

Taking The Necessary Steps To Stop The Abuse In A Relationship With Your Partner

One would hope that our homes would be safe havens for women, children, and men. But all too often, they clearly are not. Domestic abuse is an ongoing epidemic in this country. It is estimated that two to four million American women are battered each year by their husbands or intimate partners. And sadly, in the United States, a woman is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by her male partner than by any other type of assailant (Browne & Williams, 1987). It makes no sense to continue to go on in this way.

Sometimes my male clients have said to me, “*Well, wait a minute, Dave, what about all the abuse that my wife does to me.*” In reality, it is true that women can also be controlling and abusive in relationships with partners, saying and doing hurtful, disrespectful, punishing, and demeaning things. In fact, three national surveys by researchers Gelles and Straus in 1975, 1985, and 1992 found that women used violence even more frequently than men in familial situations.

But, especially when domestic abuse escalates to threats and physical violence, it is my belief (and the belief of Gelles and Straus) that there is a significant difference between most men and women in their relationships with each other. My partner is 5’4” and 125 pounds. I am 5’8” and 180 pounds. If my partner hauls off and smacks me in the face, I may be angry, annoyed, and very irritated with what she has done. But I will not feel fearful, humiliated, and intimidated. If I make the decision to use physical force with her, at that point or at any other, she is much more likely to experience fear, terror, humiliation, intimidation, and domination. She does not have the ability to scare me or hurt me physically in the way that I could do this to her. Part of what Gelles and Straus found was that men were seven times more likely to actually injure their partners when there was physical violence in the relationship.

Because of size, musculature, and socialization, most women in heterosexual relationships cannot compete with their male partners once abusive behavior and physical intimidation begin to occur. When we as men resort to using physical force with our partners, we are much more likely to be able to control and dominate a relationship through threats, intimidation, and violence than our partners are able to do with us. In addition, other types of abusive behavior, including sulking, name-calling, put-downs, cursing and swearing, slamming doors, and punching walls take on additional impact. Partners and children don’t need to be reminded that those same behaviors may have been part of an escalation to physical violence the last time they occurred.

Volatile anger and abusive behavior are always destructive in an intimate relationship and always lead to a loss of trust, respect, safety, and intimacy. Although abuse and violence may work on a short-term basis to get what you want and to control a person or situation, in the end it is never helpful in arriving at constructive problem-solving and conflict resolution that leaves both parties feeling okay about what has just transpired. Because of our ability as men to control through the use of threats and violence, it is up to us, from my perspective, to take the initiative to make sure that abuse and violence are not a part of the relationships we have with our partners and children.

The following twenty practical steps from my book, *Stopping The Violence, A Group Model To Change Men's Abusive Attitudes and Behaviors* (published by Haworth Press, NY, in 1999), are absolutely critical in the process of change if you make the decision to do something about anger, control, and abuse issues in your own life.

- 1) Acknowledge to yourself and others that you have a problem with anger, control, and abuse. Any meaningful change is impossible without this recognition and admission. Then go out and get some help to specifically address these issues. Group treatment can be especially helpful because you can see yourself, your attitudes, and your behaviors in others and other men can serve as a helpful “reality test” about the chaos and dysfunction the abuse is creating in your relationship and in your life.
- 2) Address mental health and chemical use issues when they are present in your life. If you are depressed, anxious, using drugs, or drinking too much, get some help for these issues as well. If issues like these are not addressed and are left untreated, they will interfere with treatment focused on controlling and abusive behavior. They will also interfere with your just getting along in your day-to-day life.
- 3) Come to know that, when you are abusive to others, you are always feeling inadequate, insecure, self-doubting, powerless, and unloveable. People who basically feel okay about themselves do not need to try to assume “power and control” over other human beings.
- 4) Realize that controlling and abusive behavior hurts you and those you love. When you are abusive, you erode the self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence of those around you and you teach your children to either be bullies or “doormats” in their interactions with those around them. In addition, you also create emotional, physical, and, potentially, even legal consequences for yourself when you engage in these sorts of behaviors.
- 5) Come to understand that anger is very different from control and abuse. Anger is a normal and natural human emotion. Everyone gets angry at times. It is what you do with this emotion when it arises within you that determines whether it is helpful and productive in your life or it becomes toxic and destructive for you and others.
- 6) Recognize that becoming abusive is always a choice. You are continually making decisions even when you are feeling rageful and completely “out-of-control” in that particular moment.
- 7) Learn to take responsibility for what you feel, how you think, and how you act instead of blaming and focusing on others. People can certainly trigger your emotional reactions, but no one has the power to “cause” you to think or behave in a controlling or abusive way. That decision comes from inside you.

