

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Saying NO to Family Violence

David Hertzler



Some soldiers (seeking God's favour) asked John, "What shall we do?" John replied, "Do not intimidate anyone..." (Luke 3:14 NKJV paraphrased).

Have you ever mistreated anyone to make him do what you want? That's called **intimidation**. When it happens between members of the same family, it is called **family violence**.

Family violence is a big problem in our society. It happens in families of all races, rich and poor, religious and nonreligious, educated and uneducated.

When I was a child I saw first-hand the ugliness of alcohol in the home. My mom and dad were heavy drinkers. When my dad got drunk he was extremely violent. He would beat my mom half to death at times. Often my mom would go to work Monday morning with her eyes swollen shut from their fights. I was often overwhelmed by fear. I would say to myself, "**I won't drink when I grow up.**" However, as teen years came around, I found myself doing the very things I had vowed I would never do.¹

Not all family violence involves beating or other physical abuse. Other forms of family violence are:

- Sexual abuse, molestation or harassment (rape, incest);
- emotional and psychological abuse (threats, insults, harassment, mind games, destroying property or personal possessions); and
- neglect (inadequate physical or emotional care).

The victims of family violence are usually the younger, weaker, sicker or handicapped members of the family. The violent members are usually the older, stronger, more capable ones who are responsible to care for the others.

WHAT MAKES FAMILY MEMBERS TURN VIOLENT?



In November, 1996, CBC Radio broadcast the news of a parent who murdered his child who was ill with cystic fibrosis, then committed suicide. Everyone who knew this parent was shocked that he would do such a thing. However, other parents who had children with the same disease testified how stressful it was to care for such a child.

Violence often grows out of one of these emotional pressures:

1. **Stress.** Although our life expectancy is greater than ever before, we have more stress. Modern technology makes work easier but adds to the stress of life. The No. 1 cause of stress is the same as it has always been—strained relationships. If you do not learn to manage stress, you are a prime candidate to become violent.

2. **Anger and Hostility.** Everyone gets hurt in life, somewhere, in some way. It is natural to respond with anger. Anger that flares up quickly and dies down just as quickly is usually not a problem.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (The words of Jesus in Matthew 5:21, 22 NIV).

Violence comes mostly from anger that is held inside until it turns to bitterness. This is the kind of anger that Jesus was talking about in Matthew 5:22.

3. A Need for Power and Control. Everyone has this need. There are healthy ways to be strong and stay in control. A violent person has not learned these ways. He often has low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority. He finds that violence works to intimidate and control weaker people. This gives him a feeling of being in control, so he keeps using it.

Parents with strong principles often feel a great need to control their children and make them “do what is right.” This need can lead to violence in religious homes. However, violence is just as common in nonreligious homes because they, too, sometimes lack effective means of control.

4. Family Background. Some family violence is **learned**. Abused children grow up to abuse their own families. Unless they receive other training, they treat their partners and children the only way they know, the way they learned from their own parents.

5. Isolation. In today’s mobile society, people sometimes lose contact with extended family and friends who could provide emotional support. They feel trapped, not knowing where to turn for help. Violence may be a cry for help.

6. Ignorance. It is easier to abuse other persons when you don’t understand their needs, capabilities and limitations. Sometimes people overlook violence because they don’t know what is right or normal for a given situation. For example:

It may be all right...

- For a family member to be silent and withdrawn when tired or under heavy stress;
- For a parent to use reasonable force to restrain or discipline a child;
- For a parent to shout at a child in times of danger or in fear;
- For a parent to enter a small child’s bedroom without knocking.

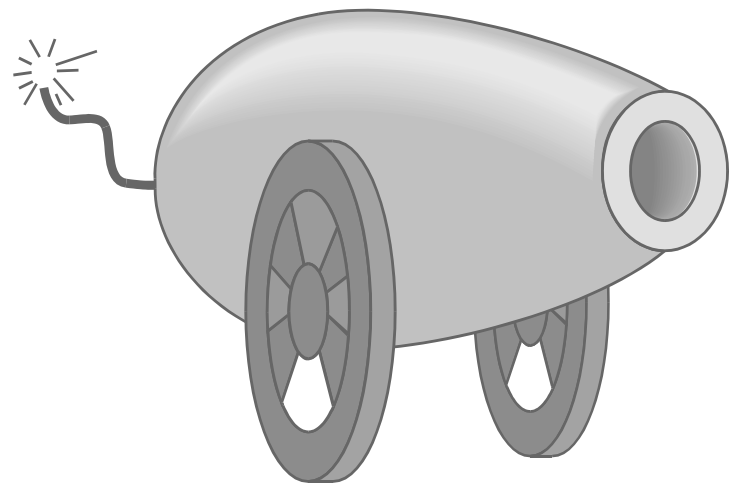
It is usually not all right...

