

A Batterer Story: Tracing the Abuse

By Alyce Laviolette

Discover how an abuser came to understand why he abused his girlfriend

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. Like his father, Sean was a stevedore, and everybody liked Sean and his father.

But Sean was also like his father in a not-so-good way: He guarded, isolated, verbally abused and terrorized his girlfriend, with the same methodical expertise he witnessed as a child.

Sean's mother was beaten down and fearful

But she remained in the relationship until daily life broke her, and she sought peace and safety in an institution. Her boys didn't understand.

Sean saw his mother as weak and indecisive

He was angry at her for years because she "abandoned" them for a hospital ward. Sean remembers well the marks his father left on his mother, him, and his brother - as well as the look in his mother's eyes.

Now, his live-in girlfriend of two years wears the same look.

When we traced the path to his abusive behavior comparing it point by point to his father's behavior - 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 abuse characterizes Sean - not impulse.

He describes what happened after a fight with his girlfriend:

When things were 'settled', she'd be sitting in a chair and I'd come up behind and hit her. I'd 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 - 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 did 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 to explain his inability to keep appointments. I assume he and his girlfriend have reconciled. I don't know.

- A n a l y s i s -

Men who batter the women they love are remorseful

However, this remorse is often confused for empathy, seen as motivation for behavior change, and tending to inspire:

- denial
- minimization
- 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.

Good news!! Court-ordered and mate-ordered referrals do work!

Once a client is entrenched in a program that works for him, it doesn't matter how he got 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

It takes about six months in group counseling to begin to cut through this self-deception.

Group counseling is an excellent vehicle to:

- break isolation
- provide support
- understand confrontation
- develop positive behavioral skills
- discuss power and redefine it
- provide role-modeling

Our groups are unstructured, not time-limited, and include key issues:

- sex-role socialization
- empathy training
- anger management
- communication skills

We 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.

We recommend one year in group counseling.

We also suggest that if the abusive emotional and behavioral patterns recur, it is important for the client to become aware of those patterns so he can return for help.

For more info, refer to Alyce LaViolette's book:

["It Could Happen to Anyone: Why Battered Women Stay."](#)