

“She’s crazy!” ... But who says she’s crazy?

**The effects of Psychological Abuse on Women in
Aotearoa New Zealand**

by Sarah Hart

“Sticks and stones may break my bones

But names will never hurt me!” ... but they do.

It does hurt to be called names. Calling people names is one form of psychological abuse as it destroys people’s sense of self-worth. Psychological abuse is one of many kinds of domestic violence, and domestic violence is as frequent as one in every four to eight families in New Zealand. In 95% of NZ domestic violence cases the man is abusing the woman (Hager, 2001: 6, and Murphy, 2002: 2). This paper is concerned with the abuse of women by men.

Part one of the paper focusses on the abusers’ tactics of psychological abuse, a form of domestic violence that is harder to recognise than physical abuse. The signs of psychological abuse are not visible. For example there are no bruises or broken teeth. Psychological abuse does not go “public.” Part two looks at the effects of psychological abuse on women. Psychologically abused women often lose their mental health. They start to feel crazy. Thirdly, we, as part of society may also unwittingly reinforce women into feeling they have “lost it.” I conclude with practical suggestions as to how we might break the “abuser” cycle.

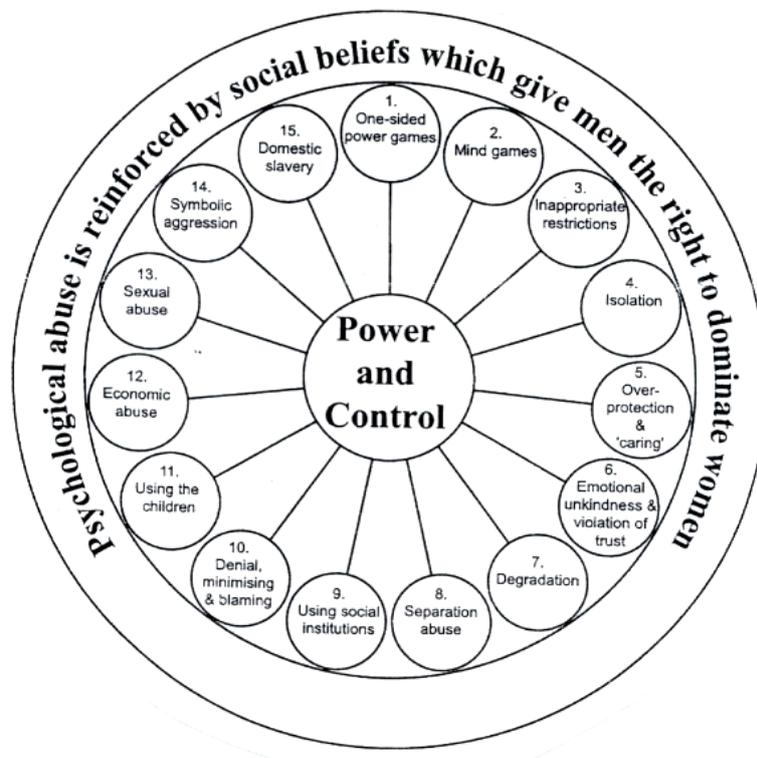
The literature for the paper is drawn from four recent New Zealand sources. I take references from *Invisible Wounds*, written by Kay Douglas, a book that is widely read by abused women in counseling contexts (Douglas, 1994). Some references are drawn from counselling material used by Charlotte Teal at *Home and Family Society Counselling Services*, Auckland. Otherwise data is drawn from two theses:

Debbie Hager's thesis, *He drove me mad*, and

Clare Murphy's thesis, *Women Coping With Psychological Abuse*.

1. Abusers' Tactics of Psychological Abuse

The following diagram shows a psychological Power and Control wheel with 15 spokes or tactics of psychological abuse developed by Murphy, based on the Duluth Power and Control wheel (Murphy, 2002: 15).



