

Domestic Abuse

Help for the Sufferer



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Resources *for* Changing Lives

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As a biblical counselor, I have seen God place many victims of domestic abuse in my care, and I have learned much from them. My heart carries their stories and their pain. Whether you are a sufferer or someone walking alongside one, you need rich biblical truths, an honest assessment, and sincere wisdom to guide you.

What Is Domestic Abuse?

Domination should not characterize a marriage. God intends marriage to be a place of sanctification, in which we learn to serve, love, and care for each other. Marriage is not supposed to be a place for self-interests; it is designed to be sacrificial—a picture of the relationship between Christ and his redeemed people. If your spouse is seeking to gain or maintain power and control over you, they are violating God's design for the sake of their own dominion. God has a word for this: *oppression*.

The word *oppression* captures the manipulative domination of one person by another. An oppressed person is subject to another's harsh control. God first speaks against oppression when Pharaoh enslaves the Israelites in the book

of Exodus. Pharaoh is ruthless and cruel in his domination, enslaving the Israelites to maintain his power. Hearing their cries for help and seeing their suffering, God promises to deliver them (see Ex. 3). Perhaps your spouse is oppressive and you need to know that God sees and hears you—that he has not left you alone without rescue.

Or maybe you are wondering if the trouble in your marriage rises to the level of oppression. Being in a close relationship with another person exposes the flaws in our relationships with God and others. We all fail to love our spouses perfectly because of sin. They fail to love us the way that God desires. We all say and do things we should not. So how do you know when your marriage is bad enough to be considered abusive? You wonder, does the label apply only if physical aggression is present?

Terminology often adds uncertainty. The word *abuse* can describe so many different acts that it leaves many asking, “How bad does it have to be before I can all it abuse?” The same confusion exists over the term *domestic violence*. The justice system and mental health field define this term to include a spectrum of violating acts, including—but not limited to—physical violence.¹ Although I sometimes use the words *abuse* and *domestic violence*, the biblical category of *oppression* emphasizes the domination involved and gives us places in Scripture that speak to your situation.

Oppression in marriage takes place when one spouse seeks to control and dominate the other through a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors. The tactics used by the oppressive spouse can vary. The treatment severely impacts the abused spouse's well-being in ways we will see shortly.

Opressors come from every culture, race, occupation, age group, and income level. Oftentimes, oppressors are popular and well liked in their roles outside the home. They can even be well-respected leaders in their church. If your spouse is well liked and successful, you may doubt your experience with him or her. You may question your own perceptions and wonder whether *you* are the problem.

Domestic abuse is prevalent.² That means that both oppressors and victims attend our churches. Yet many churches fail to talk about oppression. And since it not easily disclosed by victims, it hides in our pews. This may leave you feeling isolated and alone. But you are not alone.

If you are being oppressed, know that Scripture has much to say about your experience, your safety, and God's heart for you. This booklet will help you first to identify abuse and then to understand it, what God says about it, and what you should do about it. We will look at what oppression is, why oppressors oppress, and how their treatment affects you. We'll also

explore how you can connect to God and others to get help.

Types of Oppression

Oppression can be hard for you to identify, because it doesn't look the same in every relationship. Different abusers use different behaviors in order to dominate, but we can break down oppression into five general types. As you make sense of what is happening in your marriage, keep in mind that usually more than one type of abuse occurs at a time. Some are subtler than others.

Physical

Physical abuse is the intentional or reckless use of physical force in a way that *may* result in bodily injury or physical pain. It can also be actions that lead to harm—such as refusing sleep or medical care. Physical abuse does not need to cause pain or leave a bruise in order to be considered abusive. A spouse who does anything from throwing things at you or shoving you all the way to choking or beating you is being physically abusive. Physical abuse can be directed at you, your children, or household pets.

Emotional

Emotional abuse (also called mental, verbal, or psychological abuse) is a pattern of behavior that promotes a destructive sense of

fear, obligation, shame, or guilt. If your spouse neglects, frightens, isolates, belittles, or exploits you, plays mind games or lies frequently, or blames, shames, or threatens you, they are being emotionally abusive. Repeated personal attacks and manipulations usually result in increased fear, volatility, depression, or even a spectrum of anxiety disorders.

Emotional abuse can be more damaging than physical abuse. It occurs more frequently and distorts the sufferer's perception of themselves and of reality. If you are experiencing attacks on your personhood, you may begin to believe that you are worthless, or even deserving of mistreatment.

Spiritual

Spiritual abuse occurs when the oppressor establishes control and domination by using Scripture, doctrine, or a "leadership role" as weapons. Spiritual abuse can be subtle, as it can mask itself as religious practice. If your spouse exhibits control-oriented leadership, lords power over you, *demand*s submission, or uses Scripture in daily life or conflict in shaming and punishing ways, these are signs of spiritual abuse. When a spiritual abuser twists Scripture and uses it to attack, the abuse can feel as though it comes from God himself. Even though the Scripture is out of context, distorted, and weaponized, your oppressor is using

God's words, so it can seem as if God is the one doing the shaming.

Sexual

Sexual abuse happens when sex is not an expression of an emotional or spiritual union. Taken out of God's design, sex is easily corrupted. It is corrupted in the worst way when sex is demanded, required, or taken by force. Obvious categories include rape or forced sex acts. Sex within marriage still requires consent. The *unwanted* intrusion of pornography or implements in sex, undesired sexual activities, peeking or spying, and sexting are abusive acts.

Sex abuse can also be coercive. In such instances, the oppressor uses unrelenting pressure or threats to leverage a sexual encounter after you have already expressed your discomfort or refusal. Sex abuse in a marriage can be very difficult to recognize, and most people I talk to need help in order to understand and identify occurrences. Sadly, a large percentage of my counselees in abusive marriages experience sexual abuse.³

Economic

Economic abuse, like other forms of abuse, may be subtle or overt but in general includes tactics that limit the partner's access to assets or family finances or that conceal information. Victims typically have little or no impact on how family resources are spent. The oppressor