Breaking the Cycle of Abuse

For most of the ten or so years of their marriage, my sister was repeatedly physically and verbally abused by her husband. She moved out many times, only to be lured back by his apologies, apparent repentance, and promises that he would never do it again. My brother, too, was physically abused by his wife while she was threatening to accuse him before his military superiors of inflicting on her the pain to which she was subjecting him. Both marriages ended in divorce. I have to confess that, for their well-being, I'm glad they did rather than seeing two people I cared for deeply being physically and emotionally hurt; or worse, end up dead.

The entire church embraced these victims of abuse

During the twenty-five years I have served as a volunteer police chaplain, I have been on countless “domestic disturbance” calls, many of which ended with the male abuser being taken to jail; but there were also several times when the woman was the one taken away. On most of those calls, which are among the most dangerous which police officers face, the ones who always lost out and suffered the most were the innocent children who witnessed the cruelty inflicted by one of their much-beloved parents on the other. To their dismay and horror, the children watched one of their parents being taken away to jail, leaving them with a very uncertain and scary future and only one parent in the home.

Some of us may be acquainted with someone who is, or has been, a victim of spousal abuse; they may even be members of our church family. From personal experience with victims, and from what I have learned, one of the worst things to ask a victim is, “Why don’t you leave him?” or “Why do you stay with him?” I once received a call from a member of a local church. She told me that for most of her married life, she and her children had been physically and verbally abused by her husband. Since I was not her pastor, but the ministerial director of the conference, I asked her if she had told her pastor, to which she responded, “The pastor told me to pray, because my husband is an elder of the church.” I have to confess I was angered by that response. What kind of support did that pastor provide this victim of spousal physical abuse? I much prefer what another church did to help one of the church members going through a similar experience.

The church leaders took the wife and her children to the home of one of the members of the church where they stayed for three days. Then she and her children were moved to another church member’s home, and so on. By doing this, the lady and her children never had to go to a women’s shelter, which itself can be a traumatic experience, and her husband never knew where they were. The entire church embraced these victims of
In My Opinion

with Peter Swanson

REDEMTIVE REBUKES

Thou shalt rebuke! No, that’s not one of the Big Ten. But a closer look reveals that this imperative is enshrined in the very heart of God’s law. The last six of the Ten Commandments are an exposition of this fundamental principle: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” This being so, it follows that we indeed are our brother’s keeper and we do have the responsibility to confront him when we see him going astray. “His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, and he is caught in the cords of his sin. He shall die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray.” It is our solemn duty to turn his feet back into the paths of righteousness. “My brothers, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right.”

In fact, there actually is a command that makes this clear: “Rebuke anyone who sins; don’t let him get away with it, or you will be equally guilty.” And the very next verse states, “Love your neighbor as yourself, for I am Jehovah.”

The New Testament instruction is unmistakably clear. “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.” “Rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.” “Reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

The focus of this edition of Family Life is upon the evils of abuse and on what can be done to protect those who suffer at the hands of abusers. This includes empowering the abused one to make good decisions; and wisely following a course that is in the best interest of all. Not only is it right to be incensed about the plight of those who suffer cruel treatment, it is a crime to be indifferent to their woes.

The strong must help the weak.

The strong are under obligation to take all necessary steps to shield the weak and vulnerable from the assaults of violators. Protection by means of separation to places of safety is often necessary. Direct action by law enforcement is frequently indicated, and justice insists that the offender must not be shielded from accountability to those that suffer at his hand; both to the church, and to the community.

Along with the various efforts to rehabilitate the offender, clinically proven, individual-specific interventions must be devised which address the bio-psycho-social challenges faced by the individual. But we are also duty bound to attend to the malignancy of sin within the offender; for if the evil is left unchecked it will be repeated. “Those who occupy responsible positions as guardians of the people are false to their trust if they do not faithfully search out and reprove sin.”

“If there are wrongs in the church, they should receive immediate attention. Some may have to be sharply rebuked. This is not doing the erring one any wrong. The faithful physician of the soul cuts deep, that no pestilent matter may be left to burst forth again.”

