

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month: Domestic Violence -- It's About Control

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I was recently talking with a woman, who is known by others by her role: mother, employee, wife. She shared that her husband has been increasing his verbal attacks, more put downs, more name calling, more blaming. She confessed that he plays psychological games, threatens to take the children from her if she leaves, tells her that she is crazy and unstable when she cries, threatens to get her fired. Never during the conversation did she refer to this as abuse; in fact, when I used the term, she pulled back and replied, but he has never hit me. She was reluctant to call it domestic violence.

For many, many people domestic violence involves only physical harm – bruises, black eyes, broken bones, burns. Physical abuse and sexual violence are brutal forms of abuse. Physical violence, in all of its horror, is one of the tactics that abusers use to get power and control. Domestic violence is about coercive control: one person using a variety of tactics, a series of strategies to get and maintain control over another person.

Many abusers never actually physically hit and yet the harm they do is devastating. Emotional abuse -- putting down everything their partner does in front of the children, undermining their partners' parenting decisions, relentlessly blaming the victim for everything that ever goes wrong, calling their partners degrading names --- all of this is designed to get control over the victim; to spin the victim around until they can no longer think straight and are afraid to say a word. Psychological abuse – threatening to take the children, isolating the victim from family, destroying friendships, creating scenes, going into fits of rage – all of this is done to put the victim on edge – to create doubt and fear and to give the abuser control. Financial abuse – threatening to get the victim fired, or making the victim work while the abuser does not, controlling the money, creating crushing debt – all of this is a strategy to keep the victim dependent on the abuser.

The woman who shared her story does not see herself as a victim; she sees herself as a mother, an employee, a wife – someone trying to make it through the day – protecting her children, doing her job, being a care giver. She shared that she wishes it could be different and she is not sure how she missed the signs so long ago.

It is easy to miss “the signs” – abusers do not have the letter “A” on their forehead. They can initially seem loving and obsessed with you, but then over time their original intent becomes more apparent: control.

Domestic violence is heartbreakingly prevalent. In Delaware, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 12 men are victims of intimate partner violence. In 2018, over 23,000 incidents were reported to law enforcement and there were over 3,100 calls to DV Hotlines. We know that intimate partner violence can happen to anyone, but we also know that it most often happens to economically disadvantaged women of color. The roots of domestic violence are found in inequities in our society, racism, gender-bias, and economic injustice. Each victim's story is unique and yet, there is a shared pain and understanding that this violence is wrong and must end.

The woman who shared her story is a mother, an employee, a wife and more: she is an individual who deserves respect, healthy relationships, love and peace in her life. She is not to blame; she is a victim of emotional, psychological, financial violence – a violence that is anchored deep in an abusive need for control.

Our first step to ending and preventing abuse is to recognize that each of us – men, women, children – deserve respect, deserve to be treated with fairness, deserve peace.

Throughout the state of Delaware we have advocates, first responders, medical personnel and so many more providing supportive services, including 24-hour hotlines, shelters, transitional housing, counseling, legal services, and advocacy. If you or someone you know is a victim of abuse, please know that you are not alone; there is help available. There are advocates that you can talk to about your situation who can help you figure out ways to be safe, to keep your children safe – from physical, emotional, psychological, financial violence.

Delaware has 24-hour hotline numbers.

24 Hour Domestic Violence Hotlines:

- CHILD Inc.'s Domestic Violence Program

New Castle County

302-762-6110

- The SAFE Program at People's Place II

Kent & Sussex Counties

302-422-8058

- Abriendo Puertas Bilingual Hotline

Sussex County

302-745-9874

¹ Smith, S.G., Chen, J., Basile, K.C., Gilbert, L.K., Merrick, M.T., Patel, N., Walling, M., & Jain, A. (2017). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Full report available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/index.html>

¹ Domestic Violence Coordinating Council 2018 Annual Report