

Domestic Violence Against Men: Bryan's Story  
By Dr. Angie Panos

On Bryan's initial visit to see me, he complained of marital concerns and depression. It took until our third session before he told me that his wife would sometimes beat him around the face and head, even while he was asleep. A year prior, she beat him so hard that he lost all hearing in one ear. He lied to cover it up when he went to get medical treatment; he was too embarrassed to tell the truth. Now when his friends ask why he has hearing problems, he tells them it was a hunting accident.

Bryan was afraid that I would not believe him. He had grown up in a pretty healthy functioning family that did not condone emotional or physical abuse. He was so shocked when his wife first hit him, he did not know what to do. He knew that it was inappropriate to hit back, so he curled up in a ball and put his arms around his head as she continued to wail on him. Over the next 6 years, and two children later, the violence continued. Bryan became concerned that if he wasn't the target for his wife's rages, that she might hurt the children. During the first part of their marriage, he had hoped that her beatings were just an unusual event, and that through his love and support he could help her learn to control her outbursts. She also told him it was his fault, and he believed her. He began to think that he was hard to live with. She always had some reason that he infuriated her. However, nothing he did to please her seemed to work to reduce her rages and beatings. He offered counseling, but she said they did not have the time or money to go.

Like women who are victims of domestic abuse, Bryan began to believe that he was to blame for her actions. Bryan observed that she would be sweet to him after the beatings, which would last for a little while before the storm inside of her began building again. He felt he was doing things to irritate her and if he could just find out how to not bother her, then things would go smoother. Counseling efforts with Bryan involved helping him see that he was not able to control her rages. Bryan's perception became clearer when she attacked him in full view of their 3-year-old child who started crying out, "Mommy, stop hurting Daddy." He was horrified when he saw her turn, and in a rage, approach their child. In response to his child's cries, Bryan grabbed his wife's arms and restrained her. He said he would call the police if she continued. It shocked her for a minute, allowing him a moment to take the children and leave the house. She began screaming threats to him as he got in the car and left. A pouring rain prevented her from chasing after them. Bryan never went back. He filed for divorce and custody of the children.

Few accurate statistics exist about how many men live in situations like Bryan. In 100 domestic violence situations, approximately 40 cases involve violence by women against men.<sup>1</sup> Some of these may be couples both being abusive to one another, but some are women beating men. Like Bryan, some men stay because they feel guilty or feel like they are to blame for not pleasing their wife. Also, like Bryan some men stay to protect the children. They may not feel they can leave due to financial constraints. Shame and embarrassment traps these male victims of domestic violence from seeking help and

support for their situation. Isolation and emotional abuse from their wife may also keep these men feeling locked into a destructive relationship.

### **If You Are A Male In An Abusive Relationship What Can You Do?**

First, get professional help on your own, not with your partner. Tell the counselor exactly what is happening to you. Make sure the counselor has specialized training in dealing with domestic violence.

Some of the recommendations for women in battering relationships also make good sense for men. There are things you can do to make yourself and your family safer.

#### **If You Are At Home and You Are Being Attacked:**

- Stay away from the kitchen (the abuser can find weapons, such as knives, there)

- Stay away from bathrooms, closets or small spaces where the abuser can trap you

- Get to a room with a door or window to escape

- Get to a room with a phone to call for help; lock the abuser outside if you can

- Call 911 (or your local emergency number) right away for help; get the dispatcher's name

- Think about a neighbor or friend you can run to for help

- If a police officer comes, tell him/her what happened; get his/her name & badge number

- Get medical help if you are hurt

- Take pictures of bruises or injuries and document when it occurred

- Call a domestic violence program or shelter; ask them to help you make a safety plan

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**To find out where to get help in your area,  
CALL the National Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-800-799-SAFE  
1-800-787-3224 (TTY)**

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- Learn where to get help; memorize emergency phone numbers

- Keep a cell phone with you at all times.

- Make a backpack or bag that you keep with things you'd need if you had to leave quickly; put it in a safe place, or give it to a friend or relative you trust

- Include cash, car keys & important information such as: court papers, passport or birth certificates, medical records & medicines, immigration paper

- Take a good self-defense course that allows you to protect yourself without causing injury to the other person (some men who have been victims of battering end up getting arrested if they are too aggressive in defending themselves).

