Prevention Fund.

- In a national survey of more than 6,000 American families, 50 percent of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children.

- The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse suggests that domestic violence may be the major precursor to child abuse and neglect fatalities in this country.

- Men who as children were exposed to their parents' domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own wives than sons of non-violent parents.

- Children who are exposed to domestic violence are more likely

to exhibit behavioral and physical health problems including depression, anxiety, and violence towards peers. They are also more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crimes.

You can learn more at www.endabuse.org. To find help, call the national domestic violence hotline at 1-800-799-HELP (1-800-799-7233).

Women Raise Their Voices

Survivors advocate for child welfare system changes.

BY SABRA JACKSON

In 2000, I was looking for refuge after a traumatic episode of domestic violence. I joined the Voices of Women Organizing Project (VOW), an advocacy group of domestic violence survivors.

When I told my story to the other women at VOW, I felt safe, and through our efforts to improve how women and their children are treated by the family court and child welfare system, I feel vindicated.

I spoke with VOW Founder and Director Susan Lob about why she started VOW and how our organization effects change in the child welfare system. Here's what she said:

In the late 1990s it became clear that the New York City foster care system (now called ACS) was removing children from battered mothers simply because there was domestic violence in the home, even when the children were not present and when the mother was a good mother. It was such an outrageous development.

Passionate About Reform

We started VOW in 2000. Our members felt passionate about reforming domestic violence policies at ACS, in particular. A lot of families come to the attention of the system because of domestic violence, and about half of men who abuse their wives also abuse their children.

Over the years, ACS has worked closely with advocates and survivors to develop better policies. The present commissioner, John Mattingly, was the first to sit in the room with domestic violence survivors and hear directly about their experiences with the agency. VOW members sit on

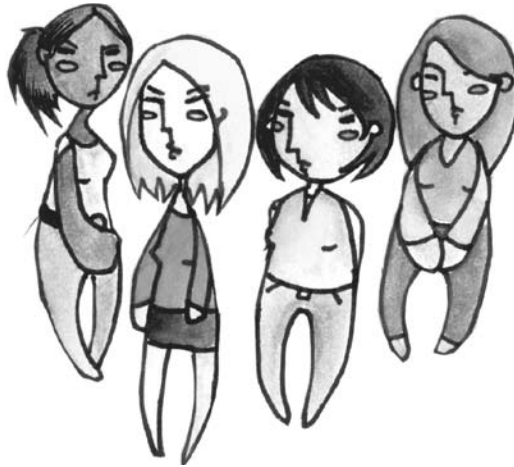


ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANIESENKO

For the first time, domestic violence survivors are involved in giving feedback to the commissioner and staff.

the Domestic Violence Advisory Committee and the Parent Advisory Workgroup.

On paper, the policies are really great. Now we're working on actually making those policies happen on the front lines. We have a 16-point list of recommendations of policy and practice improvements, and we keep track of the progress made on each.

A Positive Direction

One concern of ours has been that batterers, in particular, often make false and malicious reports to the child abuse hotline. There's been a reluctance to address this because no one wants to discourage legitimate reports. But we recently worked on a case where ACS was called about 30 times to a home because of a false allegation. That's traumatic to the family and a waste of the city's time and resources.

Now ACS has a protocol for workers to follow when they suspect false reports. (They're

supposed to contact the liaison between child protection and the DA's office.) In their latest media campaign, ACS included a line warning that false and malicious reports are a crime, and they now have it on their website and in brochures.

We've also made recommendations around training. ACS provides good training now on domestic violence, but good casework is about sensitivity and requires ongoing support.

Changing the system is often compared to turning the Queen Mary around in a small channel, but I feel positive about the direction that ACS is going in. It's a good sign that survivors are, for the first time, involved in giving feedback to the commissioner and staff and that the domestic violence staff are responsive.

A

How

Connect and Change, a project run by the Women's Therapy Center Institute in New York City, connects women who have left domestic violence relationships to private practice therapists who provide therapy for free for as long as the women feel they need it.

Many victims of domestic violence join support groups or get short-term counseling. Connect and Change helps women make deeper changes in their lives. Linda Arkin, the program coordinator and a licensed clinical social worker, explains how domestic violence affects women and how women can heal:

Q: How do women end up in violent relationships?

A: The truth of the matter is that people get into abusive relationships without realizing it. No one is looking to be abused.

