

# October is Domestic Violence Month

## Characteristics of a Healthy Relationship

by Lisa Turner, LMFT, Counselor

Betsy (not her real name) is exhausted from a day at work and is now racing around town, picking up children and getting them to various appointments and activities. She is looking forward to getting home and talking to her husband Alex (not his real name) about a phone call she received today from her mom about her grandpa, who was recently diagnosed with dementia. Betsy's mom is using her to vent her frustrations and sadness, and in turn, Betsy needs her own sounding board. However, when Alex gets home, he remains glued to the television while she talks, making it clear that he is not really listening to her. This is a pattern in their communication – each too preoccupied or too tired to pay attention to the other. At the end of the day, they each collapse into bed without ever connecting.

There are some destructive myths about marriage, the main one being “I can put my marriage on auto-pilot.” Studies show that marital satisfaction decreases during the years that children are at home, and that marital satisfaction hits an all-time low right before the kids leave home and transition into adulthood. After 20 years of disconnect, like in the example above, there might not be a marriage to return to after the kids leave home.

A second myth about marriage is “My kids are little so their needs are more important than my marriage or my spouse.” The idea behind this is that my spouse will not mind if I throw myself into the kids and their well-being, at the expense of the marriage relationship. This can be a destructive idea for many reasons, one of which is because it is important for children to see their parents modeling a healthy, loving relationship. This is where, as children, we first learn what a good relationship looks like. Research has shown that couples reporting high marital satisfaction spend at least 15 hours a week together, without children. This is a daunting statistic, and it certainly creates food for thought.

Spending time together does not have to come at the expense of someone else, and it does not have to be expensive. Go for a walk, take a drive around town, run errands together, take up or renew a shared hobby, and take advantage of times when your kids are otherwise occupied. During the dating years, prior to marriage, most people just enjoyed the company of their significant other, regardless of the activity.

Speaking of dating, how do we get started on the right foot when looking for a life partner? What are some characteristic of healthy relationships, and how does one know when to stay in a relationship and when to get out?

According to Charlotte Kasl, it is helpful to set a bottom line of behaviors in yourself and your significant other that you will not tolerate in a relationship. This includes unacceptable behavior in the other person, such as being superficially charming, having a volatile temper, and showing disrespect for boundaries. This also includes unacceptable behavior of your own, like feeling inferior to your partner, giving more than you get in return, and trying to change the other person. If at any point in the relationship, you find yourself rationalizing your behavior or the behavior of the other, or disregarding your bottom line and your own self-care, these are red flags that the relationship is not healthy.

So what should one look for in a healthy relationship, and what makes a person healthy? According to Paul in his letter to the Romans: "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; if it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12: 9, 10, 18, 21 NKJV) October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and with that in mind, it is important to review some healthy characteristics of any God-honoring relationship.

- A desire for closeness and connecting and that is more than superficial, charming, or physical;
- The ability to feel empathy, and an ability to act on empathy;
- A level of comfort with separateness and individuality
- Being comfortable ENOUGH with confrontation that small and large issues do not get swept under the rug;
- An capability to forgive others and yourself;
- The aptitude to be an adult, and relate like an adult in adult relationships, and not revert to childish behaviors;
- Possessing the skill to be stable and consistent in behaviors and emotions;
- A wish to be a positive influence for your partner; and
- The capacity to keep confidences.

In the current culture in which we live, we sometimes find ourselves in the awkward situation of having to either confront unhealthy relationship behaviors, or report them.

What should you do if you suspect someone is in a relationship that is unsafe?

According to <http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/>:

- Express concern for his/her safety. Try to be direct and perhaps start with, "I'm worried about you because..." or "I'm concerned about your safety..." If you suspect intimate partner violence and the victim remains reluctant to discuss or disclose, let her/him know that should she/he need your assistance in the future, you are available. The goal is not to get the victim to admit to the problem, but to let her/him know that you are a resource should intimate partner violence ever be an issue for them.

- Listen without making judgments. Focus on supporting her and building her self-confidence. Acknowledge her strengths and remind her that she is coping with a challenging and stressful situation.
- Tell victims that they are not alone. There are resources. Encourage him/her to contact a local domestic violence agency. Help him/her develop or keep outside contacts to reduce isolation.
- Tell her/him that the violence is not their fault, she/he does not deserve to be abused and that only her/his abuser can stop the abuse, and that there is no excuse for intimate partner violence.
- Do not tell her to leave or criticize her for staying. She has to make the decision. Research shows an abused person is most at risk at the point of separation and immediately after leaving an abusive partner. Leaving takes strength and courage. There are obstacles of nowhere to go, no money, little support, etc.
- Offer further assistance if you are able. Help with a safety plan. Research resources. Continue to listen.
- Be patient. It takes time to recognize and accept that you are being abused and longer to decide safe actions to take. Recognizing the problem is an important first step.

### ***Help Us Remember***

*Lord, help us to remember when we first met*

*And the strong love that grew between us.*

*To work that love into practical things*

*So that nothing can divide us.*

*We ask for words both kind and loving,*

*And for hearts always ready to ask forgiveness as well as to forgive.*

*Dear Lord, we put our marriage into your hands.*

### **Resources**

Cloud, Henry and Townsend, John. (1995). *Safe People*. Zondervan

Kasl, Charlotte. *If the Buddha Dates*. Penguin Publishers

Real, Terrence (2002). *How Can I Get Through to You: Closing the Intimacy Gap Between Men and Woman*. New York: Simon & Schuster

Tatkin, Stan, PsyD (2011). *Wired for Love*. California: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

[www.nrcdv.org](http://www.nrcdv.org)