November is Family Violence Prevention Month

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FAMILY VIOLENCE AND THE FAITH COMMUNITY

Information provided by:
Faithlink, Calgary Alberta
Domestic abuse is present within a relationship when one person attempts – through neglect, intimidation, inducement of fear or by the infliction of pain – to exercise control over, or exploit, another person or property.
The Holy Hush

When community members and religious leaders maintain that the problem of family violence is greatly exaggerated and does not have any particular relevance to believers.
Domestic Violence Affects Members of Religious Communities

- Family violence is as prevalent within religious/spiritually-based communities as it is within the general population.
- Women of religious/spiritual communities often remain in abusive relationships longer.
- Spiritual leaders are called upon to both intervene in domestic disputes and to counsel those who have been abusive within intimate relationships.
- Victims of violence report that the counsel they receive from spiritual leaders has not always been helpful to them.
Domestic Violence Affects Members of Religious Communities

Acts of abuse can take many forms, covering a full range of behaviours:

- Verbal abuse - name-calling, denigrating comments about personhood, appearance, opinions.
- Psychological abuse - disrespect of intimate and/or potentially damaging personal information, threats of harm, harming pets, destruction of prized possessions, stalking.
- Economic abuse - withholding financial support, denial of personal money.
- Sexual abuse - forcing sexual relations, performing unwanted sexual acts, requiring the performance of degrading sexual acts.
- Physical abuse - causing bodily harm, including murder.
Relationships in which Abuse Can Occur

- Marital partners or dating relationships
- Child by a parent
- Between siblings
- Seniors
- Between caregiver and patient
Issues for Religious Communities

- Family violence impedes the spiritual development of those directly affected.
- Family violence impacts upon the faith community and has the potential of causing divisions within the body.
- Families within the faith community experience violence and abuse at the same rate as the general population.
- Women and children can be placed at increased risk when certain religious doctrinal positions are taught, and when these are used to justify abusive acts.
Beliefs Matter

Beliefs about repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation significantly influence how conflicts are defined and resolved. They influence:

- The decision to disclose the abuse, when and to whom;
- Whether or not to leave the relationship and; if and when to reconcile;
- Whether to access secular community services;
- The extent to which the sanctions of the courts are accepted;
- The degree of commitment given to secularly based intervention regimes.
Spirituality Aids the Healing Process

- Rituals, ceremonial rites and prayers are sources of support and healing. Practitioners see these practices as spiritual assets and strength during difficult times.

- Spiritual practices provide a framework in which individual experiences can be placed within a wider perspective; to see the ‘reality’ of a larger whole; to draw strength from the realization of new and different possibilities.

- If secular-based counsellors fail to validate the importance of the spiritual, clients may feel that a vital component of their being and an authentic avenue for coping, healing and change is not being recognized.
The Need for a Bridge

• There is often mistrust between spiritually-based leaders and family violence serving professionals.

• As long as this divide exists, the dual issues faced by those experiencing domestic violence will not be adequately and fully addressed.

• Those affected should not have to choose between their faith community and accessing specialized secular resources.
Fear Hinders Accessing Resources

**Fears Include:**

- That the importance of their spirituality may be under-estimated or not validated;
- That their beliefs will be misunderstood, under appreciated or ridiculed;
- That it may not be possible to accommodate spiritual practices and/or religious requirements.
Preventing Family Violence

- Religious communities have a significant role in preventing family violence.
- These communities have access to those who may be particularly vulnerable to abuse
  - children
  - the elderly
  - the disabled
  - members of minority cultures
  - women
- teenaged girls.
Spiritual leaders can take preventive and practical action to prevent family violence. They can:

- Educate
- Ensure safety
- Make information available
- Be alert for signs of abuse
- Respond to disclosures of abuse in ways that place the victim’s safety as the first priority
- Refer congregants to specialized resources
Preventive Action

The church can take preventive action by:

• Speaking against domestic abuse from the pulpit;

• Educating children, youth and adults about family violence

• Exploring with young people ways of being safe and respectful in relationships;

