

Area shelters offer help to battered women

Common traits characterize physical abusers

By Mary Courtis
Of the Emerald

Physical abuse. It is a social problem that cuts across all socio-economic, racial, religious and age groups.

While anyone can be affected by it, the victims of physical abuse are more apt to be women and children. This battering can take place at any time and for any reason as the following

testimony of a woman called Debbie describes in the book "Wife Battering":

"I was sitting over there and for no reason he came up and just knocked me over in the chair. I went down. Me and the chair went down, and he started knocking me all over the kitchen, and down the hall here, and pushed me and I scraped my arm, and he pushed me into that thing right there, and I scraped my arm real bad. I asked him if I could wash my arm off 'cause it was bleeding a little bit and he said, 'No.' Then I went into the bedroom, and he started knocking me around the bedroom. I was up against the door, and he slapped my face, and I hit my head on the door sill, and a big bump came up. I said, 'Can I go wash my face?' and he said, 'No.' It scared me because a big bump just immediately arose, and that scared me. Then he knocked me down and kicked me a couple of times, and finally he just walked out. I had bruises all over me, on my face and on my arms, on my legs, and... I couldn't go right to work."

Unfortunately, Debbie's experience is not unusual.

"Men who batter have an insatiable need to control others," said Olga Turner, the assistant director of Womenspace, a shelter in Eugene that helps victims of domestic violence. "They have low self-esteem, insane jealousy and don't recognize where they stop and their partner begins."

Men who batter maintain rigid, stereotypical attitudes about men and women, have poor control over impulses and temper, and usually have a low frustration level, Turner said. In addition, they are emotionally dependent people, egoistic and have a limited capacity for delaying gratification, she said.

Physical abuse is likely to be present in their background, and drug use also may be a contributing factor, she added.

"However, we look at physical abuse and substance abuse as two separate problems," Turner said. "Substance abusers that are

physical abusers blame their physical abuse on the substance abuse. 'The drugs made me do it!' Our view is that a violent person is violent whether they are substance abusers or not."

Lenore Walker in "The Battered Woman" has identified a cycle of violence that seems to characterize most episodes of physical abuse. In the first stage, tension builds as a result of constant arguing or the silent treatment between a couple. This period can last for days or years and may include incidents of minor violence.

The tension builds to the point of explosion, culminating in the second stage that is associated with acute battering. The violence toward the partner may include kicking, punching, slapping, biting, choking, pushing, broken arms and noses, black eyes or assaults with weapons. It also can last for days and usually continues until the woman leaves, the police are called, the man realizes what he is doing and stops or until someone has to go to the hospital.

The third stage is characterized by calm and loving

make the relationship work for several years. A few never leave. Many outsiders find the latter behavior hard to understand.

"The victim is still being blamed," Turner said. "Outsiders don't understand why the woman stays. As a society we subscribe to a lot of myths: The woman provoked the attack, she deserves it or even that she likes it. But the real reasons a woman stays usually have to do with dependency, both emotional and financial."

Abusive men often keep tight control of joint funds, Turner said. This may include denying the woman access to their bank account, allotting her a meager allowance for food and household expenses or refusing to let her take a job, she said.

Intimidation and bullying on the part of the man when the woman tries to form outside friendships also can leave the woman feeling isolated and ignorant of support groups and other options, Turner said. In these cases, women are apt to "normalize" the situation, tell themselves everyone goes through it and stay in the rela-

'Amnesty International recently compiled a list on torture and its signs. These symptoms such as sleep deprivation, emotional neglect and constant stress, also describe the experiences of abused women. Chronic physical abuse is a form of torture!'

— Olga Turner

responses on the part of the man as he tries to make amends for the battering. During this stage the man may buy gifts for the woman, promise never to abuse her again and beg for forgiveness. The woman usually forgives him because she wants to believe it, and they remain reconciled until tension begins to build between them again.

Some women leave after the first battering incident. Others stay and continue trying to

relationship for the sake of the children, although sometimes the opposite is true, she said.

"Sometimes women get out for the sake of the children," Turner said. "When they see their son beginning to act out his father's abusive behavior, that can be the incentive for them to leave and come to the shelter for help."

Leaving the situation, however is only the first step toward recovery. Many women have such low self-esteem that they would rather return to the abuser than face life alone, or find the challenges of single life too intimidating.

Debbie, for example, eventually left her husband and sought refuge in a shelter. She filed for divorce, got a job as a waitress and made child care arrangements for her son, Jesse. Seemingly, her ability to reorient herself and make decisions was a healthy sign. But a few months later she was back with her husband.

"He was furious because he had gotten into a fight with those two drunks, and they had done a lot of damage to the jeep. Of course, he blamed it all on me. He was just at the peak of his anger. He started spitting at me and threw a pack of cigarettes at me, telling me, 'You're going to regret it.' Just like before, threatening me with Jesse. If I don't do what he wants me to do he will make me pay by taking Jesse away from me. I stood my ground for as long as I could, you know. I didn't want to go back. I tried to be as willful as I could. But, I gave in. I couldn't take it."

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