

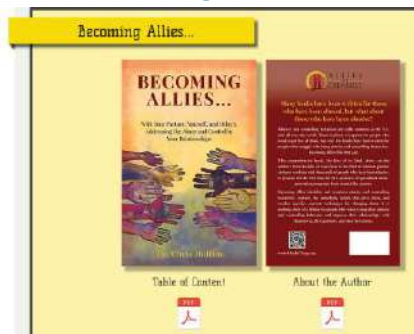
Understanding the Mindset of Abusive Partners

Presented by Dr. Chris Huffine, Psy.D.
Allies in Change
May 22, 2026

Allies in Change

- Non-profit adult out-patient counseling center
- Individual and couples counseling
- Specialized groups to address abuse and anger issues in men and women
- Over thirty groups for abusive partners: for men only, women only, and one multi-gender LGBTQ+ group
- Open ended, goal-based groups, typical length of stay is 9-15+ months
- Approximately 20% (70ish) of our group members are voluntary, more than any other program in the country
- Professional trainings/workshops

Becoming Allies . . .



Men and violence perpetration

- Men commit the vast majority of most forms of violence in the world . . .
 - Homicide
 - Person to person crimes
 - Sexual abuse
 - War crimes
 - Domestic violence

Men and violence perpetration

- The only domains in which women even come close to committing the same levels of violence as men are the vulnerable populations where they have more frequent contact than men and also have some power over them
 - Child abuse
 - Elder abuse

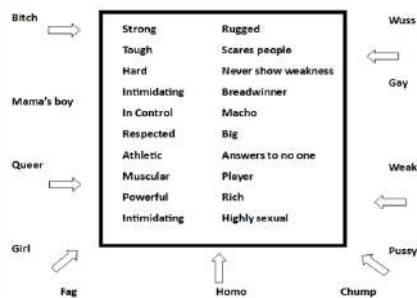
Men and violence victimization

- The significant majority of the adult victims of men's violence are other men
- Women make up the significant majority of victims of adult sexual assault and domestic violence, given that most men are heterosexual (there is much less of a gender skew when it comes to child and elder abuse victims)
- What this strongly indicates is that there is a significant connection between violence and gender
- What is this connection?

Masculinity is a social construct



The "Man Box"



Traditional Gender Stereotypes.

Feminine.

Not aggressive.
Dependent.
Easily influenced.
Submissive.
Passive.
Home-oriented.
Easily hurt emotionally.
Indecisive.
Talkative.
Gentle.
Sensitive to other's feelings.
Very desirous of security.
Cries a lot.
Emotional.
Verbal.
Kind.
Tactful.
Nurturing.

Masculine.

Aggressive.
Independent.
Not easily influenced.
Dominant.
Active.
Worldly.
Not easily hurt emotionally.
Decisive.
Not at all talkative.
Tough.
Less sensitive to other's feelings.
Not very desirous of security.
Rarely cries.
Logical.
Analytical.
Cruel.
Blunt.
Not nurturing.

Rigidity in gender roles

- Part of the traditional way of thinking about these gender roles is as an either/or—you can be male or female, have male qualities *or* female qualities
- There is strong pressure to be either male *or* female and within that gender to only conform with the “gender appropriate” qualities. Individuals who deviate from those norms tend to be abused and targeted and strongly pressured to comply with traditional gender roles.
- This is also a key driver in homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia

Hegemonic masculinity

- Hegemonic masculinity is a social pattern that idealizes “male” traits, devalues “female” traits, and encourages the devaluing and subordination of women
- “Hegemonic” means ruling or dominant—the prevalent view

Toxic masculinity

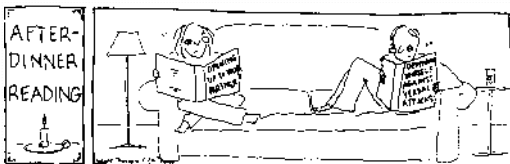
- Toxic masculinity refers to a strong, deep embracing of the “masculine” while simultaneously rejecting the “feminine”
- It takes the gender messages to a greater extreme leading to a variety of negative consequences to the men and to others, including, but not limited to, the perpetration of violence

Toxic masculinity

- *This does not appear to be based on one's genitals*—for example, research has found that women who are abusive in same sex relationships also appear to embrace more strongly traditional masculine qualities
- We have found that cis het women who have patterns of abuse display many of the same beliefs and values
- This also appears to be true for LGBTQ+ abusive partners

