

A Survivor Looks Back:
What I Wish Pastors had Known When I was Looking for Help
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Beyond Abuse in the Christian Home: Raising Voices for Change

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The home in which I grew up was a Christian one. My father is a well respected Presbyterian minister who, many years beyond retirement now, still preaches every Sunday. My mother is a classically trained soloist and former church choir Director who is so well known for her hospitality that a Christian women's shelter is named in her honor. I was one of five children who practically grew up in churches. It's no surprise that we are now involved in ministries as diverse as domestic violence, music therapy, inner-city community organizing and children's performing arts. We are a very close family and my parents are role models for a mutually respectful, affectionate, caring marriage partnership that is rooted in Biblical equality.

I knew or understood nothing about domestic violence while growing up. Even later, when I was in the midst of it myself, I had no name for the chaos and misery in my marriage. No one from whom I sought support – from the numerous ministers to professional marriage counselors, from mental health professionals to concerned church friends - ever actually called it 'domestic violence', so of course I never considered myself a battered woman. While my supporters were very kind and caring, they were untrained and essentially ignorant about the issue of partner violence.

Instead, the focus of their attention while intervening was either on repairing my fractured marriage or addressing my husband's personal problems. Neither the impact that his extreme behavior was having on me or his potential for physical violence was ever discussed. As a result, I was in the dark regarding the dynamics of domestic violence and the escalation of violence that typically occurs at the point of separation or divorce.

It was not until several months after a dramatic post-separation attack on my father and me that I called a secular community agency for help. I had been plagued by terrifying nightmares and other symptoms of posttraumatic stress. I asked them if could come to their support group for abused women, saying somewhat apologetically, "Look, I know I'm not really a battered woman, but my husband stabbed me when I filed for divorce, so could I please come anyway?" Although our church had rallied around us and supported us every step of the way, it was in that secular domestic violence support group that my healing journey began in earnest. As a result, I have spent considerable time in the intervening years trying to prepare church leaders and communities of faith to help other families that find themselves in similar situations.

I am often asked what I wish pastors had known when I was seeking help during my abusive marriage. I have put quite a lot of thought into that question. While the ignorance of those who intervened probably increased the danger of my situation, I feel great compassion for them. They were sincere and they did try to help. Through no fault of their own they were simply unequipped for the job. The sad truth is that the places where they were educated did nothing to help the students understand or deal with abuse in Christian families. They were never taught what domestic violence is and isn't, the many myths and misconceptions surrounding it, what the scripture says about it or how best to counsel those experiencing it.

Thankfully, in the years since my experience, more and more seminaries and Christian schools have begun offering classes on family violence or incorporating curriculum addressing abuse issues into their counseling courses. Based on the stories I continue to hear on an almost daily basis, however, it is clear that there is still much more to be done. I hope that by sharing my experiences and the lessons I've learned, pastors and Christian counselors who are not yet trained on the issue of domestic violence will understand the importance and value of enhancing their base of knowledge.

My story, like that of so many other survivors of abuse, started in a seemingly ordinary way. I was 32 when I married David, a man who adored me, who professed to love my God and who appeared to have so many of the qualities I was looking for in a husband. He doted on me, laughed easily, got along well with my friends and loved spending time together. There was no hint of abuse or controlling behavior during our courtship, just sweetness and sharing, fun and togetherness. My friends loved David and thought we made a wonderful couple. We were both ready to settle down and shared the dream of living a simple life in the Texas countryside. Since we were older and convinced that in each other we had found "the one", a prolonged engagement seemed unnecessary. We were eager to begin our life together. After discussing the many options, we decided to marry in a sweet, simple ceremony. We exchanged vows at sunset in a lovely little Presbyterian chapel on a river, surrounded by friends. At my request, a friend read aloud from my favorite chapter of the New Testament, First Corinthians 13. "Love is patient, love is kind, love isn't jealous or boastful or proud. . ." We immediately started planning for a more traditional ceremony and honeymoon back home in Hawaii that would include my large family and my many friends there. I

couldn't wait to introduce David to my family and to the islands. I knew that he would love them both.

We were surprised but overjoyed when we learned very soon after our wedding that we were expecting our first baby. We immediately called our loved ones to share the wonderful news and then went to work shopping for baby items. We had spent many hours dreaming and talking of how wonderful it would be to have children together, and we were thrilled that our dream was coming true already. I couldn't wait for a baby to snuggle and love, and David wanted nothing more than to raise a child in a close, loving family that would be different from the abusive home in which he had grown up.

I couldn't have been happier. It was not long, however, before David seemed to begin to change right before my eyes. Instead of being the playful and sweet man I had fallen in love with, he was becoming more and more moody and critical everyday. Before we married he had seemed to love my independent, out-going personality. Now he made cruel, hurtful remarks about me and accused me flirting if I innocently made eye contact with any other man. He wanted the two of us to be together at all times and seemed threatened by anyone else with whom I spent time, co-workers and friends alike.