“Deal faithfully with wrongdoing. Warn every soul that is in danger. Leave none to deceive themselves. Call sin by its right name. Declare what God has said in regard to lying, Sabbath breaking, stealing, idolatry, and every other evil. ‘They which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.’”

It’s a tragic irony that these stern admonitions sometimes fall like music on the ears of over-zealous, self-appointed guardians of social propriety who are quick to judge, harsh in their criticism, and unbending in their resolve to root out evil at any cost. Paradoxically, their vigilance to detect errors in others disqualifies them from the task of giving reproof and obscures their own sinfulness from their eyes.

“Frequently the truth and facts are to be plainly spoken to the erring, to make them see and feel their error that they may reform. But this should ever be done with pitying tenderness, not with harshness or severity. It is frequently the case that while one is quick to discern the errors of his brethren, he may be in greater faults himself, but be blind to them.”

“If Christ is in you, you will have no disposition to watch others, to expose their errors. Instead of seeking to accuse and condemn, it will be your object to help, to bless, and to save. You will not push your brother into greater darkness, but with a heart full of pity will tell him of his danger.”

“It is always humiliating to have one’s errors pointed out. None should make the experience more bitter by needless censure. No one was ever reclaimed by reproach; but many have thus been repelled and have been led to steel their hearts against conviction. A tender spirit, a gentle, winning deportment, may save the erring and hide a multitude of sins.” “In treating the wounds of the soul, there is need of the most delicate touch, the finest sensibility.”

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“Not until you feel that you could sacrifice your own self-dignity, and even lay down your life in order to save an erring brother, have you cast the beam out of your own eye so that you are prepared to help your brother. Then you can approach him and touch his heart. No one has ever been reclaimed from a wrong position by censure and reproach; but many have thus been driven from Christ and led to seal their hearts against conviction. A tender spirit, a gentle, winning deportment, may save the erring and hide a multitude of sins.”

Whether the abuser is a member of our congregation or not we have a moral obligation to intervene. “For evils that we might have checked, we are just as responsible as if we were guilty of the acts ourselves.” “Those who have too little courage to reprove wrong, or who through indolence or lack of interest make no earnest effort to purify the family or the church of God, are held accountable for the evil that may result from their neglect of duty.”

How truly sobering is this call for action! How high the risks and how great the challenges! “All your efforts to save the erring may be unavailing. They may repay you evil for good. They may be enraged rather than convinced. What if they hear to no good purpose, and pursue the evil course they have begun? If the erring persist in sin, treat them kindly, and leave them with your heavenly Father. You have delivered your soul; their sin no longer rests upon you; you are not now partaker of their sin. But if they perish, their blood is upon their own head.”

“Consider the power of heredity, the influence of evil associations and surroundings, the power of wrong habits. Can we wonder that under such influences many become degraded? Can we wonder that they should be slow to respond to efforts for their uplifting?”

“Bear in mind that the success of reproof depends greatly upon the spirit in which it is given. Do not neglect earnest prayer that you may possess a lowly mind, and that angels of God may go before you to work upon the hearts you are trying to reach, and so soften them by heavenly impressions that your efforts may avail. If any good is accomplished, take no credit to yourself. God alone should be exalted. God alone has done it all.”

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Questions for Discussion:

1. When the battered spouse refuses to press charges, how can the abuser be held accountable for his actions?
2. What methods have been shown to be effective in breaking the cycle of abuse?
3. On what basis do pastors and family life professionals have the right to intervene in cases of family violence?
4. How does one overcome the reluctance to do the hard work of rebuking sin?
5. How do church leaders temper the zeal and compassion to do this work that demands the utmost tact and compassion?