- For a family member to be silent and withdrawn all or most of the time;
- For a parent to use force that causes physical or psychological damage;
- For a parent to shout at a child in anger;
- For a parent to enter a teen’s bedroom without permission.

7. Immaturity. Sometimes people marry before they are ready for the stress and responsibility of family leadership. Sometimes teens and children are thrust into responsibilities for which they are not emotionally ready.

A twelve-year-old boy came home from summer camp and told his parents that his counsellor had been rough with him. The parents reported the incident to the police. Investigation revealed that the counsellor was himself a youth and not well-trained in handling children. The “roughness” may have been in fun, or accidental or an effort to restrain an over-active child. The police were unable to find enough factual data to establish a case, and no charges were laid.

8. Shame and Guilt. When people feel unable to fulfill responsibilities or live up to their image of what they would like to be, their feelings may surface as violence.



A VIOLENT PERSONALITY PROFILE (MEN)

Answer "yes" to each statement that describes you or that you agree with.

- _____ 1. My father was abusive to me or to my mother.
- _____ 2. I experienced sexual abuse when I was young.
- _____ 3. I am often ashamed of myself.
- _____ 4. I have trouble controlling my anger.
- _____ 5. The Bible teaches the husband to be the law enforcer in his home.
- _____ 6. One or both of my parents were alcoholic.
- _____ 7. Women and children often ask for rough treatment by the way they talk or act.
- _____ 8. I often feel like a failure.
- _____ 9. My wife should be more thankful for the good things I buy for her.
- _____ 10. The Bible teaches wives to give in to every request their husbands make.
- _____ 11. People have disappointed me so often that I can't really trust anybody.
- _____ 12. I am afraid of losing control of my family and relationships.
- _____ 13. The Bible teaches that beating children is a good way to control their bad behaviour.
- _____ 14. I live in a violent world. It wouldn't surprise me if I do get violent at times.
- _____ 15. Housework is for women. I don't get involved in it.
- _____ 16. I enjoy watching movies and reading books with lots of rough action in them.
- _____ 17. My father was strict with us. He usually got his own way.
- _____ 18. Women get a sexual thrill from men who are strong and tough.
- _____ 19. My wife would have an affair with another man if she had a good chance.
- _____ 20. I don't think violence really bothers my wife. She's not saying anything about it.

The more "yes" answers you gave, the more things you have in your life that could make you become violent under stress. Ten or more "yes" responses indicates an urgent need for help.

WHY DO VICTIMS PUT UP WITH ABUSE?

Abusers are usually not monsters. Most often they are people who are loved and trusted. When



they are not violent, they may be the nicest people you could ever meet.

Nine-year-old Susie was visiting her aunt and uncle. While everyone else was busy in the kitchen, Susie and her uncle were watching TV. Her uncle was tickling her. Then he began to feel up under her clothes. He had done this before and always told her to keep it a secret.²

There are many reasons why people don't "blow the whistle" on family violence and other abuse.

1. **Dependency.** Women, children and elders may be dependent on the abuser for the necessities of life. Without the abuser, their lives could be more difficult than with the abuse. Close-knit extended families may cover up for the abuser because they feel that the exposure of one member threatens the whole family.

2. **Powerlessness.** Children and elders may not have the power to escape the abuse. Language and cultural or geographic barriers may isolate victims from help. Sometimes the community is unable to provide protection for victims. Or victims may be unaware of service agencies and other help that is available.

3. **Shame.** An abuser often leads his victims to believe that what happened was **their fault**. They turn to a shame-based style of life which may be abusive to themselves and others.

Sharon was a student at a boarding school. When the time came for the students to go home, a counsellor told Sharon that she wasn't going home because her parents didn't want her. Sharon felt worthless and ashamed, like dirt and scum. She began to see herself as ugly and to neglect her personal appearance. She began to hate her family and everybody around her. When she finally got out of school, she turned to alcohol to drown her feelings.

4. **Hope.** Even in violent homes, people may enjoy some good times together. Victims may feel that it's better to suffer than to be separated from loved ones. They keep hoping for improvement.³

If you are one who hopes in this way, you need to learn about the **Violence Cycle**. You need to be aware that without help, violence usually gets worse.

