

Recognition and Assessment for Abuse within Marriage

The marriage relationship is designed by God to be a safe, trusting, and supportive relationship. As believers, the marriage union is an opportunity to live out the Gospel message in our own home and bring glory to God. Destructive words and behaviors strike at the very heart of the marriage union, fracturing its foundation and giving Satan entrance. One avenue to keep Satan from getting such a foothold in marriages is to educate couples on the signs and behaviors of abuse.

This document is not meant to be exhaustive, but does seek to highlight what abuse is, what the scripture says about abuse, and how to begin to assess abuse in relationships. Here are some important things to consider as you think about talking about this topic with couples:

- When should a discussion like this take place?
 - It is recommended that premarital couples are educated about abusive behaviors during the conflict resolution discussions in premarital counseling. A lead-in statement may be helpful. For example, “Conflict is inevitable and normal in all relationships. However, if conflict or anger is not managed effectively it can lead to abusive behaviors such as...” [at this point you can talk through the abusive behaviors and encourage them to seek immediate help if they show up in the relationship].
 - After the couple has been married for approximately one year, it is recommended you ask them specific questions (outlined below in Abuse Assessment) to determine if any abusive behaviors are present in the relationship.
- What is the most appropriate format to have this discussion?
 - Educating premarital couples on abusive behavior can happen when you are meeting with them together.
 - It is recommended you meet with each spouse individually when assessing for abusive behaviors at the one-year follow-up meeting. During this individual session, it may be helpful to check-in on other areas of their life (i.e., spiritual, relational, adjustment to marriage) so the session is not just focused on the assessment of abuse.

Categories of Abuse

- Physical abuse – hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, throwing, biting, restraining, or any act of physical coercion or violence directed at another person. Physical control and intimidation are abusive even if this does not lead to visible injury of the victim.
- Verbal or emotional abuse – words used as weapons to control, hurt, dominate or to manipulate through deceit, or misleading statements. Examples include: name-calling, mocking, cursing, chronic criticism, constant blaming, discounting or devaluing the feelings, thoughts, or opinions of another privately or in public. Of all the types of abuse, this is the most difficult to recognize.
- Sexual abuse – being forced unwillingly into performing sexual acts, being treated as a sex object, talking to someone in sexually derogatory or humiliating ways.

Recognition and Assessment for Abuse within Marriage

Abuse and Scripture

We are reminded throughout scripture of the power of the tongue (*James 3:6*) and words that pierce like a sword (*Proverbs 12:18*). Furthermore, *Psalm 55* reminds us of the overwhelming and painful feelings that lie at the root of being verbally abused by someone close. Verbal and emotional abuse does not only inflict great pain and hurt upon someone, but it is also a sin.

1 Peter 3:8-9 “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or **railing** for **railing**: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.”

The Greek word for “railing” in this passage is *loidoria*, which means “abuse, railing, reviling” (Vine’s Expository Dictionary). The root word for *loidoria* is *loidoros* which is translated as “railer” (*1 Corinthians 5:11*) and “revilers” (*1 Corinthians 6:10*). According to Merriam-Webster, *revile* means “to subject to verbal abuse” or “to use abusive language”. While man may be apt to minimize the sin of railing or verbal/emotional abuse, note that Paul includes railings as a sin along with these others in *1 Corinthians*: *fornicator, idolator, drunkard, adulterers, and thieves*. Verbal and emotional abuse is a sin and is never acceptable. God takes this very seriously and so should we.

Emotional abuse is often difficult to recognize. Abuse may be manifested through inappropriate use of anger and ineffectively managing conflict. In addition, abuse can be the result of a misunderstanding of Biblical headship and submission. Paul instructs husbands to be the “*head of the wife*” (*Ephesians 5:23*). This does not mean wives are put at the feet of husbands or that wives are less valuable than husbands. We are all equal in Christ (*Galatians 3:27-28*). This does not give the husband license to demand or force compliance of their wives. Rather biblical headship brings with it the responsibility to lead by initiating and modeling servanthood or submission toward God for his wife and then his family. Husbands are to follow after the example of Jesus in *John 13* and in so doing “*love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*” (*Ephesians 5:25*). Later James and John argue about who would have the better seat in heaven, and Jesus teaches them the essence of biblical headship:

Mark 10:42-44 “But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.”

When husbands take the lead in modeling submission to God through this type of headship it opens up the way for biblical submission to be a reality for the wife. Biblical submission is a choice and a gift to be given; not something forced.

Abuse Assessment

Seldom will couples admit to abuse in their relationship when they meet together with you, unless it is bidirectional. Therefore, to assess for abusive behavior, it is recommended you spend time individually with each spouse. Often abusive behavior shows up when anger or conflict is managed ineffectively. Beginning a discussion with spouses around general conflict management in their relationship can be a good place to start and lead into a possible assessment for abuse. Below are some questions to consider asking during individual meetings:

Recognition and Assessment for Abuse within Marriage

- Do you have concerns with the way conflict or anger is handled in your relationship?
- What happens when you and your spouse argue? Does it ever turn physical where one of you is pushing, shoving, biting, or throwing things?
- Do you ever feel unsafe at home?
- Has the Bible or scripture been used as a way to control or manipulate?
- Have you ever felt threatened by or afraid of your spouse?
- For wives: Does your husband ever use biblical headship as a way to force or guilt you into submission? Are you seeking to build up your husband and affirm his attempts at spiritual leadership?
- For husbands: Are you modeling Christ's self-sacrificial love toward your wife? Do you seek to willingly give up your own interest for the benefit of your wife and family and cherish your wife as Christ did the church?

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