

Personal Safety To Help Stop Domestic Violence

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I often teach personal safety classes to survivors of domestic violence. I would like you to picture joining me in a living room full of women who are asking with great sadness and some desperation, "How did I end up in this situation? What could I have done differently? How can I keep my children and myself safe now?" The children are being cared for upstairs so that I can have some time alone with their mothers.

Personal safety skills will not solve the social causes of domestic violence, and they will not work all the time - but these skills can help people avoid getting into a destructive relationship, make the best of a bad situation, preserve their sense of self-worth and keep looking for a way to get help.

Context

I have found it works best to present personal safety skills in the context of a common understanding with the people I am teaching. The following definitions and ideas help me to do this more effectively.

1. What is meant by domestic violence? Domestic violence can be defined to include any violence in the home, including between adult children and other adult family members. However, most people use the term to mean any abusive, threatening or violent behavior between one intimate partner and another.

2. Who is affected by domestic violence? Domestic violence can happen anywhere to anyone of any race, religion, culture or economic status. Domestic violence affects both partners, their children, other family members, friends and colleagues. Domestic violence can occur in ANY intimate relationship, including same-sex relationships and including by women towards men.

However, most domestic violence is committed by a man against a woman. For this reason, this article will refer to the person in the aggressor role as male and to the person in the victim role as female.

Domestic violence is dangerous. Too often, conflicts escalate into injury or death.

3. What about the social issues involved? Despite the exceptions, gender is very relevant in understanding the social issues that lead to domestic violence. There is a common perception in many

societies that domestic violence is the woman's fault. While this perception is changing, this belief is often shared by women as well as by men. In some cultures, women are still not allowed to make choices about whom they will marry and whether or not they will stay in a relationship.

It is exciting to see people from around the world who are working together to create laws and change cultural perceptions that tolerate or condone domestic violence.

Videos like "Tough Guise" and "Still Killing Us Softly" are great tools for raising awareness with young people about social issues that lead to domestic violence. These videos show how boys and men are given aggressive role models and girls and women are encouraged to be passive. With this understanding, young people have a better chance of not participating in violent relationships.

4. What if a victim of domestic violence refuses to leave? In our self-defense workshops for the general public, we teach our students that leaving a threatening or dangerous situation is always the safest choice. At the same time, adults who are dealing with violent partners have to make their own decisions.

Leaving might not be a realistic choice in a culture that condemns women who leave and does not offer resources such as food and shelter.

Even in cultures where a woman might have a place to go, there are many obstacles that make it hard for an abused partner to walk away from the relationship. In order to leave, an abused woman has to be able to put her own well being above the love she might feel for her husband or partner. She has to know where to go, how to get help, how to keep custody of her children and how she will survive economically. She has to overcome the isolation and shame of having failed to preserve the relationship. She often believes that the failure is her fault.

Too often, a man will not be heavily punished for murder if the person murdered is his wife. This means that a woman might have a very realistic fear about leaving a man who has threatened to kill her and their children if she does.

The goal of personal safety skills is to empower people to make their own choices, even if we do not agree with them personally or might not make the same choices ourselves. Women will not leave an abusive relationship until they are ready.

5. What if personal safety skills would not have helped? Many times a woman will tell terrifying stories of situations that sound hopeless. Maybe she was locked into a room while he threatened to set the house on fire. Maybe he had the children. Maybe he overpowered her or had a weapon. I often say, "That sounds terrible. I am very sad that this happened to you. The fact that you are here means that you did many things right. Personal safety skills can give you more tools, but nothing works all the time." Acknowledging someone's feelings and reality makes everyone more open to learning other possibilities.

6. Doesn't telling women that they might have done things differently make it sound as if what happened was their fault? Most of us can look back to times when we wish we had known how to do things differently. We try to keep women from blaming themselves by being very clear and saying at the beginning, "If someone tries to control you through saying cruel things, making threats or acting dangerously towards you, it is *not your fault*. An abusive partner's destructive behavior is not your responsibility. However, you can learn how to manage most problem situations in ways that will make things safer for you rather than more dangerous."

7. Could personal safety skills help someone not to be abusive? It is not easy for someone

who is used to feeling powerful and in control through dominating another person to change those behaviors. There is a sense of entitlement that has some aspects of addictive behavior. Just wishing and making promises will not be effective. Deep, consistent commitment to stopping engrained patterns through therapy and support groups is essential. As part of this process, people who have trouble controlling their tempers can benefit from practice in reacting without aggression to situations that have triggered them in the past.