- 8)** Accept that you cannot “fix,” change, or control other people. The paradox about being controlling is that the more you try to control people and situations around you, the more frustrated and “out-of-control” you end up feeling, which then sets you up to become even more controlling, disrespectful, and abusive with others in your life.
- 9)** Remember that you can always take a respectful time-out in a potentially explosive situation. We have always known that time-outs can be a good strategy for children when they become explosive or punishing. They are also a good strategy for us as adults. A time-out is not a magic “cure-all” but it can be a critical first step in allowing you to take a break and temporarily get away before you say or do something that you will only end up regretting later. Part of taking a respectful time-out, however, is making and keeping a commitment to yourself and your partner that you will return to address the problem or issue at a later time after you have both calmed yourselves down. Hopefully, you will not make the time-out strategy into simply another “weapon” in your arsenal of controlling and abusive behaviors.
- 10)** Start to think about the very real potential consequences to you before you actually become controlling and abusive. Domestic assault is illegal. You can lose your freedom and end up in jail. But even more important, you have the potential to damage or even completely destroy your relationships with your partner and your children for the rest of your life.
- 11)** Identify clearly what triggers your anger and your controlling and abusive behavior. Start to get to know yourself. Tune into what you are experiencing internally (e.g. your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations) and what you are reacting to that is going on around you (e.g. situations, people, places, times that may be cues and triggers for you). Abusive people rarely have a good sense of the totality of what is contributing to their personal escalation process.
- 12)** Slow down enough to start to notice what you’re really thinking. Your thoughts are powerful. Your negative thoughts can dramatically increase the intensity of your anger and the likelihood that you will become controlling and abusive with others. Or, when you are willing to intervene in your negative self-talk and reframe situations using more positive self-talk, you can help yourself calm down in potentially volatile situations or when you have a desire to try to assume power and control over someone else.
- 13)** Become aware of all your feelings, not just your anger, and then learn to respectfully communicate these feelings to others (including people outside your immediate family). Anger is always a “cover-up” to hide the emotions that make you feel more vulnerable, like confusion, hurt, disappointment, sadness, and fear. But sharing these hidden feelings is, in fact, the process that can bring you closer to the people whom you love and decrease the stress and tension that you experience in your day-to-day living.

- 14)** Work hard to turn your conflicts into positive “problem-solving opportunities.” Conflict is normal and to be expected in intimate human relationships. In fact, intimacy cannot exist without conflict at times. We are all separate and unique individuals. Don’t make your partner into “the enemy” (that certainly isn’t the way you started your relationship with that person). Make her into a teammate and work together to figure out how to deal with issues that arise in your relationship and in your own life.
- 15)** Think about the messages you received from your family and peers when you were young and from the culture-at-large about what it means to be a man. Control, abuse, and violence are learned. Begin to understand where and how you learned to be controlling and abusive and work hard to counteract those unhealthy and dysfunctional messages.
- 16)** Redefine your manhood as non-controlling, non-abusive, and non-violent. Learn to jettison the “macho” and destructive messages and “life scripts” that contribute to your controlling and abusive attitudes and behaviors in the present.
- 17)** Take the risk to count on other men for emotional support. Develop helpful and positive friends and confidants with whom you can share your joys, sorrows, problems, and difficulties in a consistent and ongoing way.
- 18)** Learn to experience a genuine sense of pride in who you are as a person by taking control of how you view and how you act around the important people in your life. Assume personal power in your own life rather than simply trying to exert “power and control” over others.
- 19)** Start to believe in your “heart of hearts” that you can truly change the controlling and abusive parts of who you have been in the past and present. Begin to visualize a “new and different you” and behave toward others with that more positive vision in mind.
- 20)** Don’t expect the partner with whom you have been controlling and abusive to applaud or even acknowledge the efforts and the changes you are making, especially early in the process. Healing for women in abusive relationships and for the relationship itself is a long and difficult process. Control, abuse, and violence destroy trust, safety, and intimacy in relationships. If your partner is willing to stay with you, the healing process for her requires a consistent pattern of emotional and behavioral change on your part over time. Women in abusive relationships often still love their partners but they very much want the controlling, disrespectful, and abusive behavior to end. Plan to get emotional support and encouragement from other places in your recovery process and work hard not to use a partner’s apparent lack of interest and support as just another reason to become controlling and abusive with her in the present.

Overcoming controlling and abusive attitudes and behaviors is a lifelong process that involves self-awareness, finding effective ways to deal with ongoing life stress and frustration, and seeing and making better choices when anger and a desire to control and become abusive do arise within you. Contrary to what some people believe, abusive men can actually change, not just in stopping the physical violence (if that is an issue) but also in intervening in emotional and verbal abuse and addressing the controlling attitudes that underlie and fuel these sorts of abusive behaviors. Continuing to be abusive will lead, quite simply, to feeling bitter, miserable, alienated, and alone. This way of being is a “dead-end street” when it comes to living your life.

The alternative to this depressing life script is much different and much better: it is working actively toward loving and nurturing emotional connections with others and yourself. Make a commitment to yourself and those you care about that you will become one of those men who chooses to become non-abusive and non-violent. This can actually happen in your life if you decide to make it so.