He insisted on driving me each morning to the school where I worked, then picking me up each afternoon. He popped in to my classroom to bring me gifts at, showed up to take me out to lunch and called frequently during the day to check on me. Soon he was even volunteering part-time in my classroom, where the students and teachers loved him. He seemed unwilling to leave my side for fear I would betray him somehow. These things which seemed like acts of sweetness initially later were revealed as merely a means to monitor and control me.

At home when we were alone, periods of increasing darkness began to creep in and overtake the good times, eroding my newlywed happiness. At first I wrote it off as marriage adjustment issues which would take care of themselves as we spent more time together and adapted to life as a couple. I wanted nothing to spoil my happiness. I was married to a man I loved and I was having his baby. I had a job I loved and I was content with my life, I would tell myself.

Before long, though, our relationship began to deteriorate to such a degree that I could no longer pretend it would somehow magically get better. I had to consider for the first time that perhaps the man I had married had hidden a great deal from me about his true nature. His affectionate ways and loving attentions had given way to ever-increasing displays of unfounded jealousy and insecurity. Although I was faithful and fully committed to David, for some reason that I could not fathom, he was not able to trust me. As a result, he insisted on knowing every single detail of my comings and goings, and became very agitated when he was not included in every minute of my daily plans. I could not comprehend why the man to whom I was so completely devoted would behave in such a way. He had begun to routinely berate me and call me names, swear at me and disrespect me in ways that were unthinkable. I was dejected and confused.

On the one hand, I was thrilled to be carrying the precious baby that we so wanted, but on the other hand I began to fear that perhaps I had made some terrible mistake. While David's devoted attention had been wonderful before we married, it had become increasingly oppressive. Before long I was feeling like a prisoner, under siege in my own home. We lived far out in the country, away from other houses. This was in the days before cell phones, and the home phone soon was being ripped out of the wall and

thrown across the room whenever I received or made calls. The car keys were even hidden from me in an effort to keep me home.

At one point David started to routinely wake me in the middle of the night to interrogate me or accuse me of crazy things. I was exhausted from the pregnancy and from working full time in a stressful position, but he would refuse to let me go to sleep or stay asleep. Instead, he would follow me from room to room harassing me, even insisting that the baby I was carrying was not his. Nothing I could say would calm or appease him. I would sob in frustration and beg him to let me sleep. My heart was breaking. When he started going through my many old boxes of mementos, tearing up photos he found of me with any other male, friends and relatives alike, I was dumbfounded. Even my favorite picture of my grandfather and me was ripped in half. When things were at their worse and I told him that I couldn't take it any longer, I would attempt to leave the house. But he would body-block or restrain me, refusing to let me out the door. Once he even took the spark plugs out of the car so that I couldn't leave the property. I tried to remain calm during these turbulent times, but I'd never felt so helpless, dejected or alone.

When things were calmer, I would try to comprehend the downward spiral that my marriage had taken. It simply made no sense. I could only think that David must be sick. Since David was in recovery from a drinking problem and attended AA meetings, I called an addictions counselor. I was urged to attend an Al-Anon group. I did so, and the members were kind, but they didn't seem to understand what I was experiencing any better than I did. They told me that when he acted irrationally, I should, "Just see the word SICK flashing on his forehead." When I described the horrible things he called me, I was told to ignore it. "If he called you a chair, would that make you a chair?", someone asked. I was told to remember that addiction is a disease. I had pledged to

love my husband “in sickness and in health” and now he did indeed seem to be sick. In fact, he seemed to have morphed into someone I no longer even knew.

I was exhausted. I tried to reason with David. I prayed for wisdom. I talked with doctors and with pastors. I wanted nothing more than to get away from the constant chaos, but I loved my husband and I wanted to help him. I thought I knew “the real David”, and I wanted him back. When, in frustration, I asked him one day why he had never done any of this before the wedding, his chilling response was simply, “You never would have married me!” It stopped me cold. For the first time, I was forced to face the possibility that perhaps in our courtship David had purposely deceived me. I had to wonder if now he really knew what he was doing when he acted so terribly.

Still, he had never once hit or physically hurt me, and he seemed incredulous and pained when I told him that I feared that he might. He insisted that he would never ever hurt me, that he loved me more than life itself. But I was beginning to fear his anger and the threats that he had begun to make during the explosive episodes.

By the end of my first trimester of pregnancy, I was exhausted, miserable and having stress-related pregnancy problems. Although my OB/GYN didn’t ask what was causing my stress, she insisted that I do whatever it took to reduce it and protect my unborn baby.

I finally left David after a particularly terrifying event during which he woke me in the night and threatened to commit suicide with a loaded gun. The evening before, I had tried again to gently approach the subject of a temporary separation. I managed to take the gun from him and spent another long harrowing, sleepless night listening to him rant and rave. In the morning after he left for work, I called my school and told

them I needed an emergency leave of absence. Some dear friends helped me pack up my belongings and I left town.