Many women who get into abusive relationships, but definitely not all of them, experienced violence while growing up. If people have witnessed abusive relationships growing up, they have a certain tolerance for violence and are not as quick to realize that what's going on is unacceptable. Sometimes women stay because they keep hoping they can change the abuser, which was something they weren't able to do growing up.

Women also stay because there's an emotional process that takes hold in domestic violence. The victim's thinking changes. To outsiders, it looks like, "Why are they staying?" But there's a kind of brainwashing that goes on that doesn't allow victims to think clearly. Women are made to feel responsible for the abuse, to feel they caused it and that they don't deserve better, and that if they leave they're going to get hurt (which is sometimes true). They're terrified.

After a while, their ability to test their perceptions against what is really going

Healing Connection

therapy can help survivors recover from the effects of violence.

on is off. "Reality testing" would be, basically, to realize that it's not your fault, it's the abuser's. But your ability to do that has been changed by hearing constant put-downs, and you don't know what's true and what isn't. A lot of what therapists do is to help women realize what's true and what's not true about them, and help them rebuild their sense of self.

Q: How does experiencing domestic violence typically affect women?

A: Women are coming to us because they're out of the relationship but they're still suffering from feelings of sadness or low self-esteem, or they're experiencing effects of violence such as flashbacks, avoidance, or memories of the past that seem to keep coming back.

A feeling of being cut off from your own feelings is very common. A lot of times women have had to really detach emotionally to deal with the situation, and that continues after the relationship is over. You're in a detached state if you're not really dealing with your feelings, or if you're feeling like you don't have any feelings, or if you don't really know what you need or want and are finding it hard to make any decisions.

Someone who is being abused is always walking on eggshells, worrying about the next incident. Life is not about what you need or your children need—it's about what the abuser needs. So you're not asking yourself, "What do I want? What do I need? What do I feel?" It's very hard to make decisions in your life if you don't know what you want, need, or feel.

Q: How can therapy help women heal and stay safe?

A: In therapy, women have a consistent, trustworthy person to talk to about their feelings.

evaluate new partners. If women haven't taken the time to really understand what happened to them, they can go on to date someone else who will also be violent. It's not that they're looking for an abusive

you're victimized, you're unlikely to choose a different sort of partner.

When people are really conscious of their needs and wants, and understand the cycle of violence, they're likely to spot someone who might be abusive sooner. It's a very conscious effort. You have to become very conscious of yourself and of who you're going out with, so you notice if there's the slightest thing wrong and react to it. If the therapist is hearing about a new guy, and this new partner sounds controlling, the therapist can help with "reality testing."

With trauma, it usually takes a long time to deal with the deeper issues. There are many different ways that therapists work, and many different ways that patients want to work. If a woman is having flashbacks, she may share what they're about or she may not. But at least she'll work with the therapist to understand why she's having flashbacks and how to take care of herself when they happen.

Or if a woman feels that she's not doing OK, that she's depressed, or maybe just finding herself irritated or upset with her kids a lot, the therapist can help her figure out what's going on and learn practical ways to cope better.

Sometimes women need a therapist to talk to just to get through the stress of court or the practicalities of daily life, and sometimes they come in depressed and we see that lessen as the work goes on. A lot of it is just the therapist helping people get to know themselves. The therapists help them deal with the pain so they can cope with life better.



ILLUSTRATION BY RIEKA TILLETT

If you don't get real counseling to understand the ways your thinking changes when you're victimized, you're unlikely to choose a different sort of partner.

Therapists can help women sort out their feelings as they try to deal with the issues of their lives. Especially if you have children, it's very difficult to get childcare, jobs, apartments, and legal issues taken care of. Victims often have a lot of medical issues and a lot of running around to do. Therapists can help break down tasks so life feels more manageable.

Therapists can especially help women

partner, but that their thinking is still off. They're still feeling bad about themselves and unable to make decisions about their own safety. They may downplay safety risks because they feel alone and want the relationship to work.

If you don't get some kind of help—real counseling—to understand the dynamics of abuse, control, and the ways your thinking changes when

The Company of Women

Support groups and art therapy help me heal.

BY ELLA VERES

In the village of my childhood in Transylvania, Romania, we had *sezzatori*, gatherings of young women who would work together on their trousseaux during white snow winters. Girls gathered in candle-lit rooms and worked together, crocheting fine lace, spinning wool. They would embroider white blouses with white silk thread. Can you imagine? White on white in candlelight.

It was a world of women. In my remembrance it was a warm, safe, cocoon of caring, as if we were within an iridescent soap bubble, fragile and of another world, a gossamer life it seems now. It was life before men somehow, but with longing, the expectation of trusting and solid love.