THE VIOLENCE CYCLE

Family violence tends to run in cycles, or stages. The Violence Cycle goes through three stages that have been identified as the **tension-building stage**, the **violent event**, and the **honeymoon stage**.



In the **tension-building stage**, (See diagram on next page) there is emotional and psychological abuse. Most of these activities are not considered illegal. Many people don't recognize them as a build-up to violence. These tension-building abuses start small and build up. Pressure builds up slowly. Stress begins to take its toll. Little irritations seem bigger. Anger increases, but often so slowly that the participants are not aware of it. Feelings are expressed with complaining, blaming, name-calling, swearing, put-downs or threats. Or the family head may control his family by holding back their money or not allowing them to go places.

When the pressure gets too great to hold back, or when an inciting event happens, there is an explosion. This is the second stage, the **violent**

inflict injury. Or it may be an assault on personal property or pets which sends the message, "Next time it could be **you**."

After the explosion releases the pressure, the **honeymoon stage** kicks in. The abuser is often sorry for what he has done. He apologizes and may ask for forgiveness. He determines to change his behaviour. He may offer gifts and kind deeds. For a while it may look as if he really has changed.

But if he has not dealt with his inner issues that started the cycle, then nothing has really changed. As the honeymoon wears off, stress begins to wear on him again, and the next tension-building stage begins.

As the cycle repeats, the tension-building stages get longer, the honeymoon stages get shorter and the violent events tend to become more severe. And the cycle **will** repeat for most abusers until they get help.



event. What happens at this stage is usually illegal. It is at this point that charges could be laid and the law could step in.

The violent event may be a beating that ends in black eyes. It may be pinching, burning, stabbing, hair-pulling, or other action intended to

VIOLENCE AND ABUSE INVENTORY

Indicate if you have ever done these things and how often. Many adults carry shame about their actions. Acknowledging those actions out loud can help to begin the process of healing.

This inventory can also help a victim view a problem partner or parent more realistically.

1 = never done 2 = once or twice
3 = sometimes 4 = a lot 5 = not sure

Emotional Abuse. Have you:

1. And your partner ever discussed a serious issue calmly? _____
2. Sulked, refused to talk or given your partner "the silent treatment"? _____
3. Withdrawn affection or sex to punish your partner? _____
4. Stomped out? _____
5. Screamed, insulted or sworn at your partner? _____
6. Ridiculed your partner? _____
7. Run down your partner's family or friends? _____
8. Done any of these things in public? _____

Threats and Psychological Abuse.

Have you:

9. Threatened to leave the relationship? _____
10. Threatened to cut off money or credit? _____
11. Threatened to take away children? _____
12. Threatened to report your partner to Child Welfare, probation worker or other authority figure? _____

- 13. Threatened to have an affair? _____
- 14. Threatened to tell family secrets to others? _____
- 15. Threatened with suicide? _____
- 16. Threatened to go drinking? _____

Economic Abuse. Have you:

- 17. Controlled bank accounts in a humiliating fashion? _____
- 18. Handed out “allowance” in a humiliating fashion? _____
- 19. Demanded accountability for expenditures? _____
- 20. Confiscated paycheque or credit cards? _____

Isolation and Monitoring. Have you:

- 21. Told partner not to leave the house? _____
- 22. Been abusive or rude to friends/family? _____
- 23. Monitored partner’s mail/phone calls? _____
- 24. Given partner a curfew? _____
- 25. Searched partner’s pockets/purse? _____
- 26. Not let partner work outside the home? _____
- 27. Made partner check in, or phone and check on partner? _____
- 28. Locked partner in the home or taken away the means of transportation or communication? _____

Anger and Intimidation. Have you:

- 29. Blocked doorways? _____
- 30. Used intimidating stares? _____
- 31. Punched walls or slammed doors?⁴ _____

A HEALING PATH

For Violent Adults...

Violent people usually don’t get better without help. The help that is most effective deals with the whole person:



1. **The spirit**, which longs for God;
2. **The mind and intellect**,

which carry a burden of wrong beliefs;

3. **The heart and soul**, which long for closeness and love;

4. **The body**, which needs good nutrition and medical care.

The Violence Cycle has a broader dimension. If it is not broken, it can start Violence Cycles

spinning in other lives. A parent’s violent behaviour often starts a similar pattern in the lives of the children. It becomes a generational pattern.

If you had a violent parent or if you have a violent partner, it is a good idea to seek help for the deep emotional effects of violence in your life, even if you have not yet turned violent. This will help to break the generational cycle of violence as you deal with the pain and any resulting bitterness or anger.

