

Domestic Abuse

Recognize, Respond, Rescue



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Resources for Changing Lives

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Ashley sat motionless in her chair. Her husband, Clint, had just finished telling me that his wife desperately needed help. “She’s cold and unfeeling. I can’t live like this any longer,” he pleaded. He clutched a book he had brought with him, a book he believed would help his wife to communicate better and respect him more. He expected me to follow his lead and focus on his complaints, and, in my youth and inexperience, I took the bait.

I regret every minute that followed. Ashley uttered only a few sentences. Thinking back on it now, it was as if she were not even present. But she was. She was there watching me side with her husband when I validated his points about marriage and empathized with his pain.

For a few weeks, our conversations sounded the same. Clint shared his issues and wounds, and I listened. At one point, I inquired further about something he said, and he did not like it. He became intensely angry and lectured me for twenty minutes. He would not let me speak, and he would not back down. That hour I got a glimpse into what Clint was really like. I realized that I was not helping him; rather, he was using me to control his wife. He portrayed

himself as the victim of his wife's uncaring ways, but in reality he wanted to dominate her completely. Every week he came in and told me what I should address with her. He was effective in steering me. I asked her to show more interest in him, plan a date, and speak in a gentler tone when addressing issues with him. It still sickens me.

After such a disastrous but enlightening interaction, I began to meet with husband and wife separately. God confirmed what I was beginning to suspect: Clint was relentlessly dominating and controlling in their relationship. He had oppressed Ashley for twenty-five years. His behavior had done unspeakable things to her heart, mind, and body.

Ecclesiastes describes oppressors and the plight of the oppressed this way: "Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them" (4:1). It quickly became clear to me that what I was encountering was not a marriage problem. The perverse and imbalanced dynamics of their relationship called for me to provide care and protection for Ashley and to directly address the underlying oppressive dynamics of Clint.

Perhaps you too are walking alongside people caught in the cycles of domestic abuse

and you want to know how to help. In this booklet, we will define abuse and look at how to uncover it. Then we will examine why addressing abuse as a marriage problem causes further hurt. Next, we will turn to Scripture to fill out a picture of what is happening in oppressive marriages. After we recognize the depth of destruction involved, I will give you guidelines for walking with both the victim and the oppressor.

What Is Oppression?

In marriage, oppression occurs when one spouse seeks to control and dominate the other through a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors. The more common terms for this pattern are *domestic abuse* or *domestic violence*. I prefer the term *oppression* because it is a biblical category that speaks to the domination involved. It also helps us to understand God's heart for victims.¹ God very clearly opposes oppression.²

The tactics used by an oppressive spouse can vary. An oppressor may limit personal freedoms of, induce fear in, exploit, terrorize, humiliate, withhold resources from, isolate, threaten, demand obedience from, or physically harm a spouse. Living under such evils harms the oppressed person's emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual, relational, and economic well-being.

How to Uncover Oppression

Let's look at how we can identify oppressive behaviors in the lives of people we are helping.

Prior to meeting Ashley and Clint, I was unaware of the prevalence of abuse.³ Oppressors abuse their spouses in secret, and sufferers cannot readily or safely reveal their oppressive acts. My inexperience and unfamiliarity with both how domestic abuse functions and how prevalent it is kept me from considering that it might be a factor in Clint and Ashley's marriage. One of the most important aspects of ministering to oppressive marriages is uncovering and identifying the pattern of oppression.⁴ Ashley and Clint had been to six counselors prior to me. None of them had unearthed the abuses that were taking place.

Like Ashley, there are many oppressed people who do not self-identify as abuse victims. When abuse is not overt or self-identified by a spouse, it can be easy to miss. Here are three evaluative tools to help you.

1. Assess patterns and imbalances in the marriage.

Look for *patterns* of punishment and *imbalances* of power in a marriage. Ask the following questions when speaking with a spouse who you suspect is being victimized.

- Do you have the freedom to give your input in decisions at home?

- What happens when you disagree with your spouse?
- Do you ever feel fearful around your partner?
- Have you ever been threatened or physically hurt in this relationship?
- Have you ever participated in a sexual act against your will?
- Does your spouse blame you for things that go wrong? How?
- Does your spouse monitor your interactions with friends and family?
- Do you have a say in how your economic resources are used?

When you ask these questions, ask for detailed examples as well. Look to locate patterns of domination and punishments. Have this conversation when the spouse in question is not present, since a spouse is unlikely to be honest about the situation if the abuser is there, and the situation could be unsafe if they are. Keep in mind that not all abuse is physical—but, when physical abuse is present, there is a strong chance that sexual abuse is also occurring.⁵

2. Analyze how the couple argues.

A second way to detect oppression is to gather precise information about how a couple argues. Oppressors do not engage in arguments

in order to find unity and resolution. They view arguments as war. To assist in my detection of potential oppression, I have couples identify the tactics that each spouse uses in an argument. Look for controlling behaviors such as sulking, refusing to respond or listen, using physical intimidation or sarcasm, laughing, acting like a victim, being harshly critical, name-calling, being deceitful, or blocking a doorway.⁶

Knowing how a couple discusses and resolves conflicts enables me to ask additional questions that help me to get a sense of the atmosphere in the midst of their fights. We need to know what an argument *looks* and *sounds* like. For instance, “When he was yelling at you, where was he standing?” This gives a spouse the opportunity to report things like being cornered. Follow-up questions are critical: “When he withdraws, how long does it last?” “What names does she call you?” and so on.

3. Study the couple’s nonverbal cues.

A third way to evaluate if a spouse is being oppressed is through nonverbal cues that the couple exhibit. Oppressors tend to control conversations, interrupt others, and fail to show empathy or connectedness to their spouse. In contrast, oppressed spouses often say very little and seem, in both posture and speech, to be deferring to their spouse. But this isn’t always