The Past Came Along

How does this translate to now? Now I live in a shelter for domestic violence victims in New York City. The violence I grew up with in Transylvania followed me here. The real horror in Transylvania is not vampires but alcoholism and its violence. My father suffers from it, my younger brother died of it. I often saw women being beaten, shouted at, called names.

I came to America with my son to start a new life and forget about the past. But the past came along in our luggage. Our landlady and many of our neighbors, fellow Romanians, were alcoholics. All too familiar. Then I met a boyfriend, a musician familiar with European culture who lived on what I thought was the edge. The real America. Soon he moved in with my son and me.

'He'll Change for Sure'

It seemed weird that every now and then he'd shout at me, filch a bit of money, hurl things about in his jealous bouts. I thought, "It's a period

When I hear the women talk about their lives, I feel weepy-proud.

of adjustment. I'll figure out how to interact with him, avoid his anger fits." Since he never hit me and he'd always cool down and apologize to the skies, we went on. I don't know what made me think it, but I told myself, "He'll change for sure."

In the quiet periods he was my co-adventurer. He knew the city. Like a walking encyclopedia, he told me outrageous stories about every building, every block. We lived on nothing without the shame that I usually felt

for being dirt poor in America.

Then one fine day I went with him to a place where he got "social services," he said. I looked around, and everything there was about HIV. His caseworker asked me if I was HIV positive. "What?!" And then it dawned on me. I was dizzy. She looked compassionately at me. She asked my boyfriend to come in. I looked at him. I asked him if he was positive. He nodded. Yes, for more than a decade.

The Abuse Escalated

It was horrible until I found out I was negative. I felt I could not forgive him that he not only risked my life, but had no qualms about making my son an orphan.

Then I found excuses for him. Plenty. That he had a sad childhood, his

mom, a drug addict, abandoned him. What could be more horrible than to sleep in phone booths, curled on cardboard, wind howling, poor child shivering? I told myself, "He doesn't know anymore how to be kind to people." And we went on for 10 more months, even as his abuse escalated.

We went from bitter arguments in the privacy of our home to him cursing and jostling me about in public, from sarcastic remarks about my artwork to attempts to tear it down. He showed up at my workplace trying to make me lose my job, then menaced my co-workers.

Stopping the Nightmare

Finally in the spring I realized that his behavior had gotten worse and worse and it really, really had nothing to do with me. He wouldn't change.



ILLUSTRATION BY TODD MELHOUSE

I had to stop the nightmare. One day after he attacked me, breaking the eye glasses I'd been proud to afford, I went straight from the emergency room to a domestic violence shelter with my son.

My boyfriend left me all kinds of messages, first whining about how horrible I was, then offering to pay for my eyeglasses, then philosophizing about life and how much this hurt. I didn't take his calls. He stalked me at work. I called the police.

I didn't stand still. In the shelter, I read books about domestic violence, about shame and about rapists, about why people are hateful. Then, suddenly, I felt a need for other women's companionship. In the shelter, I don't feel close to anyone. In the elevator, the other women don't say hello. Most of them are still upset with life. But the babies look at me with glittery eyes, and wave their little stick hands as they go by.

One woman always has fun. She lets her fluffy hair bounce, dresses up with hip jackets and always has a necktie for a belt on her tight jeans. She sings to her daughter and tells her between noisy kisses how she loves her, and the daughter laughs and laughs. I am so happy to see that woman sauntering down the street, me behind her. Her buoyancy encourages me to be myself too, to dress up, be vibrant again.

Putting Our Lives Back Together

Seeking the company of women, I went to domestic violence support groups and to art therapy. We do something beautiful together. Working with our hands while bemoaning our dismal situation, we put our lives back together out of strands of silk and ribbons, scraps of

paper and loose buttons. We make something out of nothing.

These women don't just sit and cry. They talk, and so do I. I tell my story, and I give my opinions. Terezina, with a mean girlfriend who taunts her because she put on some weight, is ashamed of her body. She doesn't want to be seen naked, is even afraid to go outside. Terezina would like to take a job she was offered as a bartender, but her girlfriend laughed

Working with our hands, while bemoaning our dismal situation, we put our lives back together out of strands of silk and ribbons.

at her, "No one would hire you, you blimp!"

"What a bore is your girlfriend, Terezina!" I intervene. "Go get the job. My crook wanted to isolate me, wanted me to be a nothing. That's how they are. Go meet people, see how it is to have money and a job. What do the pub clients care if you are fat?"

