

When Abuse Is Present in Marriage

Submitted by Marsha Hicks, LPC

I was a senior in college and had made friends with a newly married, young seminarian couple. It was clear that the husband was an up and coming “star” in our small Christian circle, and by all accounts they were a happy example of a healthy marriage. It wasn’t until the wife confided in me that on the drive from their wedding reception to their honeymoon her husband punched her in the stomach “out of the blue, for no reason”, that I knew anything was wrong in their marriage. They covered it well. She was scared, confused, and worst of all silenced. Afraid to have her husband's career threatened and their unhealthy marriage exposed, she learned to hide her pain, her heart, and her aspirations. He eventually “promised” to not hit her again, but without proper exposure and help, he began dominating her emotionally and verbally behind closed doors. Our friendship slowly dwindled and eventually died as she devoted all of her time and energy to managing her inner world and her husband’s abusive demands and rage.

It is the rare couple who comes in for counseling in a place of brokenness to deal directly with these issues. In my practice I have counseled this type of abusive dynamic from mainly two very different vantage points: parents who are heartbroken over their adult son or daughter who is married to an abusive spouse, and by individuals who after years of suffering abuse in their marriage find themselves in crisis as a result. The majority of these clients are women who come secretly, pay in cash, and have little to no support because of shame and isolation. Most have never told their own parents, pastors, or closest friends what they are experiencing. They come feeling utterly alone, abandoned, confused, self-blaming and defeated. Some come “done”, having endured an injury that has woken them up to the reality of their lives and they want out – now!

When my clients share with me about times they may have tried to seek advice from family, pastors, or close friends, they lament that people in general don't know what to say in response to this type of report about an abusive relationship because it is seen as too extreme and usually contradicts what has been portrayed by the couple's public relationship. It can actually be hard for others to believe. Part of what makes it so difficult to believe is coercive abusers rarely reveal their true identity to outsiders. In public they are often some of the most generous, charismatic, service-oriented people you will meet. It is only when one gets close enough, for long enough, that the underbelly of impatience, demandingness, vengeance, and selfishness is revealed. In other words, you aren't going to meet the real man/woman in a brief encounter. And when they come in for counseling with their spouse, the abusive spouse will portray themselves as cooperative, attentive, and understanding. Only the wounded spouse can accurately report the full weight of what it means to live under their power and control, and most of the time the abused partner has a hard time describing to anyone, including themselves, what is happening to them behind closed doors.

In the privacy of their relationship, the abusive spouse gains power over time by isolating their spouse from friends and family, controlling finances, triangulating with their children

against their partner, and using psychological tactics (shame, blame, gas-lighting) to gain cooperation with their goals. What complicates the issue even further is that a typical abuser may sometimes show remorse (not repentance) after an abusive episode by buying gifts, flowers, or being very kind for a period of time. The offended spouse may then become very confused about what is real and what is not, and may feel an obligation to “forgive and forget” because they feel pressure from a misapplication of what forgiveness seeks to achieve. In time, another incident will happen where the ugliness of the abusive dynamic returns and the vicious cycle begins again.

When my client is the injured spouse, I know my work will be long-term, very complex, and very painful for the client. But it can also be very redemptive if done patiently, respectfully, and guided by the overarching theme of what will best love (with Christ-like, “dying to self” love) the other spouse. The process will likely involve: helping the client name their “behind closed doors” reality, discussing behavior patterns of both partners, owning their own unloving style of relating/agency, getting a vision of who the spouse could be if he/she repented and moved toward health, and helping the client practice loving relating that may not yield desired results but is what is required to love well. Most of all the client will need to wait for God to do His work by avoiding taking revenge but longing for justice and redemption. It is war; a war that involves taking enough time to move through each of the therapeutic tasks in order to grasp the greater goal of love and its implications on their relationship.

When the parents of an adult child who is in this type of relationship come for counseling, my job is primarily to help them name and face the reality of what their child is suffering, grieve the loss of relationship with their child and often their grandchildren, explore how to invite their adult child to deal with their marriage, and to consider what future interactions with the couple will look like. Most parents have to face the reality their child has some agency in the marriage as well, and a process of forgiveness needs to begin in spite of the possibility of never fully reconciling the relationship.

We want to be a resource for you to help individuals and couples under your care who confide in you that these types of abusive dynamics are present in their marriage or a family member's marriage. It is our privilege to minister to these extreme situations.