I cried all the way home as I fled to my sister's home on the west coast and then on to my parent's home in Hawaii. I was devastated and confused. For three months, I stayed with my parents and sought support and answers from anyone who would listen. I attended counseling sessions and sought out spiritual advice. I was treated with compassion and counseled to try harder, to pray harder and not to give up on my marriage. After a lengthy separation during which David received intensive counseling, he joined me at my parent's home for a trial reconciliation.

Living with my family seemed wiser than moving away and becoming isolated with David, just in case he returned to his old ways. David had agreed in advance to this arrangement and also to attending three AA meetings each week and other conditions. Together we saw a licensed psychologist for marriage counseling once or twice a week. Still, no one named what had happened in our marriage as 'abuse' or 'domestic violence', and so I was never warned that David's old behaviors would most likely resume and probably even escalate. We attended church regularly and talked to pastors. My church friends commented on how much he obviously adored me and how we seemed like a great couple.

At first things were better and David was on his best behavior, but after a month or so, his jealousy and erratic, unpredictable behaviors began to return. He usually hid them from everyone but me. We continued the weekly marriage counseling.

When two months later our baby was born, we immediately fell madly in love with him. David had chosen his name, Joshua, after vividly dreaming that God had chosen that name for our son. Despite our joy over the baby, David's verbal and

emotional abuses didn't abate. He was apparently threatened by my close family, who stood by me and intervened whenever they witnessed him being rude to me. He began staying out until late at night and would never tell me where he had been. Once when I tearfully suggested another separation, he told me that if I ever left him again, he would take the baby and I would never see him again. This was something new and terrifying.

David adored and admired my father, who treated him like a son, and doted on my mother, who was always kind and nurturing. Nevertheless, he clearly resented the fact that he could not dominate me while we all lived under the same roof. I didn't want to expose my parents to any unpleasantness, but I also knew instinctively that things would be much worse if we moved elsewhere. I worried that the baby might pick up on our stress and that his development might be adversely effected, so I tried to be cheerful despite the misery in my marriage and was happy that Josh had his grandparents to distract him and play with him when things were tense.

Over and over, I prayed for insight. I wanted to be a good wife, but I wanted peace and I knew I couldn't live like a prisoner indefinitely. I was becoming depressed. In my head I would sing the same scriptural song over and over. I had learned it in church and it always brought me peace. While David would rant at me, or drive recklessly with us over the mountains, I would calm myself by silently singing, "You are my hiding place. You always fill my heart with songs of deliverance. Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. I will trust in You. Let the weak say 'I am strong in the strength of the Lord'. I will trust in You." This became my daily mantra.

Despite all I was doing to try to hold my marriage together, it continued to unravel. One horrible night David came home around two o'clock in the morning, and grabbed me up out of my sleep, holding a carpet knife to me as if he were preparing to slice me. This was the first ever physical assault on me, although I was not injured.

David began interrogating me nonstop, demanding to know who I been on the phone with when he had called and gotten a busy signal earlier in the evening. This hostage situation went on for hours and was terrifying. He held the knife to me the entire time, although I pleaded with him to let me go. Even when I had to go to the restroom, he held tightly onto my arm and kept the knife close to my face, murmuring and threatening me under his breath. He promised to hurt my father if I made any noise and woke him up, and so I cried silently all night.

Near morning David finally fell asleep and I took the knife and hid it. I sat and waited for sunrise, trying to figure out how I could get away from David without jeopardizing my family. The next morning, when he awoke and realized that I had hidden the knife, he demanded to know where I had put it. When I refused to tell him, he looked me right in the eyes and coldly stated, "I should have killed you last night when I had the chance."

I made an emergency call to our marriage counselor who suggested that I go to a shelter. I considered it briefly, but told her I was afraid that if I left him, he might hurt my family. I was also afraid that if I stayed, he would hurt one of us. There seemed to be no good solution. I felt completely trapped. I knew that my God didn't expect or want me to live and raise my baby in such destructive chaos, and yet I didn't know what to do. I just knew that I had to do something.

My dreams were totally shattered. It was clear that I could not stay married to David. I knew now that he could really hurt me. The next day I visited a Christian attorney from our church for advice. I told him everything. I said I was terrified for my family and myself. When I asked if I should get a restraining order, he said "No. We can get one later if you need one. There are laws against assault." He agreed to help me with a divorce, but he offered no other support or information. When I got home and told

David I had filed for divorce, he punched me in the face. I almost dropped the baby. This was first time he had hit me.

Two weeks after this, David reluctantly moved out. Several months later in my first support group, I learned about Dr Lenore Walker's 'Cycle of Violence theory'. I could easily relate to it. The three distinct phases she described were clearly evident in David's pattern of behavior, although in many relationships I am told this is not the case.