Struggling for Dear Life!

When I hear the women talk about their lives, I feel weepy-proud. They suffered. Some didn't come out of it all sane. But they struggle for dear life! Dolores works at Wendy's now. She coils her hair, polishes her nails, takes ballroom dancing classes. Dolores is glad she doesn't need to cook and slave for her slob who would dirty the house on purpose: "What? You have nothing else to do at home!" Dolores got rid of him. She ushers at church. She's happy serving people.

Their stories make me realize how

terrible it is that we were all raised to think that we are not complete without a man. Our childhood misfortunes made us ready prey. We felt special to be loved in such a dramatic way by our messed-up abusers.

My mom had a hard life and didn't know it was crucial to tell me that I was special when I was small. But I've sorted that out. I tell myself all day long how I'm special, and I listen to myself without giggling.

Blissful Times

I make time for myself now. I've had blissful times going to the beach, reading, people watching. I started to paint, not knowing how badly I wanted to. (I stopped painting when I was 14. Parents didn't approve.)

I put my experiences into plays and poems that I perform around town. Many women come to talk to me, saying, "I am in the same situation as you." To be ready when they come to me, I put together some brochures in English and my native languages and created a huge yellow bag to put the fliers in that has "MY HIV BAG" written on it. It has shock value. Hopefully it will attract attention, give me a chance to tell other women to protect themselves from HIV and domestic violence.

More Healing to Do

Still, I have more healing to do. In art therapy, things come out. I was working on a collage, making a quilt

of images, and enjoying it, but then I watched myself. "Why do I so neatly cut the pictures out? Why can't I tear them out? Why do I cut it boringly? I have no more spontaneity!"

Every morning I wake up and feel with my feet for my pink flip-flops. I don't like touching my soles to dirty floors! My son sweeps and mops, but he is not thorough, so I am always looking for my flip-flops!

I love walking barefoot, I remind myself. "But I haven't had any clean floors lately;" I think. It's been a long "lately"—years, decades. Really, what kind of life is that? Fearing the floor, fearing men, needing men, hiding from the world. Why don't I just dash out of the bed and go dancing to the bathroom? I should dance, not shuffle my way through life!

Sometimes in the groups I don't want to listen. One girl was talking about a maniac she met who seemed like a pillar of society, and all I could think was, "My God, why do I come here to be reminded about my past? How my boyfriend cursed me and hurt me. Or my ex-husband, a maniac with the eyes of werewolves."

This Is Recovery

But by the end of the sessions, I am elated. Each time I learn new things and I think that means the old bad things will have to go away, to make space in my brain for the new thoughts. In comes my white-on-white, my quilt, my collage, my memory of bare feet, and off goes the memory of my broken glasses, maniac eyes, arguments in the street.

One day my mind will banish the old and be filled with the new, and I will put my feet down on the floor and go dancing from my bed. This is recovery.

'It's Your Fault'

I needed my mom's protection but she couldn't even protect herself.

BY JENNIFER HOFFMAN

When I was 10, my mom ran into an old acquaintance and they immediately started dating.

The beginning of their relationship was like a fairy tale. He made us feel like part of his family by taking us out to dinner and the movies. He set strict rules for his kids but was always making them laugh and giving them hugs. It felt so right.

After four months, my mom started to change. She didn't go out as much. She made up excuses to avoid taking my younger sister and me to our sports and Girl Scouts. She said, "You guys don't need to go anyway."

Soon we weren't allowed to go anywhere with my mom unless he was with us. He would tell us straight up, "You're not going because I said so." He put my mom down and made her feel bad about herself. He'd say, "You can't live without me. You know you need me." Or "No one else will want you, you're nothing."

Nothing but a Lie

Soon I heard my mom crying at night because he had slapped her. I also saw him whip his kids with a belt or slap them on the face. The loving father he had pretended to be was nothing but a lie.

Then we moved in with him. He was very controlling. I tried to stand up to him. Then he would threaten to whip me with a belt. A few times, he did.

My mom always chose him over us. One time he whipped me with a belt and threw a chair at me. Later that night I told him, "You can't hit me because you don't have permission," but my mom wouldn't stand up for me. She looked as though she was about to cry. She had this empty



ILLUSTRATION BY SHAUN SHIBHOO

look in her eyes like she wasn't in her body.

I felt like it was my fault because I couldn't do anything to stop it. I prayed to God for him to go away. I threatened to call the cops but I was too scared that they'd take us away from my mom. Once I packed my stuff in a little kid suitcase and asked my little sister to run away with me. But I was afraid to leave my mom. I did not want her to be alone.