#### **Protect Your Children:**

- Teach your children to never get in the middle of a fight, even if they want to help

- Teach them how to get to safety, to call 911, to give your address & phone number to the police

- Teach them who to call for help

Tell them to stay out of the kitchen

Once You Decide To Get Out Of The Relationship:

Shop and bank in a different place

Cancel any bank accounts or credit cards you shared; open new accounts at a different bank

If appropriate, get a court order (restraining or protective order) and keep emergency numbers with you at all times

Keep a cell phone & program it to 911 (or other emergency number)

Your employer may be able to help, talk to your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Why Can't I Stay and Try to Fix Her?

Little is known about the prognosis for change in women who batter their partners. Women who batter their partners sometimes abuse alcohol or drugs. On these disinhibiting substances, they have less impulse control and are more prone to act out in violence. Alcohol and drug treatment may be helpful in these cases.

Some estimates show that at least 50% of all domestic abuse and violence against men is associated with women who have a Borderline Personality Disorder. The disorder is also associated with suicidal or self-destructive behavior, severe mood swings, lying, sexual problems and addictions.<sup>1</sup> This personality disorder is difficult to treat and there is little documentation of whether treatment would actually reduce episodes of violence. More research in this area is needed.

Other women who abuse may have unhealthy or unrealistic expectations, assumptions and false conclusions from past abusive relationships. Sometimes men getting into these relationships, like Bryan's story above, think they can rescue their partner from their painful past with enough love and support. However, despite what their partner offers, these women will typically experience repeated episodes of depression, anxiety, frustration and irritability which they usually attribute to their partner's behavior. The words, "It's your fault that I feel this way," is a warning sign. However, many men feel that if they try harder in response they may be able to cure their partner's rages. Typically, the women's mental and emotional state is the result of their own insecurities, emotional problems, or trauma during childhood. They have a pattern of being a chronic victim and blaming men rather than admitting their problems and take responsibility for how they react. They may enter treatment, but typically they do not stay long enough to sustain real change. They may insist the man needs treatment, but then feel threatened when he goes for help. When their partner can't make them feel better, these women become frustrated and assume that men are doing this on purpose just to irritate them.

**Frequently Asked Questions from Men in Battering Relationships:**

"Can I stay in my relationship? I love her when she is not beating me up."

Your safety and well-being have to be a priority. What advice would you give to a close friend in a situation like yours? Often once violence erupts in a relationship it is very hard to get it to stop. Also evaluate the overall quality of your relationship. Often patterns of control and emotional abuse accompany the physical violence. Are you really seeing the whole picture in your relationship? Or are you experiencing a fragmented, idealized view of your relationship, without the negative parts? This split reality is often how people in abusive relationships survive, but it also makes it harder for them to face the whole reality- good and bad- of their relationship. Keep a notebook of the negative things that have been said and done in your relationship. Look at the whole picture to make your decision of whether to stay or not.

I'm too embarrassed to tell anyone what is happening to me- what will they think of me?

It is important to tell a few people that you trust what is really going on. Ask for their support and patience. Often men think they are hiding this problem, but people close to them actually start to suspect that something is amiss. Some abusive women are very charming and sweet to others in public view and then show rage behind closed doors. Their male partners fear that no one will believe them. If you don't feel like anyone is able to believe you or support you, then seek professional help from someone that does.

"I told my therapist what is happening and he/she did not seem to take me seriously. What should I do now?"

First, print this article and take to your therapist, perhaps along with some materials from the additional list below. If your therapist still does not take you seriously, then seek out someone who has more experience in working with abusive relationships. You are not alone. There are many professionals who want to help.

What if I fight back? Will that stop the abuse?

No, unfortunately even in self-defense the use of any violence against a woman is likely to get you arrested. Violence is not the answer. Talk to a professional to help you know what to do when your partner goes into a rage.

## **References and Resources**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oregoncounseling.org/Handouts/DomesticViolenceMen.htm>

<http://www.abanet.org/tips/dvsafety.html>

<http://dahmw.org/>

*Angie Panos, Ph.D. is a therapist that specializes in trauma and grief, she has 20 years of experience in helping survivors. She is a board member of [Gift From Within](#).*

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