Endnotes

1 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22:37-40
2 Am I my brother’s keeper? Genesis 4:9
3 Proverbs 5:22, 23, New King James Version
4 Galatians 6:1, 2 Good News Bible
5 Leviticus 19:17, Living Bible
6 Leviticus 19:18, Living Bible
7 1 Timothy 5:20
8 Luke 17:3
9 Titus 1:13
10 2 Timothy 4:2
11 Child Guidance 120
12 Evangelism 370
13 Galatians 5:21; Desire of Ages 805
14 Matthew 7:1-5
15 Testimonies to the Church, vol. 3, p. 93
16 Mount of Blessing 128
17 Ministry of Healing 166
18 Desire of Ages 440
19 Mount of Blessing 128
20 Desire of Ages 441
21 Child Guidance 235
22 Testimonies to the Church, vol. 2, p. 53
23 Ministry of Healing 168
24 Ministry of Healing 494
25 Testimonies to the Church, vol. 2, p. 52
Abuse - The Silent Crime

In its statement on abuse, the General Conference states, “The Seventh-day Adventists affirm the dignity and worth of each human being and decry all forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and family violence.” This statement was not made in isolation, but has bearing in the lives and families of many of its members. Abuse provides an ongoing stressor for the individual; both its psychological and emotional trauma can be devastating. It is well recognized that people going through severe stress are more prone than others to low self-esteem, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression. It can be argued that abuse is among the most serious medical, emotional, and psychological crisis an individual can experience. Factors that may heighten this crisis may come from the reaction of family members, the attitude of the abuser, societal myths about abuse, or the abuse itself. These areas have been well researched and documented. Therefore, this article does not seek to explore the etiology of abuse, but rather to give practical guidelines to pastors when dealing with the abused and the abuser.

1. Provide help for the abused.
Church members are all part of a spiritual family; therefore, members should seek to maintain a cordial relationship with each other. Whenever a member is going through, or has gone through, an abusive experience, there is a greater need to receive support from members. Pastors should attempt to understand the emotional and psychological pain that comes with abuse, provide help for the victim, and seek support from the members.

Some abused persons eagerly await the opportunity to discuss their pain and anguish with an understanding and trusted person. The pastor can be that person. By showing empathy, the abused person can feel more comfortable opening up to the pastor. Pastors should lead their congregations into sensitivity training so that they can better understand the pain and experiences of the abused.

2. Provide help for the abuser.
Pastors must be inclusive, rather than exclusive. They should therefore foster open communication pathways, not only with the abused member but with the abuser too. On the one hand, the abused members receive nurturing, support, and assistance to cope with their painful experiences. Abusers, on the other hand, will likely not need nurturing and support so much as acceptance, professional help, and accountability. Pastors need to ascertain the magnitude of the abuse and the kind of help they will recommend for those who abuse. They should provide follow-up on the treatment, and monitor progress and outcomes in the experience of abusers. In this process, the pastor joins with, and identifies with, the family’s emotional experience. This allows the whole family, and especially the abused person, to know that the pastor understands and is working with and for them.

3. Understand the family’s dysfunctional generational transmission issues.
By working with and understanding the family, the pastor can identify what negative messages the family selects from past generations to fit into their meaning system, and explore how these messages reinforce the existing negative behavior of abuse or tolerance of abuse. Using these insights, the pastor can help the family become aware of how they are participating in the perpetuation of dysfunctional generational transmission issues.
When working with the victims of abuse, the pastor should understand that they will likely not be able to move beyond their traumatic experience until they are each able to regain a sense of control over their personal world. The pastor should challenge them to take charge of their lives, and not abdicate their responsibility to positively alter their present and their future.

By helping the family to focus on changing abusive behavior, taking responsibility for individual actions, getting the necessary help, and strengthening self-esteem, the pastor is facilitating a new family construction. This new family construction holds new
Positive Parenting

with Susan E. Murray

The Child—Witness of Marital Abuse

“Did I do something wrong
to make you lose control?
Anger so strong.
Or do you even know?
That when you come home
I want to run and hide.
The pain is so deep
that I keep it inside.
I’m not the same because
of you.
Always afraid of what
you’ll do.
If only you could see yourself
through my eyes.
You’d know why
(I’m dying inside).
Sometimes I need a firm,
but gentle hand.
Someone who cares and
understands that I am still learning.
But I just can’t take this abuse,
from you.
There is no excuse.
I’m not the same because of you.
Always afraid of what you’ll do.
If only you could see yourself
through my eyes.
You’d know why
(I’m dying inside).
This is no way to live.
If you try to change
I’ll try to forgive.”

