

## Understanding Domestic Violence

By Susan Folwell, MSW

Every year in October, many people notice purple ribbons on the lapels of friends and neighbors. Similar to the pink breast cancer ribbon, the purple ribbon is a symbol of support in the fight to end domestic violence, and October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Why devote a month to this cause?

Domestic violence is often misunderstood. All around the world, one in three women experiences some form of domestic violence in her lifetime. Also called family abuse, it is not confined to physical violence alone. Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behaviors used by an individual to gain and/or maintain power and control over another person in the context of an intimate/dating/family relationship. Some of these coercive behaviors may include:

- **Emotional, Psychological and Verbal Abuse:** put-downs; name calling; playing mind games; humiliation; manipulation; criticism
- **Isolation and Stalking:** controlling who a person sees and talks to; where a person goes; limiting outside involvement; using jealousy to justify actions
- **Minimizing, Denying, and Blaming:** making light of the abuse and not taking concerns about it seriously; shifting responsibility for abusive behavior; denying that it happened or blaming another person for abuse
- **Economic Abuse:** controlling the finances and making financial decisions without partner's input; requiring that a partner ask for money or account for what is spent; taking, hiding or blocking access to money; preventing a partner from working or keeping a job
- **Coercion and Threats:** making and/or carrying out threats to hurt partner, children, family members, or pets; threatening to leave, commit suicide, or report partner to "authorities"; forcing partner to drop charges; threatening to take the children, either by force or through the court system
- **Intimidation:** breaking and smashing objects; destroying property; displaying weapons; using threatening looks, actions and gestures
- **Spiritual abuse:** using religious texts to justify violence or abusive behavior; misquoting religious texts; questioning partner's personal beliefs and values

The pattern of behaviors is generally not caused by anger or a lack of impulse control or substance abuse. It is an ongoing effort to maintain a position of dominance over the victim and/or family members. Domestic violence occurs between people of all ages, races, ethnicities, economic, educational and religious backgrounds. It occurs in heterosexual and same-gender relationships. And although most victims of domestic violence are women, men can be victims as well.

Abusers can be quite charming and outgoing. They may have positions of responsibility and be well thought of in their communities. Many victims fear that no one will believe them if they disclose, since the violence occurs in the privacy of their homes. Generally, since domestic violence is characterized by control, it is helpful to look for controlling behaviors when dating or beginning a new relationship, rather than "anger problems," although difficulty controlling anger is also a sign of trouble.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence or family abuse, there are people who understand and can help. Counseling centers, domestic violence hotlines and agencies, family and friends can



offer valuable information and support. Finding a trusted friend or professional can make the difference between suffering in silence and getting help to end the abuse.

~Susan Folwell, MSW, is the Manager, Domestic Violence Grant Program at The Women's Center in Vienna, Virginia. For more information, call (703)281-2657 x. 242 or visit [www.thewomenscenter.org](http://www.thewomenscenter.org).