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What is Abuse?

By Sam Vaknin

What is Abuse?

by: **Sam Vaknin**

Violence in the family often follows other forms of more subtle and long-term abuse: verbal, emotional, psychological sexual, or financial.

It is closely correlated with alcoholism, drug consumption, intimate-partner homicide, teen pregnancy, infant and child mortality, spontaneous abortion, reckless behaviours, suicide, and the onset of mental health disorders.

Most abusers and batterers are males – but a significant minority are women. This being a "Women's Issue", the problem was swept under the carpet for generations and only recently has it come to public awareness. Yet, even today, society – for instance, through the court and the mental health systems – largely ignores domestic violence and abuse in the family. This induces feelings of shame and guilt in the victims and "legitimizes" the role of the abuser.

Violence in the family is mostly spousal – one spouse beating, raping, or otherwise physically harming and torturing the other. But children are also and often victims – either directly, or indirectly. Other vulnerable familial groups include the elderly and the disabled.

Abuse and violence cross geographical and cultural boundaries and social and economic strata. It is common among the rich and the poor, the well-educated and the less so, the young and the middle-aged, city dwellers and rural folk. It is a universal phenomenon.

Abusers exploit, lie, insult, demean, ignore (the "silent treatment"), manipulate, and control.

There are many ways to abuse. To love too much is to abuse. It is tantamount to treating someone as an extension, an object, or an instrument of gratification. To be over-protective, not to respect privacy, to be brutally honest, with a sadistic sense of humour, or consistently tactless – is to abuse.

What is Abuse?

To expect too much, to denigrate, to ignore – are all modes of abuse. There is physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse. The list is long. Most abusers abuse surreptitiously. They are "stealth abusers". You have to actually live with one in order to witness the abuse.

There are three important categories of abuse:

Overt Abuse

The open and explicit abuse of another person. Threatening, coercing, beating, lying, berating, demeaning, chastising, insulting, humiliating, exploiting, ignoring ("silent treatment"), devaluing, unceremoniously discarding, verbal abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse are all forms of overt abuse.

Covert or Controlling Abuse

Abuse is almost entirely about control. It is often a primitive and immature reaction to life circumstances in which the abuser (usually in his childhood) was rendered helpless. It is about re-exerting one's identity, re-establishing predictability, mastering the environment – human and physical.

The bulk of abusive behaviours can be traced to this panicky reaction to the remote potential for loss of control. Many abusers are hypochondriacs (and difficult patients) because they are afraid to lose control over their body, its looks and its proper functioning. They are obsessive-compulsive in an effort to subdue their physical habitat and render it foreseeable. They stalk people and harass them as a means of "being in touch" – another form of control.

To the abuser, nothing exists outside himself. Meaningful others are extensions, internal, assimilated, objects – not external ones. Thus, losing control over a significant other – is equivalent to losing control of a limb, or of one's brain. It is terrifying.

Independent or disobedient people evoke in the abuser the realization that something is wrong with his worldview, that he is not the centre of the world or its cause and that he cannot control what, to him, are internal representations.

To the abuser, losing control means going insane. Because other people are mere elements in the abuser's mind – being unable to manipulate them literally means losing it (his mind). Imagine, if you suddenly were to find out that you cannot manipulate your memories or control your thoughts ...
Nightmarish!

In his frantic efforts to maintain control or re-assert it, the abuser resorts to a myriad of fiendishly inventive stratagems and mechanisms. Here is a partial list:

Unpredictability and Uncertainty

The abuser acts unpredictably, capriciously, inconsistently and irrationally. This serves to render others

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dependent upon the next twist and turn of the abuser, his next inexplicable whim, upon his next outburst, denial, or smile.

The abuser makes sure that HE is the only reliable element in the lives of his nearest and dearest – by shattering the rest of their world through his seemingly insane behaviour. He perpetuates his stable presence in their lives – by destabilizing their own.

TIP

Refuse to accept such behaviour. Demand reasonably predictable and rational actions and reactions. Insist on respect for your boundaries, predilections, preferences, and priorities.

Disproportional Reactions

One of the favourite tools of manipulation in the abuser's arsenal is the disproportionality of his reactions. He reacts with supreme rage to the slightest slight. Or, he would punish severely for what he perceives to be an offence against him, no matter how minor. Or, he would throw a temper tantrum over any discord or disagreement, however gently and considerately expressed. Or, he would act inordinately attentive, charming and tempting (even over-sexed, if need be).

This ever-shifting code of conduct and the unusually harsh and arbitrarily applied penalties are premeditated. The victims are kept in the dark. Neediness and dependence on the source of "justice" meted and judgment passed – on the abuser – are thus guaranteed.

TIP

Demand a just and proportional treatment. Reject or ignore unjust and capricious behaviour.

If you are up to the inevitable confrontation, react in kind. Let him taste some of his own medicine.

Dehumanization and Objectification (Abuse)

People have a need to believe in the empathic skills and basic good-heartedness of others. By dehumanizing and objectifying people – the abuser attacks the very foundations of human interaction. This is the "alien" aspect of abusers – they may be excellent imitations of fully formed adults but they are emotionally absent and immature.

Abuse is so horrid, so repulsive, so phantasmagoric – that people recoil in terror. It is then, with their defences absolutely down, that they are the most susceptible and vulnerable to the abuser's control. Physical, psychological, verbal and sexual abuse are all forms of dehumanization and objectification.

TIP

Never show your abuser that you are afraid of him. Do not negotiate with bullies. They are insatiable. Do not succumb to blackmail.

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If things get rough– disengage, involve law enforcement officers, friends and colleagues, or threaten him (legally).