Tearing Our Family Apart

At school I slowly stopped talking to my friends and started hanging out by myself in the bathroom stalls. At recess, I hung out by myself and collected rocks instead of playing tetherball. I didn't want to be accepted because I felt bad about myself.

My mom saw that I was having problems so she signed me up for therapy. Like our friends and family, the therapist told my mom she should break up with him because he

was tearing our family apart.

Finally, she told us, "I broke up with him." I was happy, but soon she was back with him. They were off and on for the next two years.

Put into Foster Care

In sixth grade I started missing school because I was depressed. Eventually, I stopped going altogether. I went to a new school in 7th grade and after school I went to a day treatment center where I had a therapist and

did art therapy to work on my anger. I was also put on medication.

But I would ditch class and use my bus pass to go around the city. I also started eating a lot. I would only leave the house to go to the store once a week. I was a hermit.

Finally, I was placed in foster care because of my truancy. I was so depressed, I didn't even care.

Two months later, on my 13th birth-

day, my mom told me she broke up with him for good. I didn't feel anything because I figured she was going to get back with him. But she didn't.

My Pain Isn't Gone

Even though he was gone, my pain wasn't. I had shoved the hurt down for so long that it had caused a huge chain reaction. I didn't know who I was anymore. I felt so much anger, hurt and humiliation. I didn't see the world as a happy place. I didn't like myself and I didn't think I could ever be happy again.

On weekend visits with my mom I would scream and yell: "It's your fault I'm in the group home." I wanted to make her feel guilty. She would say, "Get over it."

My Experience Stained Me

With the help of my school therapist, I talked with my mom about how I felt without her saying that. She looked like she was about to cry, but she didn't apologize. She never has. She said he was controlling her and it wasn't her fault.

It took another two years of therapy to finally stop feeling as angry at my mom. Our relationship is better now, but there's a big wall between everyone in my family because we all dealt with what happened in different ways.

This experience has stained me. I don't smile very often and I prefer to be by myself. I worry about what people will think so I don't give them a chance to get to know me. I'm not good at expressing my emotions. I don't know if my anger will ever go away. It amazes and depresses me that my mother meeting one person could cause me so much pain.

Reprinted from LA Youth.

It amazes me that my mother meeting one person could cause me so much pain.

Witness Protection

How to help kids recover from living with violence.

Carrie Epstein, senior director of child trauma programs at Safe Horizon, explains how witnessing domestic violence can affect children, and how parents and therapists can work together to help children recover.

Q: How can witnessing domestic violence affect children?

A: Children who witness domestic violence are affected in different ways. Some children exhibit aggressive behavior, and some feel anxiety and depression, which are not as easy to recognize.

Children might have abdominal pains, headaches, insomnia, or bed wetting. They might show symptoms of separation anxiety (fear of being apart from their parent), an inability to concentrate on schoolwork, or feel a lot of guilt because they were not able to protect their parent or stop the abuse.

However, not all children will display symptoms of distress. Some children are just very resilient—they have a natural ability to cope with stress or adapt well to difficult situations.

Q: How do therapists help children cope with anxiety?

A: The first task of therapy is to help children cope more effectively with overwhelming thoughts and anxiety.

We work with children around identifying how they feel. Many children of all ages don't have the verbal skills yet to say how they feel. They might say "Happy," or, "Sad," but that doesn't cover a lot of the emotions they're feeling. We help them learn other words: anxious, confused, helpless, angry. If they can convey to others how they're feeling, people can respond appropriately.

We also teach kids different stress reduction techniques like "belly

breathing" or "thought stopping" so that when they notice that they feel anxious, they know some ways to calm themselves down.

"Belly breathing" is deep breathing that relaxes the body. "Thought stopping" is a way to take control if you have a thought going through your head that's stressful or upsetting. Many children and adults feel that we're at the mercy of our thoughts—that if a thought is in our head we can't do anything about it, but actually we can. I talk to kids about imagining a big stop sign and having that pop up to stop upsetting thoughts.

"Positive visualization" is another way to interrupt a thought and help a child (or adult) relax and refocus. We teach children to replace the unwanted thought with something more calming and less provoking. I might ask, "What do you want to replace it with?" Kids say, "Thinking of butterflies," Or, "A trip to Candyland," or

they mention a safe place.

Therapists might also teach kids to do something called "progressive muscle relaxation" where you slowly relax your whole body. When our muscles are tense and anxious, we feel very tight and when our muscles are relaxed we feel calmer. I have children think about a piece of spaghetti that's uncooked and then cooked, and focus on turning each part of their body into cooked spaghetti.

It's always helpful to learn about these techniques because all children go through situations that are anxiety provoking or stressful, and they can use these methods into adulthood.

Q: How can parents help their children recover?

A: The ability to not get set back in the face of obstacles is called "resilience." There's been a lot of research recently to help us understand why some children are so resilient. Researchers have asked: What are

the coping mechanisms that are helping these kids out? What kinds of protections did they have in their families, schools or personalities that helped them handle the stress?

Caring, supportive relationships with family help build a child's ability to cope with stress and adapt to changes. A deep attachment to a parent is a very basic need, a vital need. But children who are growing up with domestic violence may miss out on bonding time with their moms. A mom living in fear or feeling depressed or overwhelmed by life may be unable to handle the stressful demands of a toddler or even an adolescent, and kids can usually sense that a parent isn't really available.

Setting aside time to be close to your children can help your child become more resilient. Therapists often work with parents to help them re-establish the activities of daily living that help children grow, like regular bedtimes and mealtimes. Re-starting those routines, and making time to bond with a child, can help you and your child recover.

Researchers have also found that kids become more resilient when they have opportunities to participate in activities—like music, sports or after school programs—where they can build meaningful relationships with people outside the family. Teachers, coaches, or mentors can offer strong support. Having an adult believe in you and support you can plant a seed.

Parents (and therapists) can identify someone who can give extra care and support to the child, such as a grandparent, coach, teacher or family friend. Parents can also get children involved in positive activities that give them a sense of accomplishment and relaxation.



ILLUSTRATION BY TODD MILHOUSE

'There Is Another Way'

Men in Colorado speak up to stop abuse.

Six years ago, I got into an argument with my wife when she was pregnant. I wanted her to quit smoking, she wanted me to quit drinking. She told me, "My smoking doesn't affect our relationship as much as your drinking."

Things got out of hand and she called 911. I was mandated to go to a domestic violence batterers class, drug and alcohol abuse groups, and parenting classes. I was angry but I learned to accept that I chose to go, in the sense that I got myself into a predicament where I had to go.

Men Against Violence

In the groups, listening to other people talk, I thought, "I could lose my child, my wife, my job." I felt tired of the arguing, of never feeling good and never making others feel good about themselves. I thought, "It'll be so much easier to do the right thing."

Now I'm part of a group in Colorado Springs called Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) that started two years ago. We've spoken at community meetings, the community college, the sheriff's office, a domestic violence summit—anywhere that wants us to come and tell our stories. The way I see it, laws are changing, and we need to give men the tools to change too, not just tell them, "This is not right."

The Tools to Change

Sometimes people think it's really shocking what comes out of my mouth, that one person can treat another person that way. People ask, "Why did you change? Was it hard?"

In the batterers' group, I learned about things like taking "timeouts" when you get angry, having empathy and sympathy for other people, and showing love in a relationship. I learned that other people have feelings and what you do affects them,

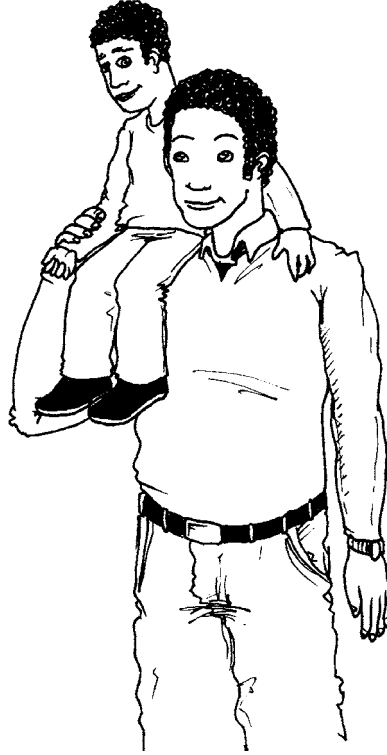


ILLUSTRATION BY RUI DA TILLET

I learned that other people have feelings and what you do affects them, which is something I didn't really understand from my childhood.

which is something I didn't really understand from my childhood.

My dad was physically abusive, and my mother was not around. When he came home, you feared what you did wrong or didn't do. I grew up in rural Illinois and it was a hush-hush situation. Things weren't spoken about, people turned their eyes away. Now I see that as wrong. I prefer to help and speak up.