Toxic masculinity

- Anger/aggression are more socially acceptable and encouraged in males
- The traditional male role is rooted in a belief in a hostile world
- Traditional male qualities are primarily related to protecting oneself from danger/threats (e.g., strength, self-reliance, stoicism, etc.)
- It is easy to take this implicit stance and reify it by viewing others as foes/threats



A Pro-abuse Belief System

A pro-abuse belief system

- While anyone can have a moment of being abusive, we are far more concerned about individuals who have *patterns* of abuse
- What drives on-going abusive behavior is a pro-abuse belief system—in other words, the abusive person is giving themselves permission to be abusive

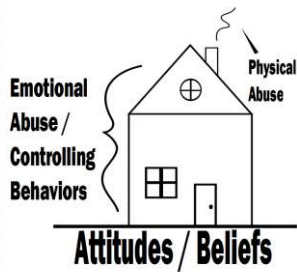
A pro-abuse belief system

- Abusive behavior is always a choice
- Abusive people simply give themselves permission to be abusive whereas non-abusive people do not
- Non-abusive people are faced with the same kinds of stresses, challenges, injustices, etc., but still do not allow themselves to become abusive

A pro-abuse belief system

- The reason why there are *patterns* of abuse is due to the presence of a pro-abuse belief system
- Stopping abusive behavior has to focus *not* just on stopping behaviors, but on changing underlying belief systems
- If the beliefs aren't changed, new abusive behaviors will appear even if old ones are stopped

DV House



"We see the world, not as it is, but as we are - or, as we are conditioned to see it. When we open our mouths to describe what we see, we in effect describe ourselves, our perceptions, our paradigms."

Richard P. Gregory

A pro-abuse belief system

- While there are a wide range of beliefs that justify abuse, a highly common one, among abusive partners and others, is a "Power Over" orientation
- This conceptualization was developed by Patricia Evans and first outlined in her self-help book "The Verbally Abusive Relationship"
- Similar concepts have also been touched on by others over the years

Reality I: Power over

- Win-lose/One winner
- One right answer/one truth
- Either my needs or your needs me *or* you
- External focus
- Blame
- Assumption of scarcity
- Abuse and control are used
- Competitive: Others are viewed as opponents, competitors
- Homogeneity and conformity
- Focus on outcome (winning)
- Truth with a capital T

Reality II: Personal Power

- Mutual respect is practiced
- Win-win/Many winners
- Many right answers/many truths
- We can all get our needs met/me *and* you
- Assumption of abundance
- Internal focus
- Cooperative
- Others are viewed as allies
- Diversity is respected
- truth with a small t-personal truth



"A flower does
not think of
competing with
the flower
next to it.
It just blooms."

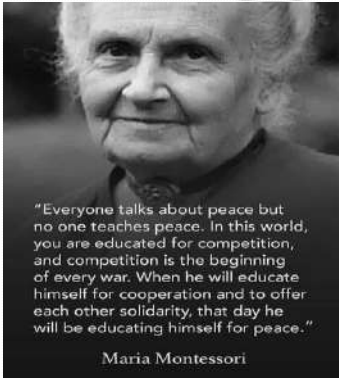


"For though my faith is not yours and your faith is not mine, if we are each free to light our own flame, together we can banish some of the darkness of the world."

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

www.JonahMerkens.com

26



"Everyone talks about peace but no one teaches peace. In this world, you are educated for competition, and competition is the beginning of every war. When he will educate himself for cooperation and to offer each other solidarity, that day he will be educating himself for peace."

Maria Montessori

Beyond power & control: Two other drivers of patterns of abusive behavior

Drivers of abuse

- It is widely accepted that a pro-abuse belief system, which can be described as Power Over, is a primary driver of abuse and control
- At Allies in Change, however, we see not one, but three drivers of abuse

Drivers of abuse

- While springing from the same source (hegemonic masculinity and the pro-abuse belief system), they are distinct from power and control
- These two additional, often co-occurring, factors present are the **externalizing of distress** and **relational neglect**
- These provide a more refined and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of DV than the simpler "power and control" model

Limited emotional awareness

- Part of traditional masculinity is to not be emotionally aware and expressive
- This can also lead to a tremendous sense of isolation and disconnection from self as well as from others





"America is in even greater danger because of its cult of toughness, its hatred of sensitivity, and someday it may have to pay a price for this, because atrophy of feeling creates criminals."