Do not keep your abuse a secret. Secrecy is the abuser's weapon.

Never give him a second chance. React with your full arsenal to the first transgression.

Abuse of Information

From the first moments of an encounter with another person, the abuser is on the prowl. He collects information. The more he knows about his potential victim – the better able he is to coerce, manipulate, charm, extort or convert it "to the cause". The abuser does not hesitate to misuse the information he gleaned, regardless of its intimate nature or the circumstances in which he obtained it. This is a powerful tool in his armory.

TIP

Be guarded. Don't be too forthcoming in a first or casual meeting. Gather intelligence.

Be yourself. Don't misrepresent your wishes, boundaries, preferences, priorities, and red lines.

Do not behave inconsistently. Do not go back on your word. Be firm and resolute.

Impossible Situations

The abuser engineers impossible, dangerous, unpredictable, unprecedented, or highly specific situations in which he is sorely needed. The abuser makes sure that his knowledge, his skills, his connections, or his traits are the only ones applicable and the most useful in the situations that he, himself, wrought. The abuser generates his own indispensability.

TIP

Stay away from such quagmires. Scrutinize every offer and suggestion, no matter how innocuous.

Prepare backup plans. Keep others informed of your whereabouts and appraised of your situation.

Be vigilant and doubting. Do not be gullible and suggestible. Better safe than sorry.

Control by Proxy

If all else fails, the abuser recruits friends, colleagues, mates, family members, the authorities, institutions, neighbours, the media, teachers – in short, third parties – to do his bidding. He uses them to cajole, coerce, threaten, stalk, offer, retreat, tempt, convince, harass, communicate and otherwise manipulate his target. He controls these unaware instruments exactly as he plans to control his ultimate prey. He employs the same mechanisms and devices. And he dumps his props

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unceremoniously when the job is done.

Another form of control by proxy is to engineer situations in which abuse is inflicted upon another person. Such carefully crafted scenarios of embarrassment and humiliation provoke social sanctions (condemnation, opprobrium, or even physical punishment) against the victim. Society, or a social group become the instruments of the abuser.

TIP

Often the abuser's proxies are unaware of their role. Expose him. Inform them. Demonstrate to them how they are being abused, misused, and plain used by the abuser.

Trap your abuser. Treat him as he treats you. Involve others. Bring it into the open. Nothing like sunshine to disinfect abuse.

Ambient Abuse

The fostering, propagation and enhancement of an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, instability, unpredictability and irritation. There are no acts of traceable explicit abuse, nor any manipulative settings of control. Yet, the irksome feeling remains, a disagreeable foreboding, a premonition, a bad omen. This is sometimes called "gaslighting".

In the long term, such an environment erodes the victim's sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Self-confidence is shaken badly. Often, the victim adopts a paranoid or schizoid stance and thus renders himself or herself exposed even more to criticism and judgment. The roles are thus reversed: the victim is considered mentally deranged and the abuser – the suffering soul.

TIP

Run! Get away! Ambient abuse often develops to overt and violent abuse.

You don't owe anyone an explanation – but you owe yourself a life. Bail out.

Sam Vaknin is the author of *Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited* and *After the Rain – How the West Lost the East*. He is a columnist for *Central Europe Review*, *PopMatters*, and *eBookWeb*, a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent, and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in *The Open Directory* *Bellaonline*, and *Suite101*.

Until recently, he served as the Economic Advisor to the Government of Macedonia.

Visit Sam's Web site at

Cell Phone Abuse. Are You A Victim?

What is Abuse?

By Andrew Lawrence

Like millions of others, you may be the victim of cell phone abuse. What is cell phone abuse? Let's say you're in a public place trying to concentrate on something or having a face-to-face conversation or just enjoying a peaceful moment when a stranger 5-10 feet away starts talking on his or her cell phone. If, as a result, your concentration is broken or your conversation is interrupted or your peaceful moment ruined or you are otherwise disturbed, then consider yourself the victim of cell phone abuse.

Making or receiving one or two short calls in public among strangers is okay but extensive cell phone use or long cell phone chats which disturb other people is an invasion of privacy. It's inconsiderate, it's annoying, it's discourteous.

And worse, it's abuse.

And if the victim of cell phone abuse politely (or rudely) interrupts the abuser (as they talk on and on) and asks them kindly to take their cell phone elsewhere, or kindly be quiet; it's disturbing, the victim is all too often met with a perplexing look or even more abuse, as in "what's YOUR problem, I'm on the phone here!" Sure. Right. Every cell phone call is important and meaningful; so important and meaningful that people expose it to total strangers in public! Pul-eese.

Symptoms of Cell Phone Abuse –

while in the immediate vicinity of strangers using their cell phone common symptoms may include: inability to concentrate on what you are doing mild or severe irritability or annoyance sensitivity to stupid or loud ring tones initially thinking the cell phone user is actually talking to YOU wishing they would hurry up and finish the call wishing they would leave wishing their cell phone battery would die

Cell phone abuse is a worldwide epidemic which is now affecting millions of men, women and children, with no relief in sight.

To the victims of cell phone abuse we say; we feel your pain and, though it's difficult, you will survive this horrible public abuse.

To the cell phone abusers we say ... try a little cell phone courtesy ... and do not burden or abuse others with your pseudo social and/or business self-importance. Or, at least, if you are in public and there are strangers around, keep your cell phone calls interesting ... and short. On behalf of the millions of us who suffer cell phone abuse every day, we thank you.

Andrew Lawrence is a philosopher, founder of the Life Purpose Society and strives to help people feel

better, do better, be better. He can be reached via

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