

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PASTORS' MINDS

Q. The woman sitting across my desk from me has bruises on her face and her arms, and has just told me the story of her husband's abuse and violence. What do I do first?

A. Your first responsibility is to listen to her and let her know that you take her report very seriously. You cannot provide all the help she needs, but she has the right to your practical help in identifying and accessing the available network of professional services offered by your community. She also needs your spiritual support and encouragement. This Quick Reference Guide is designed to help you prepare yourself for this moment.

Q. What next?

A. Your first concern must be for the safety of the person(s) at risk. Ask questions like, "Are you afraid your spouse will further injure you or your children? Are you concerned for your lives? Do you have a safe place to go? Are there friends and relatives to whom you can turn? Do you have an escape plan for an emergency?"

If she needs a safe place to go, you may suggest a battered woman's shelter. Your local telephone book or newspaper are good sources for listings. The best time to develop your list of community resources is early in your ministry in a district. Before you are confronted with an emergency, you will have more time to check out listings and consult with clergy colleagues in town to learn of the professional contacts to whom they turn in such a crisis. If there is no shelter available in your community, you may wish to ask one or two families in your church to make preparation to shelter a family as the need arises. You will want to choose a family whose relationships are positive. It would be helpful if one of the spouses works in a helping profession—i.e. nursing, medicine, counseling, etc. Such a background will enhance understanding of the needs of the abused family members and provide some basis for extending practical help.

Q. If I suggest she leave her home for a shelter or that she go to a friend's house, wouldn't I be contributing to the breaking apart of a family? Isn't it better that they try to work things out together?

A. If the family breaks apart, it will be because of the violence and abuse, not because of action to secure the safety of family members who are in danger. Healing and reconciliation can be addressed only after safety has been established and the abuse stopped.

Q. The accused is a prominent leader in the congregation. If I try to help the victim, it's going to cause a terrible problem in my church. Other members aren't going to want to believe he'd do this.

A. It is not helpful to deny that the family is experiencing difficulty or that abuse and violence may be present, even within the families of prominent church members. On the other hand, confidentiality is essential for continuing trust, and the safety of the abused. Do not provide details of the situation to other members without permission. Assure those expressing concern that you and other professionals who can best help are working to enable this family to deal with the problems they are facing. Explain that what the family needs from their community of faith right now is love and practical support. Tell those who desire to help that you may call on them to provide child care, transportation, or some other service they can provide as the need arises.

Q. Aren't there two sides to every story?

A. It is true that family dynamics may be present in abusive families which seem to entrap family members in dysfunctional patterns of relating. However, this recognition is not to be misconstrued as reason to blame the victim for the abuse. Even if her behavior seems unreasonable and inappropriate, it is her husband's responsibility as an adult to take charge of his own feelings and actions. No one "makes" another angry, violent or abusive. Abuse is



a choice made by the abuser himself, usually in an attempt to control, manipulate or otherwise get what he wants.

Q. Doesn't the Bible say a woman should be submissive? Isn't it her duty to please her husband?

A. The overarching instruction given by Paul to married couples is to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). Christ came to put an end to the curse of sin and to make all things—including marriage—new again. The gospel calls Christian marriage partners to stretch toward the restoration of God's ideals for marriage in Eden where male and female shared equally in God's image, His blessing, the responsibility for procreation and co-regency over the earth. God's declaration that His original plan was very good has not changed.

Q. Aren't Christians called to suffer at times?

A. The good that can come from experiencing suffering should never be offered as a reason for staying in an abusive situation. Suffering is a result of sin. When Jesus was asked about whose sin caused a man's blindness, He turned from this question to minister compassionately and to provide healing for a person in need. His response provides a model for our response. God does not cause His children to suffer in order to punish them, teach them lessons, or enhance their spiritual growth. He does allow human beings to experience the consequences of sin so that we may come to see its true nature. When we learn from suffering, it is God working good out of bad.

Q. Isn't it true that some wives need discipline in order to do what they should?

A. The practice of abuse and violence in the name of discipline of adults or children has troubling implications. Such behavior toward a marriage partner may stem from or lead to the erroneous conclusions that the wife is merely the property of her husband, that women are inferior and cannot be encouraged in the Christian way except by brute force, or that women are not responsible for their personal response to God's grace. Scripture never enjoins the use of force with a married partner. Jesus had no problem communicating to women the most profound spiritual lessons. It was He who defended Mary for seeking the best part as she sat at His feet to study Torah. Further, Christ did not beat His followers into submission. In fact, God has shown Himself to value and respect human beings so highly that He desires only the service of love. He uses no coercion, only the gentle persuasion of love and grace. Christians are called to follow His example in family relationships.