• Providing literature about family violence and community resources to congregants;

• Modeling for children – particularly boys – that men do not need to be violent to be masculine.
The church can take very practical action when faced with family violence situations by:

- Responding appropriately to disclosures of abuse from victims, child witnesses and/or individuals who have acted abusively.
- Reporting child abuse disclosures to police, your local Child and Family Services Authority or the 24-hour Child Abuse Hotline: 1-900-387-KIDS (5437).
- Facilitating access to specialized services within the broader community.
- Providing support to family members to ensure they are not ‘cut off’ from their faith community.
- Working collaboratively with community services to ensure individuals receive services that recognize the importance of faith.
- Calling to account those who have acted abusively.
Safety is the Priority

**Victim Safety**

- The safety of the victim must be the priority.

- Violence within an intimate relationship always has the potential to become lethal. A victim is in greatest danger immediately following leaving the relationship.
Disclosures of abuse and violence may be made in person or during a telephone call. Once abuse has been disclosed, the immediate goals are:

• Safety for the person who has been abused. If necessary, call 911 for them and ensure that the victim and her children are in a safe place with community support.

• Provision of information on specialized community resources like emergency shelters or police.

• Accountability for the person who has used abusive behaviours. Make sure that the abuser is no longer an immediate danger to the victim.
When There is Disclosure of Abuse or Violence

With Adults

When adults 18 years of age and older make disclosures of abuse:

• Intervene and report only with voluntary consent.
• Unless there is evidence to the contrary, all adults must be assumed to be competent to make their own decisions.
• The individual disclosing abuse to spiritual leaders, staff or volunteers must make the choice to accept assistance or not, and their decision needs to be respected.
• Both people and circumstances have the capacity for change. For this reason providing the opportunity to access information on more than one occasion may be helpful.
• Intervention should be aimed at maximizing safety and personal options.
When There is Disclosure of Abuse or Violence

With Children

When children (up to age 18 years) make disclosures of abuse and/or witnessing family violence:

• Their consent for intervention is not required
• The law requires that the disclosure be reported to the police, your local Child and Family Services Authority or the 24-hour Child Abuse Hotline 1-900-387-KIDS (5437).
Safety for Spiritual Leaders

In situations where you have knowledge that violence is occurring in a relationship, the following safety measures are suggested:

• Avoid home visits. Ask for a meeting in your office at a time when you know other people will be present and available to help.
• Do not accompany the abused partner to meet with or confront the abusive partner. Encourage the abused person to access support and counselling from a specialized domestic violence resource.
• Utilize the police for a ‘civic standby’ to assist the abused partner access to their home to collect personal belongings and/or to take care of incidental concerns.
• If you are going into a situation that has potential for violence, have a safety plan in mind, know where exists and phones are and possible sources of emergency support.
• Ensure your own spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health. Be aware of warning signs in both your professional and personal lives that might indicate potential problems.
Referral is Not Failure

Working Collaboratively with Community Resources:

- Allows for an enhanced level of support and counselling for the family members affected;
- Frees spiritual leaders to provide pastoral care – his/her area of expertise – to family members;
- Allows secular professionals to address the physical, emotional and psychological effects of the violence, confident that the spiritual needs of clients are being addressed.
- Enhances support provided to those affected by domestic abuse and reduces any conflict some family members may feel in accessing ‘secular’ resources.
Specialized domestic violence resources include:

- A Domestic Conflict Unit within the Police Service;
- Emergency (three week residency) and second-stage (six to twelve months residency) shelters for female victims and their children;
- Shelter for high risk victims, seniors, and male victims;
- Treatment services for adult victims, child witness and/or victims and the individuals who have used abusive behaviours;
- Services to address sexual assault, addictions, mental health and other related issues;
- A co-ordinated response between the police, justice and treatment services for victims and those charged with domestic violence related offences.
Resources & Reading

For more information on Family Violence Prevention Month, check out http://www.acws.ca

Information adapted from:


