

Domestic Abuse: How To Assess Destructive Relationships*

Violence in intimate relationships is defined as a pattern of abusive behavior that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over the other partner. The abuse can be physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, economic or psychological, and can be actions or threats that influence another person.

It's commonly believed that domestic abuse is the result of one person in the relationship losing control and then becoming violent, but it's actually the misuse of power to control the partner, which can include: intimidation, humiliation, ridicule, physical injury, manipulation and isolation.

What to listen for in assessing destructive relationships

- An imbalance of power and control in the relationship.
- A consistent lack of reciprocity and lack of mutual respect and understanding between the partners in the relationship.
- A lack of freedom for one partner to speak up in the relationship or for one person to have an opinion that is different than the other, to disagree or make choices on his/her own.
- A consistent indifference to a partner's needs, feelings, desires, and thoughts (neglect is a serious form of abuse).
- A lack of responsibility for wrongs committed in the relationship, shown in behaviors such as blame shifting and minimizing the harm.
- An attitude of entitlement or comments such as, "I deserve forgiveness."

Patterns of destructive relationships are difficult to assess accurately. As a counselor, it's important to do a careful and thorough assessment, and if possible, collaborate with other counselors and consult a supervisor. If you are a pastor, lay leader or other caregiver, it's wise to seek professional expertise or refer the clients to a counselor that could assess their care needs.

What to look for in assessing how the victim is doing

- Signs of trauma. For example, the person feels numb, has high anxiety and arousal, an inability to control his/her emotions, is triggered easily, or is unable to think clearly.
- Signs of major depression.
- Chronic health issues due to stress.
- An inability to think for him/herself. Does the person feel and act unstable?
- Reacting sinfully to his/her partner's controlling and destructive behavior.

The destructive person can affect a person's physical, spiritual, emotional, mental and relational health.

When you identify a victim of domestic abuse

- Safety is always the first step when someone comes in and displays signs of a destructive relationship. Don't send the victimized partner back to the destructive relationship or abusive home without first assessing whether it is safe.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Don't assume you have heard the complete story.
- Don't make premature judgments.
- Don't tell the victimized partner to try harder. Telling the victim to try harder is the wrong approach because:
 - It gives the victimized person a false hope that he/she can change the destructive partner.
 - It makes the destructive partner think you agree that the problem in the relationship is the victim.
 - It reinforces the destructive partner's sense of entitlement and belief that it is the victim's fault that he/she acts this way.

*Definitions and information on domestic violence taken from Vernick, Leslie (2013). *Emotionally Destructive Marriage*. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press. Also from FOCUS Ministries, Inc., www.focusministries1.org.