The 'Tension-Building' phase is the first and the longest. It is dominated by tensions that build and build, much like a pressure cooker. The 'Explosion Phase' follows, after which there may be a temporary reduction in tension. Walker dubbed this the 'Honeymoon phase.' I never liked this term, since true honeymoons don't follow violence. It has also been referred to the 'Hearts and Flowers phase' or the 'Period of Loving Contrition'. My support group leader, Luana Nery, called it the "Manipulative Kindness" phase. That is a perfect description, since the "kindesses" that follow violent episodes are anything but random. This phase is especially evident in the early stages of an abusive relationship. After acting abusively, the batterer usually begs and pleads for forgiveness, cries and perhaps plies his victim with gifts. Because she loves and pities him, and often because she really believes that she has "the *real* him back again", this works for a while. Eventually, though, the Tension starts to build again, and the cycle repeats. Usually the 'Honeymoon' period will disappear altogether eventually. The irony is that neither the victim nor the abuser can see this pattern at the time.

For the first few days after moving out, David was cooperative and pleasant, trying to win me back any way he could. He dropped in whenever he wanted, against my wishes but it was always to bring me money or gifts or to make promises to change. (Manipulative Kindness). But when I was resolute about getting a divorce, he became

spiteful and cruel, and started to leave hate-filled messages and accusatory notes for me. (Tension Building) Just five days after he moved out, the Explosion occurred with all its fury. Of course I never saw it coming.

My mother was out of town and Dad and I had accepted an invitation to join some church friends for a dinner picnic on their sailboat. It was a beautiful and peaceful evening, the first I had enjoyed in a very long time. Afterward, I picked up the baby from the sitter's and arrived home about forty-five minutes before Dad. As Josh slept peacefully in his car seat, I got out of my car and was ambushed by my estranged husband. I instinctively screamed as he grabbed me and threw me up against a wall in the darkened hallway just inside the house. He closed the outer door, and pressed a knife against my throat, threatening to kill me if I didn't shut up. He was wild. He swore and screamed and savagely beat me over and over and over in the face. He stuck the knife into the flesh of my neck so I could no longer speak or scream.

After being subdued, I was forced at knifepoint into a chair in our bedroom. I sat stunned as rivers of blood poured from my face. My mouth throbbed inside and out and my cheekbones felt like they had been shattered. David told me that he had come to kill my father, and that he intended to "cut his eyes out" and "drip every drop of blood from his body." I was horrified and couldn't believe that this was happening. It seemed as if everything was occurring in slow motion. I was disoriented and in shock.

David told me that he had already cut the phone lines and that there was no use trying to get help. Try as I might, I could think of no way to stop the horror that was unfolding before my eyes. I was paralyzed with fear and disbelief. I tried to think of how to stop him. I knew I could never overpower him. He was agitated and seemed possessed, demonic. He opened and closed his fists repeatedly as he berated and mocked me. I pled with him to leave us alone, to spare my father. I told him that Dad

loved him, that my family and I loved him. I reminded him that God loved him. This made him even more furious. He snarled and stuck the knife deeper into my neck, screaming obscenities and repeating what he had planned for Dad.

All this time, David watched the window. When he finally saw the lights of my father's car arriving, he listened for the door to open and then suddenly released me. He raced out in to the hallway with the knife over his head, screaming wildly as he ran. I yelled a warning as Dad opened the door and lunged after David, attempting to hold him back. In a flash of fury, he turned and stabbed me deeply in the abdomen to get me off of him. I had no idea that I had been hurt. I could only think of trying to save my Dad. David immediately began slashing at Dad. The knife cut through his eyebrows and across his face. Later more than 40 stitches were required to repair his largest wound. Miraculously, Dad's eyes were untouched, although we didn't know this until later. As a matter of fact, I nearly lost an eye as well when David tried to wrench it from the socket after he wounded my father and I tried to restrain him.

The events of that night are the stuff of which nightmares are made. Dad and I were taken to the hospital where our wounds were explored and tended. I was hospitalized for three days. David was located and arrested the night of the attack. He was eventually charged with attempted murder and kidnapping among a host of other felonies. He later pled no contest to attempted manslaughter and was given a twenty year maximum sentence and a ten year minimum.

In the aftermath, as stated earlier, our stunned church stood solidly with us. Over time, our wounds healed. God remained faithful and blessed my family abundantly. Until that time of healing, though, there were many new and different struggles ahead of me.

When several months after the assault, Luana, the leader of my victim support group told me about Rev. Marie Fortune's book, Keeping the Faith: Questions and Answers for Abused Christian Women. I immediately obtained a copy. In it, I found information, spiritual encouragement and comfort. Rev. Fortune explained that that by seeking a divorce from an abusive husband, a Christian wife has not failed her marriage. Instead, she wrote, husbands who abuse their wives have already broken the sacred covenant of marriage. By abusing their wives, they abandon them emotionally. The wife's declaration of divorce merely makes public what has already been done by the abuser. I think I breathed an audible sigh of relief. I went on to read and understand so much more about what the scriptures had to say, not only about about abuse in marriage and divorce, but about mutual submission, forgiveness and suffering. That little book became my constant companion, and I shared it with many, many others.

