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When Love Hits You Hard

Courtship abuse takes its toll in jealous, violent relationships

By Karen Engels
Of the Emerald

"Sarah" fell head-over-heels when she first met him. He was a gentleman and really seemed to need her warmth and attention.

Now, eight months later, things have changed. The relationship is far from ideal. Violence and jealousy have surfaced leaving Sarah feeling trapped, always hoping that he'll change.

Sarah is a non-existent woman who is a very real representative of other women in very real situations.

Courtship violence — slaps, beating and verbal abuse — affect at least two of 10 college students, according to a recently released national study. Most college officials knew of only one to 10 incidents of such violence on their campuses, found researcher Rosemary Bogal-Albritton, an associate professor of social work at Murray State University in Kentucky.

The numbers actually are probably much higher, according to University campus security officer A.A. Norman, who said that many violent episodes in dating relationships go unreported for fear of hurting the other person, causing embarrassment to self, guilt feelings about the violence or because of low self-esteem.

Norman, who works in the area of date-rape awareness, said that 10 times more violent acts are committed than are reported.

A typical courtship-abuse situation begins with an obsessive need to control the partner in the relationship, said Lois McClellan, a Eugene counselor. Outbursts of jealousy and manipulative behavior often are misinterpreted as love, she said.

The woman often sees the man in the relationship as needing her to help him emotionally and to nurture him, McClellan said.

He tends to be "emotionally inaccessible," said Susan Fjerkenstad, the coordinator of a "Women Who Love Too Much" no-cost support group that meets at the Koinonia Center, 1414 Kincaid St., each Tuesday from noon to 1 p.m.

"Women are still expected to take care of a man's physical and emotional needs while men are conditioned to react in a 'manly' way, with anger," McClellan said.

People in abusive relationships are "emotionally addicted," Fjerkenstad said, which leads them to believe that bizarre and abusive behavior is normal.

All might appear fine in the first stages of an abusive relationship, McClellan said. Both individuals are on their best behavior,

wanting to be appealing to the other, she said, but things gradually change as the man or woman becomes more demanding or non-communicating.

Verbal abuse, slaps or pushing begins, and violence sometimes increases in severity and frequency, at times with choking or even assaults with weapons, McClellan said.

About one-third of the abuse situations Fjerkenstad deals with involve physical assaults. The majority deal with verbal assaults, put downs and other forms of abuse, which reduce feelings of self-worth, she said.

Surprisingly enough, 20 to 40 percent of couples remain together after violence, Bogal-Albritton estimated.

Why don't individuals leave abusive relationships?

Many complex reasons including fear and guilt keep a person in an abusive situation, McClellan said.

The victim usually has a low self-esteem in his or her perceived inability to make the other person happy, area counselors said.

This, coupled with the abuser's affirmations of the victim's lack of worth creates a vicious circle, McClellan said.

"Dependency is a key problem in these relationships," she said. "Feeling low self-worth, they both become emotionally dependent on each other and are caught in a circle of their own making."

Counselors said that people are often afraid to leave these situations even though they know it would be in their best interest.

"There's this idea that women are supposed to hang in there and try harder to hold it all together," said McClellan. Both dating and marriage situations are very similar in this respect, she said.

"The woman takes on the caretaker or fixer role," echoed Fjerkenstad.

A tendency in victims is to not seek help until the situation becomes unbearable, counselors said.

McClellan noted that women who come to shelters such as Womenspace already have been in an abusive situation from one to 30 years.

Many of these women have learned that silence is a way to avoid conflicts with their partners and have become numb, further hindering them from seeking help, Fjerkenstad said.

"The problem has really come out in the last few years," said Charlie Nixon, director of the University Crisis Center. "Women have begun speaking out."



Graphic by Lorraine Rath

Fjerkenstad believes that increased awareness partially has come about because of "Women Who Love Too Much," a best-selling book that many women have read and say, "This is me!"

Both the problem and the solution seem to be embodied in one word, counselors say: communication.

Society teaches us attitudes about men and women that aren't conducive to communication between the sexes, McClellan said. Books, television, magazines and songs are erroneous on the subject, she said.

When young, men are not encouraged to

show their feelings, but instead are encouraged to show aggressiveness while women are prompted to be very verbal with their feelings, passive and non-confrontational, McClellan said. Needless to say, these two lines of thinking come in to conflict, often leading to courtship abuse, and later, possible spouse and child abuse, she said.

Many couples in abuse situations come from communication-deficient families or from abusive homes and have continued this cycle in their lives, Fjerkenstad said.

Changing the cycle is a slow process but

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