

Probing Beyond the Bruises

It's wise to challenge your assumptions about domestic violence

A. Early in my career working with domestic violence, I saw a middle-class couple who seemed loving and connected, yet it emerged during the first session that he had hit her the day before their appointment with me. I was confused when she revealed this, because he seemed like a nice guy—nothing like my image of an aggressive, angry batterer. It taught me to challenge my own stereotypes about who batters. Since then, having worked with hundreds of domestic violence cases, I no longer think there is a “type” of person who batters. They come in all shapes, sizes, classes, races, sexual orientations and, although more rarely, genders.

Your discomfort and confusion about how to address possible domestic violence with your client is quite common. There are strong social taboos about challenging power imbalances, and that is precisely what domestic violence is all about. I believe battering and other forms of domestic abuse are directly related to power imbalances, particularly—although not exclusively—between men and women. When therapists say to me, “I don’t work with domestic violence, so I don’t have to assess for it,” I argue back that no matter what problems they present with, power imbalances are at the heart of couples’ pain. So even if there isn’t any battering going on in this case,

doing an assessment can only help your work with them.

But how do you make an assessment and feel comfortable doing it? First, understand that domestic violence doesn’t just hurt the victim; it also hurts the abuser and the entire family. The goal of therapists should not be to protect the victim and accuse the abuser—that’s not therapeutically helpful. Instead, our job is to help the whole family understand that power imbalances jeopardize their future and to help them find a healthier and more loving way to be together or to be apart.

I begin with the broad context of the relationship. Asking your client only about her bruises isolates that event, and my goal is to get the fullest picture of their relationship. My first questions focus on the emotional climate of the family. I ask about how they take care of each other emotionally, attend to each other, experience conflicts and have reconciliations. I am looking to see whether they are able to take care of each other’s needs; whether, during conflict, one person stonewalls or becomes abusive in any way—from name-calling and mind games to physical violence. I also ask clients how they show physical affection to each other and what happens in anger. Is

there a lot of touching? Do they push, throw things, avoid each other or hit each other? I ask about their families of origin, and how physical affection was expressed when they were growing up. Did their parents talk lovingly? When they were angry, did they scream or become stonily silent?

Money is so often used to control and overpower the other that it is essential to ask a couple about who earns the money, who controls the money, who has independent bank accounts, who has knowledge about money, how they make decisions and resolve conflicts about money, etc. I also ask about sex—another area in which power imbalances come into play. What are their ideas around body image, trust, connectedness and pornography? How do they get turned on? What is the expectation of who should caretaker whom during sex, and what are their rules about pursuing or not pursuing each other? You might feel intimidated by asking such intimate questions, but I have found that when you ask direct questions in a matter-of-fact way, clients will answer, because they are hoping you can help them.

Isolation is another sign of a power imbalance. Does one person in the family control with whom and when the others can have contact? Are the partners only connected to work? Do they have connections with spiritual or religious organizations, or even a community recreational center? If they have children, are they involved with child care and parenting organizations? In general, the more isolation, the more probability of power imbalances.

Only after you gather this information about your clients’ relationship—their emotionality, physicality, handling of money, sexuality and social connections—should you assess for the probability of domestic vio- ▶

Q: *I just started working with a couple and noticed the woman has bruises on her arm. When I asked her about it in private, she said she fell. Should I believe her? He doesn't seem like a man who would hit his wife. How can I assess for possible domestic violence without offending either of them?*

Day workshop for psychotherapists by:

John Gottman, Ph.D.

The Nation's foremost researcher on Marriage and Relationships.

Marital Therapy: A Research- Based Approach.

Integrating leading-edge research into a comprehensive program for assessment and intervention with couples.

Based on Dr. Gottman's breakthrough studies of over 2,000 couples.

CEU's available

Author of the popular books:

- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*
- *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*
- *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child.*



For information contact: The Gottman Institute Inc.
1-888-523-9042 www.gottman.com

- June 23-24
San Francisco
- October 12-13
Long Beach, CA
- Nov. 16-17
Portland, OR
- Jan. 25-26
Seattle, WA
- March 8-9
Baltimore, MD



GETTING UNSTUCK

lence. With your deeper understanding of their family life, you will already have spotted clues about whether harmful power imbalances exist. Not only will your assessment probably be more accurate, but you will have a much clearer sense of why family members react the way they do when you ask about the abuse. For example, if your client admits that her husband hit her, you may also understand her fear that if he leaves, she will be financially ruined because the house, car and bank accounts are all in his name. ■

.....
Rhea Almeida, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., is founder and director of the Institute for Family Services in Somerset, New Jersey, and is the editor of Expansions of Feminist Family Theory Through Diversity and Transformations of Gender and Race: Family and Developmental Perspectives. Address: 3 Clyde Road, Suite 101, Somerset, NJ 08873.

So you have an interest
in online psychology courses.

How long have you had these feelings?

The Internet has changed the way we live. And now the way we learn. At Capella University our psychology curriculum is entirely online, so class is ready whenever and wherever you are. Our School of Psychology offers accredited master's and doctoral degree programs, certificates and continuing education in addiction, clinical, educational, family, health, organizational and sport psychology. It's the ideal way to advance your career at the speed your schedule allows. To get the full story, call 1-800-987-1133 or visit us at www.capellauniversity.edu.



Online education built around you.

© 2000 Capella University. Capella University is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.