Further, Scripture is clear that each person is responsible for the care of his/her own body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Nothing which destroys the body is to be engaged in, let alone encouraged or required of the Christian. Each person's value can be measured only by at the price of his or her redemption—the shed blood of Jesus Christ. For this reason, Christians are called to honor God with their bodies. Everything about abuse and violence is in violation of this call. Hence the warning that if anyone destroys God's temple, He must be accountable to God. The consequences will be his own destruction.

Q. Shouldn't I pray with an abused person who comes to me? I believe that God will protect people if we only ask Him.

A. God is always willing to listen to our concerns. He cries when we cry, hurts when we hurt. He extends His arms from heaven through the persons He puts in our path in times of need, and through the peace and presence of God which the Holy Spirit provides. A victim may have too many spiritual questions to see God in this way. She may be confused about how she can honor her father and yet say "no" to his abuse. She may be wondering where God has been as her husband has abused her. She may not know whether God can forgive her for a failed marriage. She may be angry with God for not answering her prayers. She's likely

confused about what God would have her do. She will need you in the weeks to come to address her spiritual concerns one at a time. Now she needs your understanding and practical support, not a Bible study or discourse to sort out her theology, or terse advice to just “pray about it.”

Of course it’s always appropriate for you to suggest a prayer together. Ask her if you can pray for her and her family, yourself and the church family as you respond to this crisis. If she responds positively, assure her that God is listening. Talk to Him about the pain she is experiencing which you know grieves His heart because she is His beloved child. Ask God to help her to find the best path through the crisis she is confronting, and to help you and her church family to support her in the most helpful ways. When you have finished your prayer, it’s time to move into appropriate action as God’s emissary. If you sense she is not able to join you in prayer just now, tell her you understand and that she will be in your prayers.

Q. If the situation is so awful, why doesn’t she just leave? Why do women stay in or return to abusive relationships?

A. There are many reasons. She may feel that it is her responsibility to keep the home together, for the sake of the children or her husband. She may believe that the abuse is her fault and be embarrassed for anyone to find out what is really happening. She may be concerned about her husband’s career or fear the reaction of extended family members. She may be concerned that she cannot make it on her own--financially, emotionally, as a single-parent, etc. She may think she has nowhere to go. She may erroneously believe that God wants her to stay in the relationship no matter how her husband treats her because He hates divorce, or because He is trying to teach her a lesson, or because He wants her to lead her husband to Christ, or because He is punishing her for something she has done wrong, etc. She may fear worse treatment, perhaps even for her life, if she leaves. She may fear her husband will take away her children. Remember, the issue in family violence is power and control. Abusers are often highly skilled in manipulating their spouses into staying, despite abusive treatment.

Q. Aside from helping a victim of domestic violence find a safe place, what else can I do?

A. Your responsibility as a pastor, as an important piece of the network of professional resources needed by abusive families, is primarily to:

- Help the victim and other vulnerable family members find a safe place where they will be protected until the abuse has stopped and she and her children are no longer in danger.
- Identify the network of professional services available in your church and community with the expertise to help all involved.
- Provide practical assistance to the family as they seek to use these services to meet their needs.
- Cooperate with other professionals to hold the abuser firmly accountable for his abusive behavior in order to create the best likelihood that he will participate actively in professional treatment which can help him to stop the abuse.
- Address the spiritual questions confronting abused persons.
- Provide a ministry of reconciliation at such times as changed attitudes and behavior open possibilities for forgiveness and new beginnings.
- Assist families in grieving significant relationships which cannot be restored.

Do not take the role of counselor yourself unless you have been trained as a marriage and family therapist. You do not have sufficient expertise to deal with such complex problems. Many pastors who are also therapists find that it is best not to assume the role of counselor for a parishioner since it is difficult to be both pastor and counselor at the same time. The entire family needs you as pastor right now. You may be the only one who can fill this role in the network of professional services available.



In the wider sense, you can be a powerful spokesperson in the church and in your community against abuse and domestic violence. The 1997 Family Ministries Planbook and the awareness video that compliments this resource is designed to help you.

Q. What about the children?

A. Doubtless the mother is deeply concerned about them, and you should be as well. Children are highly vulnerable and need protection. Inquire about them. Find out what you can do to help to make sure they are safe. When you suspect child abuse take immediate action to protect the child(ren) and to report your concerns to the appropriate child protective agency in your area.

Q. What will happen when I make a report?

A. Once you have made a report to the appropriate child protective agency, a child protection worker will investigate the allegations. They will provide for the safety of the child(ren) and others who may be at risk if action is called for. Initially, the offender will likely deny all allegations and attack the credibility of the victim(s). Victims may even recant their stories because they feel under extreme pressure by the perpetrator or frightened by the chaos their disclosure has brought about. It may take several weeks for any measure of normalcy to return. Your ministry to the family during this time—reassuring victims that they have done the right thing to disclose the abuse and to seek help, and providing the practical help they need—will be most important. Your cooperation with the network of community workers attempting to help the abuser accept responsibility for what he has done and participate actively in a treatment program will also be significant.