1. One-sided Power Games

An abusive relationship is characterized by inequality. “When one partner consistently controls, dominates, or intimidates the other by means of manipulative, punishing or forceful behaviour, abuse is occurring” (Douglas, 1994: 24). There are several key words in this definition of abuse. For example, consistently means the abuse is persistent or relentless. Dominate means the abuser is always winner in the relationship. Manipulation is about changing established rules. When one partner wins on most issues at the expense of the other person’s rights, beliefs and desires, this is abuse.

One-sided power games exist when, what the abuser wants is more important than what the partner wants. There are two different rule systems, one for the abuser and another for the abused. The abuser has the last word, is always right, and makes the big decisions.

2. Mind Games [Manipulation]

Mind games are ways of manipulating within a relationship. Such games involve paradox, contradiction, brain washing, getting partners on guilt trips, and conflicting messages are its tactics. Deliberate tactics may be used to confuse women, such as hiding objects then telling her she is crazy when she cannot find them. Telling her that she is imagining things is part of this style of psychological abuse.

“Chris would say, ‘Get yourself ready, and when I come at twelve-thirty we’ll go out for lunch.’ Then he’d come home at eight o’clock at night and say, ‘Why aren’t you ready?’ When I’d tell him he was supposed to be home at twelve-thirty, He’d insist that I had it wrong. He’d be adamant that I’d have to stop and think, but you couldn’t argue with him. It happened so often that I got to the point where I wasn’t sure what I was hearing or what I believed anymore”

(Douglas, 1994: 35).

Or,

“I’d try to discuss something rationally with Murray and he’d immediately start to shout over the top of me, ‘You’re being aggressive. Look at you. Listen to yourself. I’m not discussing anything with you while you’re behaving like this.’ It didn’t matter which way I approached it, it was the same thing every time. I never got off base one” (Douglas, 1994: 35).

3. Inappropriate Restrictions

Inappropriate restrictions are any of the following (Murphy, 2002:18-19),

- Refusing to allow her to go out, for example, to church, or to work
- Making her late for work so frequently that she loses her job
- Discouraging her from her hobbies, interests, or activities, [especially those he is not interested in]
- Interrupting her activities
- Keeping her from having time to herself

4. Isolation

Isolating a woman from other human beings is a major tactic of psychological abuse.

Isolating techniques may be any of the following,

- Controlling what the other person does
- Controlling where they go
- Controlling who they see
- Controlling how long they spend anywhere
- Sabotaging their plans
- Being rude to her friends, or about her friends
- Refusing to go to joint social events
- Complaining that she cares more for her family and friends than for him.

Isolation techniques may be when the man comes home and checks all telephone calls made that day, controlling who the wife has had contact with. It may be leaving a small amount of petrol in the car or taking her car keys.

“Greg seemed to constantly resent me going out. He was always saying he was far more available for the relationship than I was because I was out more, but most of the time I was just at work. Even then he’d often be sulky and moody when I got home. In the end it became easier not to bother doing other things. It wasn’t worth the hassle” (Douglas, 1994: 26).

Or,

“Peter would sit in a chair facing the door so that everyone that came in was under his surveillance. He was always the one to answer the door and the phone, and would quite often not pass important messages on to me. It got to the stage where I couldn’t even have a phone call without him standing beside me or wanting me to sit on his knee so he could hear the whole conversation too. The windows were being closed as quickly as I opened them, and so was the front door. I felt like a prisoner in my own home” (Douglas, 1994:29).

5. Over Protection and Caring

Over-protection and over-caring are characteristics of the “jealous type.”

- He says he “worries” about her
- She never has to work
- He does the shopping so she does not have to go out
- If she is out he is suspicious
- He is extremely jealous
- He takes her to and from work so the men she works with will not get ideas
- He frequently calls her to check up on her
- He harasses her about affairs he imagines she is having

“Barry wouldn’t give me the privacy to pray. He’d walk in and ask what I was doing. When was I going to come to bed? It was always: ‘Come to bed. You’ve finished work, you must be tired. You’re frail, you must have your rest’ ” (Douglas, 1994: 27).

