

A Batterer Story – Tracing the Abuse

By Alyce LaViolette, 1983

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Sean was slightly built, average height with dark hair and eyes. He had a very gentle appearance that bordered on fragile. It surprised me to learn that Sean worked on the docks. He was a stevedore like his father.

Everybody liked his father and people liked him also. Sean had lots of friends.

He was like his father in another very significant area of his life. He guarded, isolated, verbally abused and terrorized his girlfriend with the methodical expertise he had witnessed as a child.

Sean's mother was beaten down and fearful. She remained in that relationship until daily life broke her and she sought peace and safety and an institution.

The boys didn't understand. Sean saw his mother as weak and indecisive. He was angry at her for years when she "abandoned" them for a hospital ward.

Sean remembers the marks his father left on his mother, on him and his brother...and he remembers a look in his mother's eyes.

Those memories have become vivid. His live-in girl-friend of two years now wears the look. He traced the abuse for me. He compared it point by point to his father's behavior. And he cried. He cried because his girlfriend was gone and he was forced to look at what he'd done.

When we talk about batterers acting impulsively, Sean stands out in my mind. Systematic described Sean, not impulsive.

He described what happened after a fight, when things were "settled": "She'd be sitting a chair and I'd come up behind her and hit her. I had already told her I'd get her back when she wasn't prepared. After awhile, she started looking for me over her shoulder. If she saw me, she'd stiffen and I'd tell her I'd get her later and she would cry. Sometimes I'd knock her out of the chair. I don't know why I do that."

Sean looked at what he'd done for two sessions. He remained in contact with his girlfriend while he was in counseling. For a short time, he called me to explain his inability to keep appointments. I assume he and his girl-friend have reconciled. I don't know.

Men who batter the women they love are remorseful. This remorse is often confused for empathy and seen as a motivation for behavior change. However, what it tends to inspire is denial, minimization, and an externalizing of responsibility.

The move toward counseling is generally motivated

by separation or impending separation. If a spouse has left and returns to her partner before he becomes deeply involved in the counseling program, it is likely that he will drop out of the program. Initially, the counseling may be a manipulation to persuade the battered woman to return

Court orders with the threat of imprisonment for non-compliance provide additional motivation to get counseling. Personal growth has not emerged as a primary catalyst when abusers are seeking help. And personal growth does not have to be the incentive for change to occur.

Court-ordered and mate-ordered referrals do work. Once a person is entrenched in a program that works for him, it doesn't matter how he gets there. We have been greatly encouraged by the men who have chosen to remain in the program after their court order has been completed.

Battering is a back-against-the-wall issue, parallel to substance abuse, except that the individuals have crossed one more social taboo.

It is difficult to come forward and "explain" why you hurt the person you love.

Denial is a necessary part of self-preservation — and it takes about six months in group counseling to begin to cut through the self-deception.

Group is a good vehicle to break isolation, provide support, confrontation, education, behavioral skills, discuss power (and redefine it), and provide role-modeling. Our groups are unstructured and not time-limited.

We include certain key issues in group (sex-role socialization issues, empathy training, anger management and communication skills, etc.) but believe that for real change to occur individuals must have the place to practice and the time to internalize what they're learning. Resocialization is the goal.

Battering is a chronic life problem. It is an escalating pattern that has usually taken years to establish and will take time to alter. Much like alcoholics who stop drinking, batterers who stop battering are in a process of recovery.

I recommend one year as an average time in group counseling. I also suggest that the emotional and behavioral patterns can recur and that it is important to become aware of those patterns so that if they recur, a client can return for help.