Q. Wouldn't it be better to handle the situation privately and protect the privacy of the family?

A. Experience has shown that the broader the network of professionals and community services involved in helping a family dealing with abuse and violence, the better their chances of getting the help they need to stop the abuse and move toward reconciliation. In cases of child abuse, the law in nearly every state and province mandates the pastor to report the suspicion or disclosure of abuse or any situation where a child needs protection. The safety of the innocent and vulnerable is your first concern.

Q. Women are usually identified as the victims of domestic violence. Don't men suffer abuse, too?

A. Men are sometimes the victims of abuse, but currently 95% of the reported victims of domestic violence are women. Women can be abusive, but they don't usually resort to physical violence. More often they may try to gain control through verbal means. It must be clearly understood, however, that abuse is never justified on the part of anyone. It is always incompatible with Christianity.

Q. I'm also the pastor of this man. Don't I have a responsibility to him as well? What can I do to help him?

A. Your first responsibility to the abuser is to help him recognize that whenever there is a report of abuse and violence, there is a serious problem which needs to be addressed. It is not your responsibility to conduct an investigation to prove his guilt or innocence. This work is for community agencies with trained professionals.

It is your responsibility to guard against his ostracism by the church, while at the same time cooperating with professionals to help him to accept responsibility for his actions. It is important to note that you should never attempt to confront an abuser alone. Your safety may be at risk as well.

You can help best by cooperating with a network of professionals and other individuals with

specialized training who can confront the abuser and hold him accountable for his behavior. An abuser needs professional treatment to own his behavior, stop the abuse, and learn positive ways of relating to his family and others. He will need your help and encouragement to participate actively in a treatment program.

Abusers also have spiritual needs and questions. As a pastor, you can provide the assurance that, regardless of what he has done, He is not outside the circle of God's grace. He is not beyond God's transforming power. At the same time, grace is not cheap. It cost the life of the Son of God. With grace comes a powerful call to live as a child of the light. It is a call to full acknowledgment of one's sinful actions. It is a call to true repentance. It is a call to changed behavior, to a new way of life in the Spirit—a life in which there is no place for abuse and violence.

Q. What if he says he's sorry? How can I be sure his repentance is real?

A. Denial is usually an abuser's first response to confrontation. He will frequently contend that the victim lies and attack her credibility in other ways. Remember, it is very difficult for a victim to summon the courage to tell you about the abuse. There *is* a problem that needs to be addressed. Beware of quick repentance or conversion on the part of the abuser. Recognize the stages of the abuse cycle which are sometimes present. Recognize that remorse may simply be another way to control. True repentance may be recognized by:

- Acceptance of responsibility for the abusive action.
- Willing and active participation in a professional treatment program.
- A willingness and attempt to make restitution in every way possible.
- Changed behavior which stops the abuse and exhibits growth toward better ways of relating.

Q. As Christians we are called to forgive those who hurt us. Shouldn't I try to help her forgive him?

A. Forgiveness is God's healing balm for deep relational wounds. But God's call to forgive should never be offered as the reason a person must remain in an abusive relationship. Forgiveness is one of the last steps in dealing with abuse and violence. Forgiveness is a process which begins with the offender entering into the pain he has caused and accepting full responsibility for his behavior. It allows time for processing the painful events that have transpired and the feelings of mistrust, betrayal, exploitation, devastation which most victims experience. In time, forgiveness can open the way for better attitudes and patterns of relating to emerge. Only when the abuse has stopped and growth toward positive relational patterns are evident can forgiveness safely come full circle to reconciliation. Sometimes the abuser refuses to enter into the process. Sometimes the pain has run so deep that relationships have been totally destroyed by the abuse. Then forgiveness can only bring personal healing to the abused person(s) and, in time, make it possible for them to take up life again, no longer incapacitated by this painful experience. In such cases, forgiveness cannot safely lead to reconciliation. Rather, forgiveness may bring closure to the process of grieving the loss of a significant relationship.

Q. What if she wants a divorce? I'm not comfortable with encouraging the breakup of a marriage.

A. Separation, and in some cases divorce, may be the only safe option if the abuser refuses to accept responsibility for his actions and get help to change his attitudes and behavior. To require a person to stay in an abusive relationship is to depreciate the worth God places on every human being and to inflict on individuals and families unjustifiable pain and risk. When families break apart, it is always a circumstance to be deeply mourned. But the need for some families to live apart is a reality in this fallen world. Such tragedy brings great sadness, but it can also generate new commitment to minister God's grace to the afflicted and to enable all to find the abundant life Christ came to bring—a life free from abuse and violence by His grace.