8. What role does alcohol and drug abuse play in domestic violence? Substance abuse leads to loss of control, and any loss of control is likely to escalate a potentially violent situation. Both partners in a violent relationship are more likely to lose their tempers or to panic if they are drunk or high. Many people in treatment for alcohol or drug recovery are also survivors or perpetrators of violence and abuse - and sometimes have been in both roles.

What Are The Important Personal Safety Skills? And What About Fighting Back?

The most important personal safety skills that we want students to practice include:

- Assessing the person's behavior and being aware of potential danger signs;
- Getting centered to calm themselves down so that they can think clearly and make safer choices instead of panicking or escalating the argument.
- Protecting themselves emotionally rather than being triggered or coerced by the mean things someone says to them.
- Using verbal self-defense tactics to defuse a potentially violent interaction.
- Protecting themselves physically without fighting back.
- Creating a safety plan for how to leave and for how to get help.

When we teach physical self-defense to women who are dealing with domestic violence, we tell them, "If you are still in an intimate relationship or living with a person who is sometimes violent, fighting back is likely to increase your risk of the person becoming more dangerous, perhaps by using a weapon. If you fight back physically, the safest thing to do is to leave immediately, get yourself to a safe place and never come back."

Learning fighting skills, including defense against weapons, can make a big difference to a woman's self confidence and also can increase her ability to protect herself in other situations. Using fighting skills for revenge, punishment or control of a violent person is dangerous both physically and legally. We teach that fighting skills should only be used as a last resort, when there is no other way to escape the situation and get help.

Paying Attention to Danger Signals When Dating or Courting

Our workshops are skill-based, and we focus on practicing what to say and what to do rather than discussing issues. However, the following information can be helpful in structuring practices to be realistic for students who are in the early stages of a potentially violent relationship.

Looking back to the beginning of the relationship, some survivors of domestic violence will say that they saw many signals that there were problems that they did not recognize as trouble at the time because they were "too much in love" or "too lonely" or "really wanted the relationship to work out." Others will say that the

man's behavior was wonderful until after they were married or living together.

At any phase of an intimate relationship, personal safety means learning to separate superficial appearance and actions from what really counts in terms of someone's character. Many women are seduced into loving someone because of - how he looks, how he dresses, the loving sweet things he says, the gifts he gives, the excitement and fun of being with him, the economic security he offers and the prestige he seems to have.

None of these qualities will lead to a safe, positive relationship unless the man also consistently treats the woman and others with respect and caring. Useful assessment questions that we encourage students to consider while dating are:

- Does he treat you as if you belong to yourself OR does he act possessive of you?
- Does he seem positive about the attention you get from others OR does he seem jealous of it?
- Does he insist that you do nothing affectionate or sexual towards him unless you truly feel like it OR does he try to pressure you into doing more than you want?
- Does he encourage you to spend time with friends and family OR does he does he try to separate you from others who are important to you?
- Does he take full responsibility for his behavior OR does he tell you he cannot help himself because he loves you so much?
- Does he encourage you to be independent OR does he try to get you to be dependent on him?
- Does he do his full share of the work in the house and with money OR does he expect you to pay for him or to do most of the work?

Women are often taught that a man being possessive, jealous, demanding, needy, or wanting them all to himself means that he cares. The truth is that a man believing that a woman is his property is dangerous.

One excellent predictor of someone's future behavior towards any of us is that person's behavior towards others. Useful assessment questions are:

- How does he act towards others?
- What does he do when he is mad at someone or upset about something?
- Does he take responsibility for his share when things go wrong with another person, or is his story that everything is the other person's fault?
- Does he try to make women feel sorry for him because of all the hard luck he has had with other people?

Another important assessment tool is to notice what someone is like when he is disappointed, frustrated or not getting what he wants. Is he unhappy but respectful or does he become aggressive?

We tell young women who are dating, "Even if someone is wonderful to you, it is a danger signal if he is mean or threatening to others or if he blames others instead of taking responsibility. Act as if you are extremely allergic to any sign of possessiveness, emotional coercion or threat. Remember that you do not

owe loyalty or love to someone who endangers you."

These are some of the practices we use with students for dating situations:

- Protecting themselves emotionally from words like, "Stuck up bitch."
- Leaving and saying, "I am not interested."
- Saying clearly and firmly, "I do not want to go out with you."
- Not giving in to emotional coercion or feeling guilty even if someone is very sad.
- Pulling away, getting into a strong posture and saying in a firm loud calm voice, "That is NOT okay with me. I am leaving now."
- Pushing someone away and saying, "I am going home now."
- Resisting pressure and saying, "My NO means NO!"
- Sitting in an imaginary car and saying in a loud voice over and over, "Take me home. My parents (or housemates) know where I am. Take me home NOW!"