Meanwhile, my husband was in prison awaiting trial. At first I received numerous apology letters from him. He claimed to be sorry for what he had done, but he never really seemed to take responsibility for it. He seemed sorer about being in jail than for doing what he did to Dad and I. I felt great pity for him, but as I learned more about domestic violence, I began to realize that these insincere 'apologies' were his way of trying to manipulate his victims and make us feel guilty. He was more angry than sorry, especially because we were cooperating with the state in his prosecution, although we really had no choice in the matter. I even received several credible tips about death threats he was making about me from prison, and he even sent me his copy of the restraining order that he was served, as if to say "You think a piece of paper can stop ME?"

When I read the words of Psalm 55, it seemed to speak directly to me. “The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart. His words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.”

I struggled to understand what had happened, to forgive David and to find God’s will for my future. I wrestled with the command of Jesus to “forgive seventy times seven.” I wanted to forgive, but I wasn’t sure what that meant. Seeking advice, I made an appointment with the same Christian lawyer that I had seen before the attack. When I asked if he could help me with my legal concerns, he insisted that I take the baby to the prison right away, because, as he put it, “a bad father is better than no father at all.” Despite my fear of David, I was tempted many times to do just that. I wanted him to get help. I often thought about the words of Jesus, “I was in prison and you did not visit me.” I put myself in David’s shoes and wondered how it would be to be imprisoned and separated from my baby. I didn’t think I could survive that, and my heart hurt for him. If there was any possibility that he could learn and really change, I reasoned, maybe at least Josh could still have a father again. After all, we serve a God of miracles! I knew that no one was beyond the reach of Jesus’ healing touch, and I prayed for a miracle.

Fortunately, however, Christian friends who had a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of domestic violence and the danger of contacting David advised me not to intervene with him directly. One dear Christian sister, JoAnn, who was also a survivor, saw my struggles. She explained gently that if I injected myself into David’s recovery process, I would simply “become an occasion for abuse.” He was obsessed with me, she reminded me. By distracting him from his own necessary inner work, she said, I would actually be a stumbling block to him! I felt immediate peace and confirmation that she was speaking the truth. I felt great sorrow but also great relief to know that I

was not responsible for tending to David's spiritual needs. I would have to trust God to send others to do that.

In my survivor support group, I also learned that it is possible to love someone and to consciously choose not to have him in my life. I was reminded to focus on my long-term best interests and urged to accept that I could not be the person to help my husband, although I secretly sent others to minister to him. I focused on caring for my baby and on keeping us safe. I was still heartsick, but I told myself that my job was to stay strong for my son and create a future for us. It was not easy, but my family, friends and church supported me. I went back to college and graduated with honors. I never worked in special education again, but instead focused my efforts on domestic violence prevention and intervention.

Seven years after David's incarceration, I was shocked to learn that he was about to be released from prison, three years before the end of his 'minimum sentence'. When that same week the phone company mistakenly published my unlisted phone number and address, he called me from prison to say that he was being released and that he knew exactly where I lived. He read my address to me. Terrified, I immediately moved and quit the job that I had loved managing a Christian transitional abuse shelter in which I also lived.

Because of the dangers he presented to me and my family, when David was released from prison, he was transported directly to the airport and sent to the U.S. mainland to serve out his parole. One of many parole conditions was a ban on returning to Hawaii. I felt somewhat safer knowing this, but I have never since had a published address or phone number.

This turned out to be a good decision, because according to several sources, David has apparently never quit looking for me. Although he was out of prison for several years, he was eventually re-incarcerated, this time for threatening one of his family members with a knife. Through this criminal case, I learned that while David had been free on parole, he had illegally purchased a gun and bragged that he was planning to kill me. Today he is serving a life sentence. I have been told that he cannot be considered for parole until the year 2025.

With the benefit of years of hindsight, I never pass up an opportunity to share with caring Christians the information I have learned the hard way about domestic violence. Had the ministers and helpers from whom I sought support been educated on this topic, perhaps my story would have turned out differently. We will never know. But for the sake of all the Christian victims who today find themselves equally trapped and endangered, I pray you will take this information to heart and pass it on every chance you get. Here is What Wish Pastors Had Known When I was Looking for Help.

I wish pastors had known what domestic violence IS

I needed pastors to understand what I was dealing with. Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive, controlling behavior, exercised by one intimate partner over the other. It's a belief in the right to absolute power and control over the partner. It's not just physical abuse, either. It never starts with that. It can be *verbal abuse*, *sexual abuse*, *destruction of property*; *abuse of pets*; *emotional abuse* (isolation, financial control; blaming the victim, minimizing or denying the abuse; using and or/abusing the children, making threats, threatening suicide, 'manipulative kindness', etc.). Anyone can be a victim. Typically, women are the victims, but men can be victims, too. I have met and counseled with several abused men. It is much more likely, though, that when a man comes to you and claims to be an abused husband, he is actually an abuser who

is hoping to convince you that his wife is the one with the problem. True victims tend to be reluctant to disclose. Bad-mouthing the partner is typical abuser behavior, however. Abusers usually want you to believe them and do only one thing – nothing! They will often try to beat the victim to the police or to your office and attempt to manipulate those in authority into siding with them. They tend to be very slick and believable, and often a victim finds herself trying to “prove” that her partner is abusive, while he tries to convince you that she is a liar or “crazy”. I often recommend the paperback book When Love Goes Wrong: What to Do When You Can’t Do Anything Right By Ann Jones & Susan Schechter to anyone who wants to understand domestic violence. In addition to other very helpful information, it contains an exhaustive checklist of abusive behaviors, many of which are very subtle.