With your helper, you can start to understand your inner wounds and learn new responses to the stress of life. An excellent guide for learning new responses is *God, Help Me Stop* (Claire W., Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI). Ask your local bookstore to order it if they don’t have it.

AN ACTION PLAN FOR REDUCING VIOLENCE

The following steps have been effective for many violent adults.

1. **Keep records** of what happens:
 - a. both inside yourself (thoughts and emotions) and outside (actions),
 - b. before, during and after the violent event.
2. Learn to recognize cues that tell you when you are angry and when the anger is getting out of control. Look for such things as physical changes, negative self-talk, mental pictures and words that stir up anger.
3. Call a time-out to move away from the action and cool down. Set a time when you will return. Thirty minutes should be enough to cool down from most anger.
4. Keep busy during the time-out. Physical exercise like walking, jogging or chopping wood may help. **Do not use alcohol or drugs during time-outs.**
5. Plan how you will express yourself when you return to the action. Decide how and whether you will discuss the issue, put it on hold or drop it.
6. If you cannot find a way that works to express yourself, spend time with a support group, pastor or counsellor and learn from them.

FOR VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE...

It may be hard to believe the following truths about yourself. If you have a Bible, you can read what God says about you as a person.

1. You are made to be like your Creator. Read Genesis 1:26, 27.

2. Your desires for close relationships, security and impact on your world are good desires because God gave them to you. Read Genesis 1:28, 2:19-25.

3. Sin brings death and separation from God and other people. Read Genesis 3:1-24.

4. God loves you so much that He provided a way for you to find security, closeness, impact and true life that lasts forever. Read John 3:16-21.

But living in a violent world, you have learned some **lies** that contradict God's truths. Here are some of those lies.

1. I am no good, worthless, garbage, because important people in my life have treated me like this.

2. I can never have the kind of relationships I long for deep in my heart. I might as well grab what I can and stop hoping for anything better.

3. Other people will give me what I want if I work hard enough, act tough enough or outwit them in some way.

4. I can't trust God or anybody else to meet my needs. It's all up to me.

The longer you live by these lies, the more deeply rooted they will be in your life. Getting these roots out may take a long time and lots of help. That's why it is important to find a helper who will stick by you and won't give up on you when you fail to reach all your goals on time.

God is a helper like this.

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall. God will help her at break of day"
(Psalm 46:1, 2, 4, 5 NIV).

But God has also provided other helpers for us, helpers with skin, such as parents, ministers and counsellors. After you have trusted God, He will help you to trust another human also. You will find that just learning to trust takes away some of the stress and anger inside.

An excellent book for victims of violent partners is *God, Where is Love*, by Claire W.

(Zondervan Publishing House). It looks at the reasons why people sometimes choose unhealthy relationships and stay in them. This book will help you examine your own past and make an action plan for change in your own patterns of relating to people.

FOR ANYONE IN A VIOLENT FAMILY...

You may also find it helpful to learn to trust other people outside your family. A support group is a good setting for this to happen. Look in the phone book for mental health agencies and counselling services. You may find some of these in the Yellow Pages under "Children," "Social Service Organizations," or "Crisis Intervention." Ask them for information on counselling or support groups. Don't be afraid to try several groups if necessary before finding one that is right for you. A group like this will give you a setting in which to practice your new responses before trying them out on your family.

Look for church support, too. Look for a church that has already dealt with any violent tendencies its members may have. When you find a church like this, you will have a spiritual haven for your own recovery. It may take some searching, but a church like this is well worth the search.

Family violence is more than a family matter. It is a **crime** against humanity. But we must not depend on civil law to wipe it out. Until all of us stand up, with God's help, and say, "**This must stop!**" we can expect to suffer from this evil.

ENDNOTES

1. Howard Jolly, *Hope For the Hurting, Rising Above*, Moose Factory, Ontario, 1996.
2. Told by Lynn Heitritter in *Little Ones Activity Workbook*, Little Ones Books, 1983.
3. Some points modified from *About Family Violence*, Scriptographic Communications, 1988.
4. From *Rising Above: Dealing with Issues of Abuse*, 1995 conference.

NYM Ministries

Site 306 Box 1 RR 3

Dryden, ON P8N 3G2

P 807.937.4421 • F 807.937.5524

www.nymministries.org • nym@nymministries.org

Scriptures quoted from The Holy Bible - New King James Version
Copyright © 1997