6. Emotional Unkindness and Violation of Trust

Emotional unkindness is about what the partner neglects to do. It may be a passive omission of care, such as withholding approval and affection, that is generally expected in a relationship (Murphy, 2002: 20). Unkindnesses may be,

- Ignoring, sulking, walking and storming out
- Refusing to discuss issues
- Keeping important information secret
- Using guilt, being sarcastic
- Ignoring any need for assistance when she is tired, overworked, or the children are ill
- Reading the newspaper, watching television, and making that seem more important than the relationship to her
- Exploiting intimate disclosures such as her weaknesses, past life, vulnerabilities and insecurities and using them against her
- He says she needs to join the real world, or says she is too sensitive and then cannot take a joke
- Back-handed comments such as, “This is the first decent meal you’ve cooked in months”

7. Degradation

One tactic of degradation is name calling as mentioned at the very beginning of the paper. It is also any of the following behavioural tactics,

- Calling her names, “a slut, a bitch, lazy, crazy, a bad mother”
- Criticising her appearance, “fat, ugly,”
- Suggesting she’s useless, incompetent, stupid
- Humiliating and embarrassing her in front of others

Abusers may be charming when they are dating someone but their shadow side reveals itself once they have bound a partner to a relationship with them. Abusers may tell other people personal or intimate things that their partner shared with them, making the partner feel embarrassed and stupid before others.

8. Separation Abuse

Abuse often increases after separation as the abuser attempts to reassert his authority, Techniques, such as diminishing her financial resources through endless legal hearings, or visitation of the children accompanied by harassment, are used. Such tactics may be,

- Driving to her house
- Leaving notes on her windshield
- Taking photos without consent
- Performing favours without permission
- Making unwanted phone calls

In one of her interviews Murphy writes, “since their divorce in 1996 Steven has engaged in ongoing psychological abuse of both his daughter and Adriana. He has threatened to kill Adriana, has taken her to court several times over custody battles and Adriana, European, is now unable legally to leave the country with her daughter.

Steven has breached protection orders twice, has written degrading and humiliating lies in his affidavits about Adriana, her friends and members of his own family who are supportive of Adriana. He has unsuccessfully tried to turn his family against Adriana, has consistently failed to carry out his parenting responsibilities and the separation abuse is still continuing” (Murphy,2002: 52).

9. Using Social Institutions

Social institutions may be used to justify, support and enforce the abuser’s dominance, hence affirming the abuser in thinking that hierarchy is natural. An abuser thinks that those at the bottom of the hierarchy cause their own deficiencies. [This area of psychological abuse is not well-researched.] Ways in which social institutions may be used as tactics of psychological abuse are any of the following.

- Telling her how lucky she is because his abuse is minimal compared to other men
- Using battles for custody of the children as an arena of psychological abuse
- Showing excessive interest in her emotional life and trying to convince her that she needs to see a psychiatrist
- Threatening to tell social services that she is an unfit mother if she does not do what he wants
- Dobbing her into social welfare so she cannot get the Domestic Purposes Benefit
- Dobbing her in to immigration if she is an immigrant

10. Denial, Minimising and Blaming

Denial, minimising and blaming behaviour is any of the following.

- Making light of abuse
- Not hearing the concerns of others
- Denying abuse ever happened
- Shifting responsibility onto others
- Blaming another factor, for example, alcohol or stress
- Minimising his abusiveness, claiming their relationship is the best she can hope for
- Using rationality and reasoning, reminding her of times when he was right and she was wrong.

Abusers deny responsibility for their behaviour and blame the victim, twisting things around so that she appears responsible.

11. Using the Children

- An abuser punishes or deprives the children when he is angry with his partner
- He makes her feel guilty about the children and says he would not lose his temper if she kept them quieter
- He tells her she is incapable of looking after the children
- He threatens to kidnap them if she leaves him

“One day Nigel just announced, ‘You’re not having the chequebook anymore. From now on Sharleen is going to do all the shopping. I’ve opened a cheque account in her name, and I’ll give her the housekeeping money each week.’ Our daughter was seventeen at that stage. It was like he was treating her as his wife” (Douglas, 1994:44).