I wish pastors had known what domestic violence IS NOT

I needed pastors to dispel the numerous common societal myths and stereotypes that I held about domestic violence. In my mind a ‘battered woman’ was someone who was weak and was always getting beaten up. That wasn’t my reality. Here are some other things I learned over the years that I hope will help you, too.

Domestic violence is not a relationship in which the couple frequently “fights.”

It is a relationship in which one partner is being routinely subjugated and abused by the other. Although both individuals may get hurt, it is the victim who is hurt the worst and hurt the most often. Only the victim lives in fear.

Domestic violence is not a “marriage problem” or a “communication problem.”

It’s a *violence* problem that stems from a *belief system* problem. Anyone who believes that he or she has the right (especially the God-given right or responsibility!) to “keep another person in line” is a potential abuser. Working with either a victim or an abuser

(or both) on communication skills or marriage issues will NOT be helpful if violence has occurred. The violence will continue, and it will escalate.

Domestic violence is not an anger problem.

Everyone gets angry. Anger is a feeling. Anger never hurt anyone. Domestic violence is not an anger problem. Therefore the commonly prescribed 'Anger Management' classes for the abuser will not help. In fact, longitudinal research shows that abusers can be just as violent (or even more violent!) when they are calm. (For more information on this, see the fascinating research described in the book When Men Batter Women by Neil Jacobsen, Ph.D. and John Gottman Ph.D.) Abusers, like all of us, can and do get angry at other people. They may become upset with a boss, a co-worker, or even the police and judges who hold them accountable. Yet rarely do they act violently towards them. Why? They know they would suffer an immediate negative consequence. Thus domestic abuse is better understood as a behavior, a choice – not as a *feeling*.

Domestic violence is not the result of stress.

Certainly stress may be a factor. We all get stressed from time to time. We don't all get violent when stressed, though, although many of us have extremely stressful lives or jobs. Abusers also often attack their victims during completely non-stressful times, such as at or after a party or when things are quiet and calm. Sometimes the victim is fast asleep when the assault begins, as I was on several occasions.

Domestic violence is not caused by using alcohol and drugs.

By focusing almost solely on my husband's recovery issues, therapists and helpers diverted their attention from the core issue at hand – his abusive behavior- and ignored the impact it was having on my emotional health. The fact is that most

batterers or abusers are not alcoholics or addicts. Most addicts are also not batterers. While studies have shown that there is a correlation with increased severity of injuries when alcohol is involved, it does not 'cause' the violence. I worked in an addiction treatment program for three years. Consider this fact. Batterers who do get drunk or high often do so with their buddies. However, they rarely if ever, beat up their friends when they are drunk or high! Moreover, sometimes the most violent abusers are strict nondrinkers and non-drug users. This is important to understand, because as I now often remind addiction professionals, when you sober up a wife beater, guess what you get? A sober wife-beater!

Lastly, domestic violence is not the result of a 'sickness' or mental illness.

Abusers are not sick. Even those with a genuine mental health diagnosis cannot attribute their abusive behavior solely to their illness. Most mental health patients are never violent. Those who are can usually be medicated. If domestic violence was the result of a true illness, the sick person would be unable to control when and where he displayed it's "symptoms". He would not be able to abuse *only* his spouse or partner and *only* behind closed doors. Since when do sick people control their symptoms? The Jekyll-Hyde behavior that victims describe is manifested at will by the abuser who is attempting to manipulate someone to "get his way". Formerly violent abusers who are genuinely working to change tell us this quite openly. Did you know that abuse is often directed only at parts of the victim's body that are covered by hair or clothing?

Domestic violence is not about the loss of control- far from it! It is rather about the use of power and control to get one's way. Nevertheless, victims are often told by untrained helpers (as I was by my fellow Al-Anon members and others), "Your husband is sick. He can't help himself." When victims hear this, their struggle is exacerbated because they have married "in sickness and in health".

The above issues are all very commonly misunderstood myths about domestic violence. Even highly trained counselors, professional social workers, licensed psychologists and psychiatrists typically do not understand this very well. Neither our very caring marriage counselor (a psychologist with a PhD), or two psychiatrists who assessed David addressed the power and control issues or safety concerns. For anyone who is interested in better understanding batterers, I highly recommend the excellent book, Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men by Lundy Bancroft.