Assessing What is Normal and What is Dangerous in a Relationship

It is normal for people who care about each other to get upset with each other sometimes. People in healthy relationships sometimes yell and say mean things that they later wish they had not. In healthy couples, each partner accepts his or her share of responsibility for what went wrong, apologizes, and hopefully learns to deal with conflict in less upsetting ways.

Yelling and saying mean things in a conflict is not the same as someone trying to control another person through violence. Violence can include:

- Threatening language about hurting the woman or someone she cares about physically, economically or legally;
- Aggressive gestures such as shaking a fist or picking up a knife;
- Destructive behavior such as throwing or breaking things or driving recklessly;
- Physical domination such as shoving, shaking;
- Sexual assault through forced sexual contact of any kind; and
- Physical attack such as hitting, pinching, forcing the woman into submissive or degrading positions, or kicking.

If this behavior happens, apologies and regrets are not enough. The odds are that a man who has used violent behavior to control a relationship is very likely to do it again.

There is no single right answer for everyone. I know of women whose relationships have survived a time of threat and violence and become healthy. This is more likely if there has been just one violent phase or

episode that led to a couple getting help that resulted in lasting improvement. If an abusive partner is committed enough to learning and using nondestructive ways of handling frustration and anxiety, change is possible.

Far more common is a pattern of repeated abuse for which the man blames the woman or goes through a cycle of alternating violence and abject apologies. Unfortunately, too often the unrealistic hope that things will get better keeps women in dangerous relationships far too long.

Surviving While Still Living With the Abusive Partner

If someone is in a domestic violence situation that she does not believe she can leave, then her challenge is to try to defuse conflict as much as possible. She can learn to think strategically instead of reacting to the other person's behavior. She can plan to use verbal self-defense tactics rather than waiting helplessly for the next outburst or wishing unrealistically that it will never happen again.

These are some of the practices we do with our students that can be helpful in domestic violence situations:

- Becoming centered by having them imagine being upset and then taking a moment to breathe and feel their bodies.
- Moving and standing with awareness, calm and confidence.
- Using their imaginations to throw away the hurtful, scary things that an abusive partner says instead of taking this in as the truth about themselves.
- Identifying and taking the power out of their triggers so that they are able to make choices instead of automatically reacting to what someone says or does.
- Saying nice things to themselves to counteract the mean things that have been said to them.
- Letting an aggressive person have the last word without feeling like they have given away their power.
- Setting firm, polite, respectful boundaries.
- Making a safety plan for how to get help if there is an emergency.
- Being persistent and effective in asking for help from people who do not want to get involved.
- Making a report to a police officer in a way that is calm and factual rather than sounding out of control. "I was attacked. I had to defend myself. I need to talk with an advocate."

Often, students get caught up in wanting to control the behavior of their abusive partner. They do not want to let him get away with being unfair or making horrible statements. We tell our students, "Yes, it is true that no one has the right to talk to you in cruel or threatening ways. It is normal to want to get even or to try to stop someone from saying something awful to you. It is important to remember that you can feel one way and act another. Instead of trying to win an argument, it is safer to stay calm and say calming things."

While an outburst can seem to come out of nowhere, women often can predict times when a partner is more likely to blow up or become punishing. Are there triggering events such as times of stress or transition, disappointing or frustrating experiences, being turned down for sex, or use of alcohol or drugs?

Are there warning signs of impending violence like demeaning comments, threatening gestures, etc?

One woman told me that she had argued with her husband because he wanted the computer and she was not done using it. He ripped the computer off the table and crashed it into the wall in front of their four young children.

I asked, "Was this predictable?"

My student sighed and said, "Yes."

I pointed out that the problem was not just the broken computer but, even more important, the damage this behavior could have on her children. As long as she was living with this man, her job was to try to manage the conflict rather than escalate it. We then role-played having this woman step back to various demands to give up something and say gracefully, "Whatever you want."

Some verbal tactics we practice with our students are:

- To go to a safe place for the moment. Is there a neighbor, family member or friend you can take your children to stay with until things blow over?
- To leave with love. It is dangerous to scream, "I hate you and I never want to see you again!" Instead, go to a safer place while saying quietly and warmly, "I love you and I want us all to be safe. I will come back when you feel better."
- To lie. You do not owe an attacker the truth. You can lie and say whatever the other person wants to hear about your feelings or your plans.
- To distract. Have a plan ready if someone is about to blow up. A distraction could be someone important to your abusive partner who you have asked to expect a call so you can say, "Your brother called with some exciting news," and be able to count on the brother coming through. A distraction could be to bring up a topic that will get him to focus on outside problems, like politics. A distraction could be having a favorite food.
- To offer a face-saving way out. Some people will fight to the death to preserve their image of themselves as being powerful and in control. Instead of arguing, it can be more effective to agree with an abusive partner who is being unreasonable in order to buy some time and calm the situation down. "Yes, it is all my fault. I am sorry. I will come back later."