12. Economic Abuse

Economic abuse involves

- Making her earn all the money,
- Withholding money from her
- Not giving her enough money for the shopping
- Spending whatever he wants on things for himself but blaming her when there is not enough money

It can also be

- Denying her access to bank accounts
- Making her ask permission to have money or to spend it
- Monitoring how much she spends and what it is spent on

Or,

- She has to bail him out of financial difficulties
- He refuses to work, creating extreme hardship
- He takes money from his partner’s purse
- He excludes her from important financial decisions
- Does not give her access to financial information
- Blames her if there is not enough money

“As far as David was concerned all the money was his. His wages would go into his account, and he had the chequebook. I didn’t even know how much he earned. I’d have to ask for money for food each week, and I had to account for everything I spent. If I wanted something extra like clothes, I’d just have to go without. There wasn’t much point in asking, he’d just say no. I’d get upset and depressed because I didn’t have anything of my own, but it never made any difference” (Douglas, 1994:27).

13. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is a form of psychological abuse when it involves non-physical coercion.

- The sexual abuser expects and demands to have sex when she does not desire it
- He makes her have sex on his terms
- He forces her to do things she does not want to do
- He makes her strip when she does not want to
- He insists she dresses in a more sexual way than she wants to in return for actions such as giving her a gift or a back rub
- He will not do what excites her sexually, minimising the importance of her feelings about sex. He withholds affection.

Or,

- He has affairs with other women after agreeing to a monogamous relationship,
- Tries to seduce her friends and family members
- Publicly shows interest in other women

- Makes her perform degrading sexual acts in public
- Makes sexual jokes about her in front of the children

Or,

- He humiliates and criticises her sexuality
- Makes fun of her body
- Makes demeaning comments about women in general
- Treats women as sex objects
- He compares her unfavourably to women in pornographic magazines and videos, or to previous lovers

“According to Kim it was never appropriate to say no to sex. Not only was I expected to give him sex whenever he wanted it, I was expected to enjoy it and reach a climax as well. If I did, he’d be nice to me afterwards, but if I wasn’t responsive enough, he’d go on and on about how I wasn’t normal, had big problems sexually, and tell me I needed to go to counselling. I used to upset me, so I’d try really hard to please him” (Douglas, 1994: 40).

“If he wanted sex, Grant’s signal was to come up to me when I was at the bench and pinch my nipples. I hated it and it hurt. I’d always tell him, ‘Don’t do it, I don’t like it.’ And he’d say, ‘You do. You find it a turn on.’ This went on for years. If I didn’t want sex he’d blame me and slam the doors, scream abuse, sulk or go out drinking with the boys. Heavy emotional blackmail! A lot of the time I gave in just for peace. I became very effective at just lying there and not feeling anything at all.

Faking it got it over even quicker, but in the long term I lost myself, and my self-esteem, by doing this” (Douglas, 1994: 40).

14. Symbolic Aggression

Symbolic aggression concerns use of body language and tone of voice. It may be

- Using intimidation
- Using gestures, looks, actions that intimidate others
- Smashing things, damaging property
- Abusing pets
- Keeping a weapon in view or within reach, or displaying weapons
- Direct or indirect verbal threats to hurt her, such as, “If you say another word I don’t know what I am going to do,” concurrent with body language of standing very close to her, clenching his fists. Blocking the door so she cannot leave or he refuses to leave are means of aggression. Driving recklessly with her in the car can also be a form of aggression.

15. Domestic Slavery

Domestic slavery is about asymmetrical responsibility. He is “master of the castle” and she is treated like a servant. She is obliged to carry out her responsibilities and she does so, but he is not obliged to carry out his responsibilities and does not necessarily do so.

“Peter would expect me to be there for him constantly. He often twisted things around to make it seem as if I was being selfish. He’d go round with this long face

doing his “poor me” act, and I’d wind up feeling terribly guilty and give myself a really hard time: ‘I should’ve stayed home last night, I should’ve cut that phone call short, I should’ve given him sex this morning.’ I was so hard on myself, it was crazy. I felt so guilty most of the time, I had myself tied up in knots. Often he was the one being mean to me and I was feeling guilty!” (Douglas, 1994: 54).