I wish pastors had known how to identify the signs of domestic violence

I needed the pastors I approached to “read between the lines” and be on the lookout for signs of possible abuse. Routine assessment for abuse should be incorporated into all pre-marital counseling, marriage counseling and family counseling. Clearly, none of the pastors I approached, from the one who married us to a number of others, was equipped to do this. The fact is, in all interactions with couples, especially those who are seeking relationship advice or those who are clearly struggling, pastors should always be on the look-out for signs of power and control issues.

In my case, the signs of domestic violence were everywhere. The very fact that I had left David shortly after the marriage, that I even explained his terrible treatment of me (verbally and emotionally), that David demonstrated extreme jealousy and a “bad temper”, that he had made many attempts to isolate me from family and friends, that the incidents had escalated in frequency and severity over time, that David’s father had battered his mother and his children and that David had made prior threats (including threatening suicide, taking the baby from me, etc.) were all obvious red flags.

Here are some of the possible warning signs that domestic violence may be occurring: There have been separations in the past. You know he was abusive in a former relationship. You know his father abused his mother. He has an explosive temper. He won't let her talk in counseling sessions. He tries to control where she goes, who she talks with and what she does. He accuses her of having affairs. She says things like, "He's a Jekyll-Hyde." or "I walk on eggshells." or "He's mean when he drinks." or "No one believes me when I tell them the way he treats me." He seems to always want to be with her (or conversely, he leaves her alone for days.) He controls the money. The property is in his name only. She may be forced to cancel their counseling appointments if he can't come with her. He may not "let" her work or "let" her drive. He may insist that she stay at home (often this includes an insistence that she home school the children). He may badmouth her or her family to you, or try to convince you she is the only one with a problem. He may try to convince you that she is 'crazy' or is 'a terrible mother'. He may try to get her arrested, or get a restraining against her. If so, he uses this as evidence to convince you that he is "the real victim." She may say he has threatened to take the children from her. He may have moved her far away from her family or support system. The police may have been called to their house before. She may have bruises or unexplained injuries, or wear long sleeves in hot weather. She may seem depressed or afraid to talk. She may be using drugs or alcohol to self-medicate or cope. She may make excuses for him or minimize any abuse that you know has occurred.

I wish pastors had known to assume that a victim is usually telling the truth when she shares what has happened in her relationship.

I needed pastors to believe me. Victims are typically too embarrassed or afraid to talk about abuse at all. Despite common misconceptions, there is little value in lying

about abuse. When a victim does work up the courage to disclose the truth, she is often not believed at all or is herself blamed for provoking the abuse. The truth is that victims are much more likely to minimize their abuse, not exaggerate it.

Abusers can be very charming in public and many can easily “con” a pastor or Christian counselor in the same way they con police and judges. I have heard many stories from victims whose abusers have convinced their pastor that his wife was lying or exaggerating. Many women have left their churches because the church sided with her abusive husband.

In my case, one of the pastors in my church seemed to support me at first, but apparently believed outrageous accusations that David made about me after he went to prison. I was deeply hurt.

One another occasion, while separated from David, I sought support from an older pastor friend of my father’s. He was kind but he quickly dismissed my concerns about David’s behavior and seemed only interested in what I was going to do to save my marriage. Of course, this is what I wanted as well, so I took his words to heart. I desperately wanted David to stop treating me so horribly. When my concerns were not validated, it was easy for me to slip into believing that I could handle the situation and that David might change if I just worked harder to find the right kind of help.

I wish pastors had known to NAME the abuse and to call it domestic violence.

I needed to be educated about what was happening to me. I needed to know that I was experiencing domestic violence and that God did not want me to be abused. Without being taught the dynamics of power and control and the typical escalation pattern of domestic violence, I could not have possibly anticipated David’s dangerous

potential. Since no one named the problem, I was not referred to domestic violence agencies that could have helped me carefully plan for my separation and divorce. When I was finally presented with domestic violence information in my first support group, I remember vividly that it was as if a light bulb went on over my head and suddenly everything made sense. Unfortunately, by this time my father and I had already been assaulted and David had been sent to prison. Oh, how I wished then that I had at least been given the opportunity to learn some of this sooner. I have often wondered if David could have benefited from a Batterer Intervention Program. Unfortunately, I learned too late that domestic violence was our problem.

I wish pastors had known not to assume that just because there has been no physical abuse, domestic violence isn't occurring.

Everyone I approached for help minimized David's lethal potential. Since I had not been hit or slapped or otherwise hurt physically, it was assumed that violence was not a concern. Even the focus of psychiatrists seemed to be not on *what* David was doing but *why* he was doing it. The issues that were addressed, therefore, were alcohol abuse, his childhood issues, his temper, etc. Anyone who had been trained in domestic violence intervention could have easily identified the escalating continuum of abuse and warned me that the worst violence (and nearly all intimate murders) occur during or after a separation.

I wish pastors had known to avoid marriage counseling when violence or abuse is occurring.