Even if boys and girls are never physically abused, they do suffer abuse if they live in an environment of abuse and they may likely feel the same way the child did who wrote this poem. These children are often unable to form nurturing bonds with either parent; and hearing and seeing the abuse and its effects takes a terrible toll.

Statistics show that in the United States, more than three million children see their parent or other family members exposed to violence in the home. It should be no surprise that children who witness abuse are much more likely to exhibit emotional, social, and behavioral problems. These outcomes not only affect their development, the damage can continue well into adulthood. While children respond differently to their environment, depending on their personalities, age, gender, as well as the severity and duration of the abuse, there are similar outcomes for most children.

Emotionally, children grieve for their family and their personal losses. They often experience shame, guilt, and all-too-often blame themselves (as evidenced in the poem above). They are fearful of being abandoned. They are angry. They feel helpless and powerless. They are embarrassed. These responses may lead to depression, anxiety, and other clinical problems.

Acting out (aggression) or withdrawing (passivity) are common. Some behavioral issues show up more in social settings, such as refusing to go to school, lying to avoid confrontation, excessive attention seeking, manipulation, dependency and mood swings. Sadly, children may evidence reduced intellectual ability, which has life-long negative consequences.

A misbehaving child is a discouraged child

Sleeping problems and bedwetting are common. Other physical issues include headaches, stomach aches, and a general lack of overall health. They can be anxious, nervous, and may exhibit shortened attention spans, show signs of being tired and lethargic, and may be careless about personal hygiene.

Some children take on ways of playing that exhibit high-risk behaviors, and others show passivity with their peers. It can also be difficult for them to trust their peers or relatives or authority figures. They may be involved in excessive social involvement to avoid spending time at home, and may develop stormy relationships, or they may even try to totally isolate themselves from friends and relatives. Various kinds of self-abuse (eating disorders, cutting, taking physical risks beyond normal behavior) are all too often the pernicious outcomes of many who are trapped in abusive families.

Other children, even at surprisingly young ages, take on a care-taking role, acting as a parent-substitute to siblings. They may even assume the role of “parenting” the needy parent, to the detriment of their own wellbeing.

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Parenting from page 5

Children in Seventh-day Adventist families are certainly not exempt from these difficulties. While the scope of this column does not allow for a full discussion of issues or interventions needed, it is important to note that many adults don’t recognize these symptoms when they see them. When a child acts out, observers are more likely to label the child as disobedient and incorrigible than to view those behaviors as symptomatic of the child’s struggles.

Rudolf Driekers said, “A misbehaving child is a discouraged child.” That was so insightful for me, and I have shared it with many students and parents. How we look at, and respond to, a “discouraged” person is often far different from the ways we look at and respond to a “misbehaving” child (of any age).

It is our responsibility, and that of our church leaders, to grapple with these issues, to identify the most effective means of intervention, and to provide needed resources to those who do the front-line work.

James Garbarino and John Eckenrode, in Understanding Abusive Families, caution that developing a social conscience is no small accomplishment; but it is a major step in the normal development of an individual, as well as for a whole civilization. They suggest being cautious in our claims and rhetoric, and that we resist the impulse to espouse the “crisis motif” in which social problems are typically cast (and then cast off).

Predictably, there is no single intervention and no simple answers. What we must do is to establish high standards of care for our children and their families and work to provide adequate health care and other essential services. We must educate those who have the oversight of children to set in place reliable and appropriate adult supervision and ensure that each child is involved in enduring relationships with responsible, caring adults. To some extent these systems even protect and sustain children who witness violence in their own home and with their own parents.

Looking at it from a family life education perspective, I’m reminded of Bill Doherty’s Levels of Family Involvement Model. I invite you to consider how your particular ministry or responsibilities fit into this model:

**Level 1:** Minimal emphasis on family. Many legitimate types of involvement, while beneficial to society as a whole, are not really family-centered. Practical and legal reasons are often the impetus for providing resources, but they likely don’t meet the particular needs of each parent or family.

**Level 2:** Information and advice. This is when the provider collaborates with parents and other family members and offers information of relevance to that particular family.