2. How Do Women Become “Crazy?”

Psychological abuse exists when several forms of psychological manipulation are persistently used by the male, creating a power imbalance in the relationship. The effects of psychological abuse intensify as abuse continues. Here are some frequent

Long Term Effects of Psychological Abuse

- Ongoing fear
- Inability to function [numbed, stunned, slow]
- Diminished ability to deal with stress
- Being super-woman
- Vigilance [always alert to the next round of being put down, being on tender hooks]
- Being suspicious
- Being afraid
- Depression
- Being worn down [physically and mentally, exhaustion]
- Isolated from others [family, friends, self]
- Disassociation [blocking out, having gaps in their lives]

- Reality checking becomes poor
- Feeling crazy, losing perception of how others see us
- Low self-esteem, no confidence
- Diminished ability to make decisions
- Powerlessness

If a woman's mental health starts to crack, under the pressure of abuse, it is not surprising. Gaye Rowley writes in "Robbery"

You wormed your way into my mind, and burgled my virtue.

You turned all the mirrors askew in my head

And I lost my way.

You dropped a stolen flower on my bed, to pacify me

And turned everything around so completely

That I thought I was the intruder.

The poem expresses the confusion of self. Women become mentally ill, as they experience an increasing loss of their sense of self (Murphy, 2002: 36).

One woman speaks,

"I felt I was living two totally different lives. When I went to work I'd be really together. People would tell me their problems and I'd be full of love and give the impression that everything was fine. Then when I went home it was like an instant depression came down on me. I'd go into total silence because of all the aggro and tension. I was so different; no wonder I thought I was going nutty" (Douglas, 1994: 21).

Hager reports that women who have been abused are commonly diagnosed as suffering from major depression, trauma, schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, and anxiety disorders (Hager, 2001: 49). Other presenting issues may be sleeping disorders, self-neglect, panic attacks, aggression towards ones-self and/or others, sexual dysfunction, physical illness, or pain. One woman writes,

“I stayed as long as I could, but eventually I couldn’t even eat. It got to the stage that my body was shaking and I didn’t have the strength to stand up any longer. I thought, ‘I’ll die, and then who will look after the children?’ ”

(Douglas, 1994: 61).

A woman’s self-esteem is low because of the abuse she is suffering. It is NOT her low self-esteem that is causing the abuse. Psychological abuse penetrates and impinges on all parts of inner being.

“As they look back on their relationship, many abused women experience a sense of unreality and sometimes horror at what they have lived through. At some stage almost all doubt their sanity. Most experience depression; many were on medication; several were seeing psychiatrists; some had panic attacks, breakdowns, suicidal thoughts or had attempted suicide; and one was referred for shock treatment. Once out of the relationship, all regained their mental health with surprising speed. From their more peaceful and happier present lives, they find it difficult to reconcile those memories with how they view themselves today” (Douglas, 1994: 242).

3. How We Make Women Feel Crazy

Social institutions and our own socialisation mean we also sometimes unwittingly participate in keeping women in their “abused cage.” A New Zealand school home economics textbook in the 1950’s suggests women prepare before their husband come home,

“Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking ... Be a little gay and a little more interesting for him. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it. ... Don’t complain if he’s late for dinner, or even stays out all night. Count this as minor compared with what he might have gone through that day. Don’t ask him about his actions or question his judgement or integrity. Remember, he is master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him. A good wife always knows her place” (C.M. Support).

The socialisation instilled by this text book excerpt is the world probably lived out by our parents, and passed on to us in many subtle ways. Other stereotypes of the “Feminine Woman” are any of the following (C.M. Support).