-Anaïs Nin, April 1940

Limited emotional awareness

- This limited awareness can then lead to a projecting and externalizing of their emotions onto others, including their distress
- People who are abusive are often, but not always, in a state of distress. This distress is often a driver that leads them to give themselves permission to be abusive or to escalate their abuse. Distress doesn't cause the abuse, but it can *trigger* it.
- "Hurt people hurt people"

Distress

- A common thing abusive partners do is externalize/act out their distress
- People who are prone to abuse tend to have an external focus—they look outward to explain their distress, they are quick to blame others for their distress
- Often anger is another emotion plus blame
- This is why there is often a correlation (but *not* causation) between anger and abuse



"I imagine one of the reasons people
cling to their hates so stubbornly is
because they sense, once hate is gone,
they will be forced to deal with pain."

— James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

Limited emotional awareness

- Besides its negative impact on oneself, a lack of emotional awareness limits one's ability to have/develop empathy and compassion . . .

Limited emotional awareness

- A lack of emotional awareness also limits one's ability to have/develop empathy and compassion . . . Which can lead to a limited awareness of others.

Egotism

- Egotism, which is also small-n narcissism or grandiosity (Terrence Real's word), refers to a low-grade chronic self-absorption and lack of awareness of others
- A tendency to mistakenly presume that all that matters are that individual's perceptions/priorities
- This is typically at its worse with immediate family
- Commonly experienced by the family as feeling overlooked, undervalued, invisible, not considered, neglected
- This is common in many males due, in part, to male privilege, patriarchy, and socialization

Relational neglect

- This egotism leads to relational neglect
- Neglect is a more subtle form of mistreatment
- It isn't about doing things to a partner, it's about NOT doing things with a partner, specifically the things that help keep a relationship healthy and loving
- Just as there is child abuse and child neglect, both of which can be quite damaging, there is also relational neglect. And, just as child abuse and neglect can go together, so can relational abuse and neglect can go hand in hand.

Relational neglect

- One common form of neglect, rampant in abusive relationships, is the non-acknowledgement of the bad behavior
- Accountable acknowledgement can significantly mitigate the damage of the abuse
- Typically, abusive individuals don't do this, instead they deny the abuse, rationalize, minimize, justify, ignore, or blame the other
- This non-acknowledgement significantly aggravates the impact of the abuse, akin to scraping a knee but not attending to it

Relational neglect

- Relational neglect includes things like:
 - not acknowledging a partner
 - not thinking about them, particularly how they are different from the other
 - not considering their input or preferences
- The partner presumes everyone sees the world through their eyes, that their perspective is the only one, that their concerns and needs are the only ones that are important

Relational neglect

- Others typically experience this as feeling invisible, voiceless, unimportant, like their wants/needs/selves don't seem to matter to the other
- The opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference, which is a significant aspect of relational neglect

Recommended Reading

I Don't Want To Talk About It
by Terrence Real

Final thought . . .

- While the abuse and control that abusive partners do is unacceptable, it is vital that you not hate or vilify the person who is doing the abusive behavior

The only one who knows both sides of the abusive partner . . .

- Because most/all of the abuse happens in the privacy of the home, most people who know the abusive partner don't see their abuse or consider that person to be an "abusive partner", simply a partner/co-worker/friend/neighbor
- This is one of the ways abused partners suffer from what is done to them, feeling so alone in their suffering (e.g., "I just wish you could treat me with the same kindness you show everyone else in your life")

The only one who knows both sides of the abusive partner . . .

- On the other hand, if your only knowledge of the partner of your client (or friend) is as an abuser, then it can be difficult to also see that person as having non-abusive qualities (e.g., seeing them as a batterer rather than as a partner who is also abusive)
- This makes it easy to reduce this other human being down to this single set of qualities



The only one who knows both sides of the abusive partner . . .

- Only the abused partner and the children see the abusive partner as both a partner/parent *and* as an abusive person, rather than as either/or (i.e., “a person who is abusive”)
- It is vital that you consider this other person as both someone who is abusive and as a partner/ex-partner, that you can hate what they have done, but don't hate them as a human being
- Martin Luther King was quite eloquent about this . . .

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy . . .

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

-Martin Luther King, Jr.



"Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.



Thank you for listening!

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