Feeding a Relationship

In the groups, I learned that you have to feed a relationship, you can't just go home and sit on the couch

and expect to have sex. My idea of the relationship was that my spouse would cook and clean, and I would just to stay in power, take care of bills and get groceries.

I learned "romance tools"—things you do to build a connection with your partner. My wife and I started taking weekend trips out of town, and that helps out. I also changed my attitude toward her doing things without me. If she wants to see her family, I say, "I'll see you when you get back" and make it known that I'm not going to be mad.

When I told her I loved her before, I was kind of saying it without meaning it. Now she can actually feel it. Helping out around the house isn't, you know, a big thing, but it shows that I'm listening to her say "I had a long day" and that I care enough to do something nice, like cooking the dinner or cleaning up.

The hard part was remembering to use these tools and not revert to abuse or even certain looks or verbal tones. It meant stopping all the things that came easy. Once you figure out how the cycle of violence works and start catching your anger earlier and earlier, you can get what you want—and even more—just by being nice to someone.

'There Is Another Way'

At MAVA, we tell our stories, and give out information on domestic violence. We've probably gotten about 200-300 pledges. Men fill out the card with our mission statement on the back: that we'll hear women's and children's voices, refrain from abusive activity, refrain from abusing ourselves, and stand up against violence.

I hope people hear that there is another way besides abuse. I didn't realize that controlling the finances was abuse, or that telling my wife she couldn't go somewhere was abuse. I looked at it as, "That's my wife, she should listen to me."

I'm sure my son has benefited from the changes I've made. I don't remember my dad telling me he loves me. When I drop my son at daycare, I make sure to tell my son I love him and to kiss him goodbye. My son hugs people, he knows how to show affection toward others. Hopefully he'll remember these lessons when he grows up.

—Jamey Block

Losing Control

Why men batter and how to stop.

Vicki Gorder is a co-director of Partners in Change, a domestic violence offender treatment program in Colorado Springs. Here she explains how the program helps batterers change:

Q: What is your approach to working with batterers?

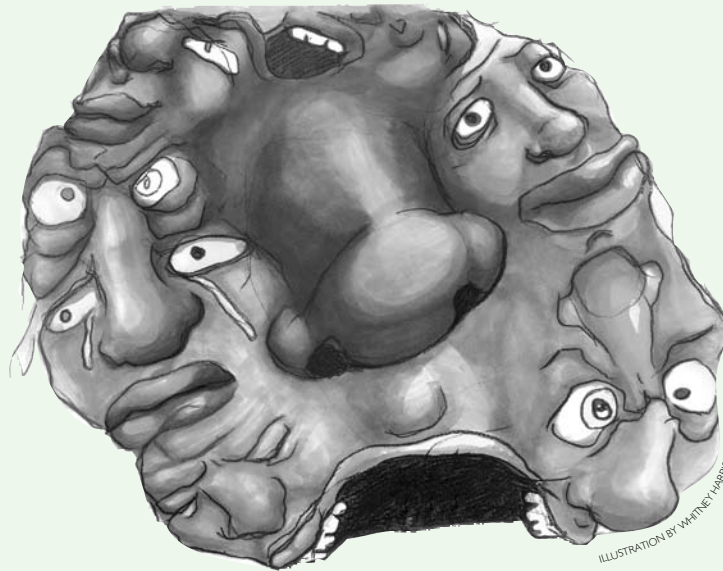
A: One thing that's controversial but important to me to clarify is that battering is not simply a pattern of violence, it's a pattern of using certain behaviors, including violence, to control your partner and a relationship. Using violence against a partner is against the law, and it's wrong, but someone who has an incident of violence is not necessarily a batterer.

Treatment for batterers is still relatively new, so there's a lot of debate around what does and doesn't work. I believe that to see long-term change, I have to hold these men accountable *and* create an environment where men want to change, not because I say it's wrong, but because *they* do.

Q: What motivates men to change?

A: Most men—and I do say most, not all—truly desire to be a man of honor and integrity. I ask them, "What is your own sense of honor telling you? How do you define your personal code of integrity and live up to that?" Most men are taught not to hit women, so they're violating their own beliefs, not just mine.

A lot of my clients have never thought about it that way. They're used to being told, "You're a batterer, a bad person." All their defense mechanisms kick in and they want to minimize their behavior and shift the blame. They say, "It wasn't that wrong. It's not like we're Ike and Tina." I say, "Well, how wrong do you see it as being? How wrong was it *for you*?" Often they've come from a violent home, so the fact that they



Most men are taught not to hit women, so they're violating their own beliefs, not just mine.

punched a hole in the wall doesn't seem that bad, because they didn't punch their partner. Sometimes they think they're handling their anger well.

I also tell my clients, "We all do things for a reason. You use violence because there's a payoff—it gets someone else to do what you want. But what does it cost you?" For a lot of men, when they start to look at what kind of role model they're being for their children, that's the avenue of change. They want their sons to look up to them, and they don't want their daughters to end up getting beaten.

Q: How can you change a pattern of violence?

A: A lot of our program is about building skills, especially teaching the men how to recognize cues that they're angry much earlier so they don't get to the explosive stage. Part

of that is helping them realize that they're not really out of control when they get very angry. It feels like they are, but they're not. They're still making choices.

We ask them, "When did you know you were angry? How? What were you thinking? What were you doing?" A lot of people don't really think about early signs. They escalate the situation and don't try to stop until they're in that red zone and then it's too late. Those of us who don't offend, we realize we're getting angry and take steps to cool down before we act out.

We give them a lot of mandatory homework, because if they're not applying what they've learned, they're not working to change. They have to practice taking "timeouts" and talk about what worked and didn't. They have to write down their relationship

histories, what patterns they've had.

Q: How can you change a pattern of control?

A: We want to help the men see that abuse is not only physical, it's also a pattern of treating their partners as children and not being able to accept who their partners really are.

We ask them, "How do you accept differences between your partner and yourself?" They might not accept that their partners' experiences and needs are different from their own. We ask, "How can you just talk with your partner, instead of trying to change her? How might you support her?"

We also ask, "Are you treating your partner like an equal or as a child? How do you feel when you're treated as a child?" Maybe a boss or another family member has treated them that way. When they think about it, they're like, "Oh, yeah, I get it. No wonder she doesn't like that."

Q: What changes do you see?

A: There are definitely men who use violence who are not going to change. They care about maintaining control more than they care about love and respect. But most men who are working to change will say they feel better about themselves and have a different type of relationship with their partners—one that's loving, warm, and nurturing. They begin to get what they really wanted.

These men want relationships, but they don't know how to get their needs met without using violence. They don't want their partners to leave, or to be looking at other men. When they learn how to earn respect, admiration and love, they realize the difference between love and fear. Love is very different from compliance they've forced out of their partner by using violence.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

For more information about Rise, or to join the writing staff, please call Nora McCarthy at (212) 279-0708 x113. Or find Rise on the web at www.youthcomm.org/rise.

Most of the stories in this issue were written by participants in a writing group at the Voices of Women Organizing Project (VOW), an advocacy group of

domestic violence survivors in New York City. You can reach VOW at (212) 696-1481 or www.vowbwrc.org. Other stories were written by participants in the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an advocacy program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000.

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Leading the Fight

Losing my kids turned me into an activist.

I became an activist when my children were removed because my ex-boyfriend came to my house and attacked me. In family court, I talked to other women and realized that it was normal for poor mothers to lose their kids just because they were abused. Sadly, I also found that women in court were telling each other, "Don't fight the system. Whatever they give to you, just do it so you can get your kids back."

I said to myself, "I left my abusive boyfriend. I've been taking good care of my kids. I've done everything I'm supposed to and I'm still in this predicament." In court, they were saying, "Admit your guilt," but I wasn't guilty, so I wouldn't. The damage was done.

I was lucky to get my children back after three weeks. Compared to other mothers, I got my children back fairly quickly, although it felt like a very, very long time. I was separated from my mother at an early age when she immigrated to the United States for a better life. It was such a crushing pain. I yearned for my mother. I told myself that no matter what, I would not separate from my children. But they felt that void when the system took them.

After I got my children back, I

became the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit to force the New York City foster care system to stop taking children from their mothers simply because their mothers were abused. I found out that we won on my birthday, and it was one of the best things to happen to me. I was very, very pleased that our case sparked interest across the country. It was a start.

I also got involved with the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a group of parents who advocate for system change. I was a guest presenter at a meeting and I could truly sense the anger the parents were feeling and the encouragement and empowerment I had to give. I knew that by joining a group I could have an impact on a multitude of people. Through lobbying real change can come. Now I'm the president of CWOP's board of directors.

I also do presentations nationwide at conferences on the topic of domestic violence and child welfare. Hopefully, my participation helps to push forward legislation that will encourage more parent voices in the system, and will bring about changes for the better for parents and children dealing with domestic violence.

—Sharwline Nicholson

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