Marriage counseling assumes equality between the partners. Equality provides the necessary give and take of compromise. It is impossible to compromise with an abuser. Furthermore, a partnership mentality is imperative to insure truth-telling and

safety in the couples counseling setting. Domestic violence victims are frequently beaten for telling the truth in such a session.

I needed a domestic violence support group for victims and David needed a batterer intervention program that would hold him accountable for his actions in a group setting. Individual counseling can be helpful for both parties as well, but only when each party is seen individually by someone with expertise in domestic violence and safety issues.

Marriage counseling assumes that the relationship is one of mutuality and trust. Nothing could be farther from the truth when domestic violence is occurring. A “relationship problem” or “marital distress” can often be helped by both persons working on it, but domestic violence cannot. Only the abuser has the power to stop the abuse. Unfortunately, few abusers ever take full responsibility for their abusive behavior. They are much more likely to blame the victim, minimize their abuse and/or deny the abuse altogether. Marriage counseling often keeps the couple stuck in the tension–building phase of the “cycle of violence” for longer, but it will not prevent the next episode of abuse. It may even endanger the victim. In my case, it simply held off the final explosion a little longer. It certainly didn’t prevent it.

Typically couples counseling is never recommended until the abuser has been violence and abuse free for at least a year. This may be difficult for the couple that approaches you for help to understand, but it is the responsibility of the pastor or counselor to explain that safety must be the priority.

I wish pastors had known to always maintain safety as the highest priority.

My safety did not appear to be a priority for any of the pastors I approached. I needed to hear certain statements loudly and clearly. Such statements as, “What you

are describing is abuse.” “It is not your fault.” and “Domestic violence is a crime.” I also needed to hear them say, “I am concerned for your safety.”, “I will not discuss this with anyone, including your husband.”, “Would you like to know your legal options?”, and “Would you like to call the local domestic violence agency? They can work out a personal safety plan with you.”

I needed someone to do what is called a lethality (or dangerousness) assessment. This could have helped me understand the many factors that indicated David’s potential for physical violence. I needed a personalized safety plan and knowledge about all of the local resources and options for abuse victims. Had I been able to meet with other victims and survivors, I might also have been provided with additional support and ideas for staying safe.

I wish pastors had known the importance of maintaining a domestic violence victim’s confidentiality

I needed to know that nothing I said would get back to David without my permission. Occasionally, though, when I disclosed something terrible that David had done, the person I told would then confront David with this information, thinking that it would prevent him from doing it again. On one occasion, the police were called against my wishes and he retaliated by holding me hostage all night in the bedroom while he harassed and threatened me and deprived me of sleep. It is important to understand that unless a physical assault is occurring, the decision to call the police about domestic violence should be the victim’s if at all possible. Mandatory reporting requirements for abuse of an adult are very rare.

Without a victim’s clear permission, it can be dangerous to confront the abuser. Even with her permission, it may result in further abuse. The victim may be suddenly

blindsided by an abuser who becomes enraged by her perceived 'betrayal'. Many abuse victims have been beaten after just such an event.

I wish pastors had known the importance of validating a victim's feelings, respecting her wishes & supporting her decisions.

Shortly after joining my domestic violence support group, I was advised to apply for a protection order because we had no idea how long David would be incarcerated. As it turned out, despite his very high bail, there were several attempts by the prison itself to release him as he awaited trial, because the state was being sued over the overcrowded prisons.

As I stated earlier, when David was served with a restraining order, he mailed it to me as evidence of his refusal to comply. He was ordered not to contact me directly or indirectly in any way. Nevertheless, he continuously harassed me with phone calls from the prison. When I reported this, he lost his phone privileges. When he lost his phone privileges, he wrote me letters. I reported this and he then lost his mail privileges. Soon I was getting both phone calls and letters from other inmates on his behalf. When this too was reported and stopped, he started sending me letters through a pastor from our church who visited him regularly. I explained to the pastor that I did not want David's letters, which were very upsetting. He delivered them to me anyway. I explained that David was breaking the court's order, and that by assisting David this way, he was breaking it as well. Still the pastor continued to deliver letters and lengthy monologues to me, which became more upsetting over time. I felt misunderstood and betrayed. I couldn't understand why a pastor who had known me long before he ever met David felt no compunction about dismissing my request and interfering with my efforts to heal and move on with my life.

Remember the adage “Do No Harm”. Even if you don’t agree with a victim’s decisions, allowing her self-determination is crucial. She will likely come back to you later for help if you are not coercive or judgmental. Her decisions must be respected. She has had her power taken from her by the abuser and an important part of her recovery process is being empowered to make her own decisions. Sometimes this is hard for helpers, who may believe that they know what it is best for her. I try to avoid giving advice, and always remind myself that each victim is the expert on her own life.

Today, I can thank God for what has happened in my life, although I would not want to re-live it. I know that it was only through these dramatic experiences that I have been brought to the place where God wants me. I am grateful for all those compassionate pastors and Christian friends who tried to help me, even when they were ill-equipped. By sharing my experiences here, I pray that you too will find the courage to minister to suffering families in search of safety, support, justice and peace.