DON’T BE

Objective

Adventurous

Concerned with self achievement

BE

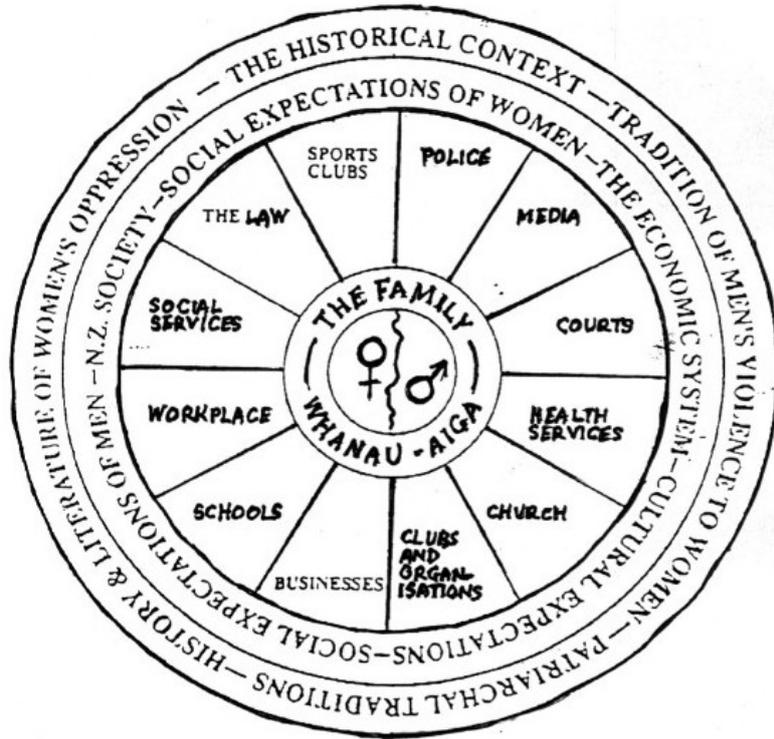
nurturing

affectionate

concerned with your appearance

Analytical	cheerful
Willing to take a stand	a non-user of harsh language
Powerful	soft-spoken
Self-reliant	warm
Ambitious	gentle
Aggressive	loyal
Dominant	yielding
Forceful	childlike
Strong	flatterable
Athletic	sympathetic
Assertive	dependent on others
Competitive	compassionate”
A decision maker	excitable
Self-sufficient	sensitive to others
Individualistic	understanding
A leader	eager to soothe hurt feelings
A defender of beliefs	
Independent	

The following diagram, “Model of Socio-political Context of Men’s Violence to Women,” shows how a power imbalance is inherent in husband-wife relationships, due to social beliefs (Source unknown. Accessed from an educational sheet used by Home and Family Counselling Services, Auckland, NZ).



The exterior circle is the historical context of the Western

world. We grow up in a tradition of men’s violence to women, in patriarchal social structures, with a history and literature of women’s oppression.

The next circle refers to social expectations within NZ society. The excerpt from the 1950’s home economics book and the list of attributes of the stereotypic woman demonstrate women are contained within the house in a “feeling world.” To caricature the situation, “A man’s home is his castle,” and “A woman’s place is the home.” He is master, she is servant.

The spokes of the circle refer to those working within the institutions of society, for example, lawyers, judges, doctors, counsellors. These institutions represent society’s values and structures, often putting constraints on a woman’s freedom.

The family is affected by the attitudes within social institutions when there is interaction between family and institution, and also through the stereotypic expectations generated by policy.

Then at the centre of the circle is wife and husband. In a socio-power analysis, his power keeps him at the top. He is the most powerful. She is the least powerful.

I will give an example first of how the police as one of many social institutions can favour the man's side in a relationship. It is difficult for police to find evidence to prosecute and convict men who psychologically abuse because psychological abuse is difficult to quantify and measure. An abuser may leave roses on her doorstep when under a protection order. The partner understands the roses left on her doorstep as an invasion of her private space. The police may reject the harassment and say that it is a sign of love. To the abuser this police view proves that he can get his victim any time he wants and that no legal institution can stop him. The meaning of "giving roses" in an abusive context may be very different to that learnt in our standard socialisation.