**Level 3:** Feelings and support. This involves professionals that understand individual and family reactions to stress and the emotional aspects of group process. This level builds on Level 2 by adding the dimension of emotional support. The provider probes for dynamics underlying the family’s problems but does not try to intervene to change challenging family patterns.

**Level 4:** Brief focused intervention. An understanding of family systems theory is necessary at this level and involves actively exploring personal or family problems that affect the care of the child. The provider forms an assessment of the family dynamics and offers to help the family past its present difficulty. Providers need special training in family assessment and basic family interventions, but this is not the type of intervention that is termed Level 5.

**Level 5:** Family therapy. This involves intensive work with families that have serious difficulties and cannot be helped by Level 3 or Level 4 involvement. Without advanced studies and licensing, it is not appropriate for family life professionals to offer this type of assistance.

I have always maintained that good therapy is educational, and good education is therapeutic. A clear understanding of what constitutes appropriate practice is imperative at every level of church leadership.

Maybe the best question is to ask, “Is this the best we can do for the children?”

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Questions for Discussion:

1. What can be done for the “invisible” child who survives an abusive family environment by disengaging and hiding and pretending that everything is okay.
Perspective from page 4

meanings and thus new possibilities for the family. Neither abused persons nor abusers will see themselves as “victims” or “perpetrators.” Instead, they will see themselves as “survivors,” or “overcomers.” The one has survived a horrific abusive experience and the other has overcome maladaptive impulse-control patterns. The pastor has therefore created an open environment that amplifies the family’s strengths, weaknesses, resources, and solutions.

5. Stabilizing the new family construct.

The pastor should be aware that, in many instances, abused individuals have difficulty reintegrating their sense of control, esteem, and hope for the future. They may believe that they can talk more openly, but emotionally they may still be floundering. If the abuse is known publicly, it can create embarrassment for both survivor and overcomer.

Pastors can help to stabilize the “survivors” by crafting a support system within the congregation and providing follow-up contacts. They can help the “overcomers” to forgive themselves, take responsibility for their actions, and normalize themselves back into the fellowship of the congregation.

Questions that might be asked to help in this process are: How do you view yourself without the problem? How do you see yourself relating to friends and members? Do you see yourself at church becoming involved again without any thought of the problem? By asking these questions, the pastor provides the possibility for individuals to become reintegrated with some of the more difficult areas of their lives, including integration in the church.

By focusing positively on these five points, the pastor is doing exactly what the GC statement calls for, that is, “to preserve the dignity and worth of each human being.”

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Questions for Discussion:

1. How can we assist those church members whose sympathies lie with the abused person and who are critical about efforts to minister to both the abused and the abuser?

2. What difference does it make to the abused person to assume the identity of a victim vs. that of a survivor? Are there better terms to use to describe one’s post-abuse identity?

3. How long should a person be on probation before his/her status can legitimately be changed from abuser to overcomer?

For Further Study:

http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main_stat2.html
http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main_stat12.html
http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/violence.html

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2. How can we best help the sullen, rebellious child whose abuse has kindled an inner inferno of anger?

3. “Monkey see, monkey do!” What must be done to interrupt the inter-generational patterns of abuse?

4. How do we go about developing a social conscience personally, and within our congregations?

From CHANCE (Changing How Adults Nurture Children’s Egos)
http://www.wyomingdvsa.org/domestic/children.htm

abuse. They took on the victims’ pain and fears and made them their own.

As family life professionals, we are in a unique position to provide support, help, comfort, and guidance to victims of abuse so they can find freedom, healing, and a better future. We can also teach others how to help, encourage, and empower their friends or relatives who may experience mistreatment to find ways to end the brutality. We can educate people in our circle of influence about the cycle of violence and how they can be instrumental in breaking it. Without such intervention and interruption of this harmful cycle, it will continue, increase in intensity and frequency, and in many cases result in deadly consequences. 💿

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Questions for Discussion:

1. In what ways would you deal differently with abusive situations within the families of your relatives and with families of non-relatives?
2. When the abuser is the sole bread-winner in the family and his assaults will likely cost him jail time, what do you do?
3. What is the same, and what is different in the ways you deal with a case when the abuser is a female?
4. When the abuser is a respected church leader how do you proceed?