

Domestic Violence Occurs In Every Social Class, Doctor Says

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I walked into our Philadelphia Community Center with a ho-hum attitude: I'll just take my notes, I thought, and dash off something perfunctory for the *World Tribune*.

Boy, was I in for a big surprise.

In less than two hours, my eyes were opened to a common phenomenon in the United States, one that I had thought was far away from me: domestic violence.

Dr. Ellen Taliaferro, an SGI-USA member, physician and co-founder of Physicians for a Violence-free Society, spoke at a small roundtable meeting where she also answered questions. By the end, I felt as if I had been walking through and living in a naive vacuum.

Here's a sample of her observations (95 percent of domestic violence is men beating women, so most of the information discussed here refers to violence by men aimed at women):

- Although statistics are poorly kept, we know that between 2 and 4 million women are seriously injured by someone in an intimate relationship with them. That's once every 12 to 15 seconds. Up to 18 million women are beaten each year; 2,000 to 4,000 women die each year from domestic violence.
- Witnessing violence can be more harmful than the actual experience of it.
- Domestic abuse is about power and control. Abusers use beatings to stay in control.
- Some couples see no reason to break the cycle.
- Many perpetrators don't recognize that they're perpetrators.

Dr. Taliaferro's comments as a Buddhist physician and specialist in this field were particularly illuminating:

- Couple counseling or other therapy for the perpetrator often does not work and can even be highly dangerous when it deals only with changing the environment rather than the individual.
- It is not helpful to tell a victim only that "It's your karma." This can be interpreted as "It's your fate," and leave the victim feeling helpless. Karma is dynamic — always changing and manifesting in different ways. What matters most is what you do with your karma, not so much what happens to you. An authority on alcoholism says, "You are not responsible for the fact that you are an alcoholic, but you are responsible for your recovery." This is similar to saying, "If you're a diabetic, you are responsible for taking your insulin." If you're a victim of domestic violence, you are responsible for changing your family situation to a happier one.
- The perpetrator and the victim's states of mind are crucial. As Buddhists, we can understand this. Domestic violence is linked, of course, to the three poisons, and with an understanding of the oneness of self and environment, we need to realize that domestic violence, so prevalent throughout our environment, is everyone's problem.
- (One participant, who works for a domestic abuse hotline, asked, "What do you do when the victim is stuck in the world of Anger?") Anger is hard to get rid of and is usually painful. There are two kinds of pain: acute, which eventually heals, and chronic, which defies standard treatment and begins to drive the life of the family. The second type is the kind we're dealing with in domestic violence. Many times we can say of the victim

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or the perpetrator, “In the beginning, he had pain, but now, the pain has him.” In therapeutic terms, we can say to the victim or perpetrator, “The Anger has you,” or “You are attached to your Anger.” A way has to be found to break the attachment, and it can only begin when the person recognizes it.

Dr. Taliaferro’s discussion on domestic violence offered us a rare opportunity to learn about conditions that cause suffering for many people throughout the United States.

Her knowledgeable and insightful comments gave all of us the chance to heighten our awareness — and to be on the look-out for — the possibility of domestic violence among our friends, relatives and colleagues. In this sense, our discussion was a valuable public service.

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Help Break the Cycle of Domestic Violence

Do you suspect someone you know is experiencing domestic violence? Dr. Ellen Taliaferro offers the following suggestions for action you can take:

- Identify or confirm the domestic violence situation.
- Document what you see and/or hear (it should eventually get into the legal system).
- Refer the victim to a shelter, or at least encourage the victim to work out a secret safety plan. (If she is not in immediate danger, she can call 1-800-799-SAFE to get further information or referrals.)
- Listen. There is no substitute for good listening.
- Send therapeutic messages (everyone is equal, no one deserves to be beaten, you are a person of worth).

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