New Zealand family court hearings are private so injustices in a marital relationship tend not go "public." The public does not hear about the plight of many women. An abuser prefers a closed to an open atmosphere. The family court resembles an "isolated legal yet controllable environment," and hence is an extension of some of the abuser's power and control tactics, such as isolation, minimising, denying and blaming. Juries judges and lawyers tend to side with the abuser not the victim, and as a result the woman is "blamed." This reinforces her sense of self-blame for the relationship not

working. Abuser behaviour flourishes when the woman is weak and she continues self-blaming behavioural patterns. Abuser behaviour is hindered when his dominating behaviour starts to get out of the bag, to go public. The less the public know, the less the state of the woman's case becomes known. This is a reason for changing the existing NZ Family court procedure (Murphy, 2002: 11).

There is a medical tendency to look for physical and hormonal symptoms in mental illness cause, neglecting contextual reasons, which may be psychological abuse. Doctors often perpetuate abusers' actions by prescribing antidepressants and other drugs for symptoms without addressing the cause, namely psychological abuse. This is related to the ninth spoke of the psychological abuse Power and Control wheel, using social institutions. The abuser gets some satisfaction to see that his partner needs help or is on medication. It feeds his vision of his strength and her weakness. Post-natal depression, for example, may be caused by the abused woman's distress about her partner's aggressive reactions to having a new baby in the house and feeling despondent about her future, rather than depression due to a post-natal physical condition (Douglas, 1994: 232).

Those in pastoral positions may respond from the viewpoint that women are responsible for keeping a family together. They may counsel women to work harder at the relationship rather than encouraging women to listen to their personal needs. Hence, those in pastoral situations may reinforce a male perspective, that it is men's right to dominate women. For example, one woman says,

“I felt like I was going crazy. Half the time I knew what was happening, but then I’d start to doubt that it was actually as bad as it was. There were times when I’d think; “I must be over-reacting.” I wanted to believe that it wasn’t that bad. At one stage I tried to tell the priest, but he didn’t believe me and I became really confused. Was I making these things up about my husband? Why would I lie? Why would I be so emotional?” (Douglas, 1994: 56).

4. How to Break the Cycle

1] If we are ever in a situation that someone might even start to talk to us about abuse that they have experienced, we need to believe them. The woman needs to know that we believe her story even if it sounds exaggerated. Most women minimise what is happening to them rather than exaggerate. We may want to take sides, or be neutral. If we take an impartial position we may be indirectly supporting the more powerful partner. “The woman needs someone on her side to help redress the power imbalance” (Douglas, 1994: 229).

2] We can show our care for the woman through our responses. For example, we assist positively if we encourage the woman to talk about how her partner is behaving towards her, and how that makes her feel, rather than searching for reasons for the abuse. It is always the man’s responsibility if he abuses a woman. Remind the woman that she cannot change her partner’s behaviour nor prevent his abuse, if he is determined to abuse.

3] We can be supportive by saying things like, “I’m around any time you need help. If you need someone to talk to, here’s my phone number” (A Safer Community Council Education Resource, 1997). It does not help telling a woman what we think she should do. She will go through the process of staying or leaving a relationship in her own time. It may take years but we mustn’t give up on her.

4] We need to say that we can be trusted and will respect the woman’s confidentiality.

5] We may be concerned about the woman’s safety. We may say, “I’m worried about you, and your safety.” This validates that abuse is happening and helps her perception of herself. It helps to tell her where she can find the telephone number of the local Woman’s Refuge, or even better explain the services that a refuge offers. Most “Domestic Violence Crisis” telephone numbers are found at the very front of the telephone book. [In New Zealand not all women can get into refuges. For example, those women with drug and alcohol problems, or those with perceived mental health problems often have difficulty getting into a refuge.]

6] Most women fear they are going crazy. Some will present with symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Help the women to understand her situation and to realise that her symptoms are the result of her body reacting to severe stress. Reassure her that she is not going crazy, but in fact has been coping with the situation as well as she can (Home and Family Society).

One woman from an abusive relationship who came through the depths of despair speaks,

“I’d really like other woman to know there are people who care about them. I really wish I could give all those women my number. When I was at my worst I thought I was so worthless that nobody would be interested in what I had to say. I was wrong. People do care. Find someone who you can really trust to talk to, and get their support” (Douglas, 1994: 221).

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