It is dangerous to fight back and stay. Instead, we teach students how to pull their arms away from a grab, dodge or block a hit or get out of a choke without hurting the other person - and then to leave as quickly as possible.

We make room for our students to tell us what happens so that we can tailor the practices to their needs by asking, "What sorts of things get you into conflict?"

A common answer might be, "When he wants to have sex and I do not."

We then ask, "What happens if you say NO?"

Students say things like, "He will accuse me of cheating on him." Or "He will tell me that if I don't give him what he wants, he will cheat on me." Or "He will say that I do not love him."

We sometimes role-play this to let a student show us what she would do. Typically, she will rush into the face of the person pretending to be her partner and shout, "DON'T SAY THAT!"

We point out that getting into an upset person's face and shouting makes it more likely that he will hit her. We then repeat the practice and coach the student to leave calmly while saying in a warm voice, "I LOVE you. I would NEVER cheat on you. I want us both to be safe. I will come back when we are feeling better." We point out that this is just one of many choices she has if she can keep thinking clearly instead of getting overwhelmed with feelings.

Getting Out of the Relationship and Staying Out

This is information to keep in mind when teaching women who are getting ready to leave or who have just left.

When a woman plans to end an abusive relationship, this can be a very dangerous time. If possible, it is best if she can gather legal papers, get legal help, have bank account access and have a safe place to go to.

A woman who decides to leave will be safest if she can end the relationship decisively, without making threats and without changing her mind. She will need a safety plan for where she works, where she lives and what happens with her children. She will need support to create a new life for herself so that she can overcome temptation to return to the relationship. She and her children will benefit from counseling to help her repair the damage caused by the relationship.

Where they are available, domestic violence programs can offer a wealth of resources to help women to get out and to stay out.

As she is preparing to leave, in order to get through this time of transition safely, a woman may make her situation less risky by using the personal safety skills described above to protect herself and to defuse conflict. She is often safest if she can hide her intentions, even if she has to lie, until she is safely gone.

Once the woman has left, common issues that can make it hard to stay out of the relationship are:

- Feeling sorry for an abusive ex-partner;
- Guilt about the sadness of her children;
- Fear about being able to make it on her own; and,
- Being told by other family members that she has disgraced them for not succeeding in making the relationship work.

We help our students practice protecting themselves from negative thoughts and beliefs, saying positive things to themselves and stopping and thinking instead of reacting. We have them define what support means to them and have them practice being effective and persistent in asking for help.

We apply the practices described above along with physical self-defense to specific situations that our students worry about once they are living away from the abusive person - What if he shows up at my door? What if he corners me on the street? What if he has a weapon? What if, now that I am by myself, someone attacks me?

We acknowledge repeatedly that nothing works all the time but that these tools will work most of the time.

Our students express great relief in just being able to review different scenarios and try out using the skills in different contexts.

Keeping the Children as Safe as Possible

Some women who will not leave a destructive relationship for themselves will do so because they worry about their children. Other women will stay because they are afraid of losing custody of their children or because they think it is better for the children to keep the family together. Whether they stay or leave, we remind mothers that it can be emotionally damaging for children to see their parents lose control to the point of violence or to witness one parent abusing another.

Children from families dealing with domestic violence benefit from basic personal safety training so that they feel better able to protect themselves emotionally and physically. Special issues for children often include:

- Feeling hopeless and as if nothing they do will make a difference.
- Copying the abusive behavior of one parent or the victim behavior of the other parent.
- Believing that the violence is their fault, especially since children are sometimes blamed by either parent for causing the conflict.
- Feeling responsible to stop the conflict or to protect other children in the home.

We coach children so that they are successful in throwing away destructive words that others say to them or that they say to themselves, being powerful with their voices and their bodies, leaving, and being persistent in asking for help. We remind them that they are not responsible for their parents' problems.

What Students Tell Us After Practicing Even Just a Few Skills

Back in the living room that I mentioned in the beginning of this article, my students from the domestic violence program are enthusiastic after our short time together. I am always astonished at what a huge difference a small amount of practice can make for someone who has gone through a hard time. I am moved by their courage. Their words motivate me to keep sharing this information with others:

"This is the first time I ever understood what it means to set a boundary."

"It felt good to yell NO!"

"I never realized that I have so much power!"

"Instead of feeling helpless, I feel like I can take charge of myself and my emotions."

"I wish I had known this sooner, and I am glad I know it now."

"I feel as if I have many more choices about how to protect myself and my children."

"Instead of having to think, my body just knows what to do."