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Am I experiencing abuse?



I didn't see myself as an abused woman. The only images I had came from television. I thought of abused women as weak, quiet and less educated—women who were battered and bruised. That wasn't who I was at all. And my partner certainly didn't fit my image of an abusive husband. I thought they were wild and out of control—men who drank too much, were brutal and hateful. My partner's behaviour was confusing. I saw him being kind and pleasant to our friends and family. He was often loving to me, and I loved him. But he got angry so easily; and when he was angry, he was hurtful. Since his hurtful behaviour was always directed at me, I believed I was the cause of the abuse. **Maggie**

Am I an “abused woman”?

Was it difficult for you to pick up this book? Is it hard even to consider if you are being abused in your relationship? If it is a struggle even to ask the question, you are not alone. Many women find it hard to imagine that they are being abused by their partners. Part of the struggle has to do with the negative stereotype our culture has of “battered women” and “abusive men.” If neither you nor your partner fit the stereotype, it may be even harder to imagine that you're actually being abused.

Women who are abused by their partners are like any other women. Some are professionals, some are homemakers, some are wealthy, some are poor. Women who experience abuse come from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. In the same way, abusive men don't fit the stereotype either. The stereotype is of men who are monstrous and volatile. It does not reflect that these men are often affectionate, charming and sociable. Some men even appear to be progressive in their attitudes about women.

The stereotype of an “abused woman” may prevent women from being able to describe or identify their experience. You may have struggled between your experience of abuse and the negative stereotype of an “abused woman.” We encourage you to pay attention to your experience rather than to the stereotype.

It might be useful for you to identify all the negative descriptions associated with the stereotype. Take a moment to think about the stereotypes many people hold about abused or “battered” women. Jot down the stereotypes you or others hold.

Would you define yourself in terms of these stereotypes? Of course not. None of us would. Thankfully, not one of them is true. There is only one thing that women who are experiencing abuse have in common: they are being abused by their partners. It sounds straightforward, doesn't it? But it's amazing how many ideas distract us from this basic truth.

You will notice as you read this book that we always refer to “women who experience abuse,” and not “abused” or “battered women.” That is because women are much more than the abuse they experience. You are a person with many qualities and gifts. There is nothing typical about a woman experiencing abuse, except for the abuse itself.

Many women feel that, because they do not fit the stereotype, they are not being abused. Abuse takes many forms and, even though you don't fit the stereotype, you may well be experiencing emotional, physical, financial or sexual abuse from your partner. You may even have been asking yourself if your partner is abusive. This book will help you to know if you are being abused. If you have picked up this book, you are obviously not comfortable with the dynamics in your relationship or with your partner's behaviour.

As I started to read about abuse and attend my support group for women I had very conflicting emotions. On the one hand, it was good to finally figure out what was really going on in my relationship. On the other hand, I struggled with feeling ashamed that somehow this had happened to me. I was also scared that if I really admitted that I was

being abused, I would then have to leave my partner. That was something I really didn't want to do. Looking back on it now, I realize that those conflicting emotions were only natural and all I could do was be patient and gentle with myself. **Sarah**

What's wrong in my relationship?

You may have asked yourself, "What's wrong in my relationship?" You have probably considered many explanations in order to try to understand the problem. Let's look at some of these explanations.

Most ideas about relationship problems suggest that men and women are equally responsible. Sayings such as "It takes two to tango" reflect this cultural belief. In relationships that are respectful, and when women are not worried about how their partners will respond or behave, we agree that men and women share responsibility for problems in the relationship. There is a problem with the idea of shared responsibility, however, when a man is controlling or abusive. In such cases it is often assumed that the woman has done something to cause the abuse—she has provoked him. In one way or another, women are often held partially responsible for the abuse in their relationship.

In our experience, women who are being abused seek many solutions and explanations in order to improve their relationship. You may have gone to counseling by yourself or with your partner, or you may have asked your partner to attend an anger management program (or attended one yourself). Perhaps you have read other self-help books that have suggested that the problem has to do with the natural differences between men and women and that you simply need to accept your partner the way he is. Other books may have implied that you are codependent, love too much, or have problems asserting yourself. Based on suggestions from counselors or self-help books, you have probably tried to change your behaviour in order to get your partner to treat you with respect.

If you are experiencing abuse, the problem will persist no matter what you try to change about yourself, your partner or your relationship. This is because the problem is his abuse—his need to have control in your relationship. The sad truth is that you can't change the one thing that really matters—stopping your partner's abuse. Only he can choose to stop being abusive. Until then, everything that takes place in the relationship is related to the abuse. When a man is abusive in his relationship, he alone is responsible for the abuse, but there are things you can do for yourself. This book will help you to understand your situation and it will suggest ways to care for yourself and your children.

Why was I attracted to him?

Remember when you first met your partner? Did he act in the same abusive ways he does now? When he first met you, did he shake your hand and say, "Hello, my name is Bob and I am abusive. Let's move in together"? Of course not. If he had, you wouldn't have had anything more to do with him! Similarly, if on your first date he'd treated you the way he treats you now, would you have had a second date?

In reflecting back on their relationship, women describe the early period as generally being positive and loving. They didn't observe any abusive behaviour until they were committed to the relationship. When women in group counseling list the positive qualities they saw in their partner when they first met him, they always generate a substantial list. Like you, none of these women thought abuse could happen to them.

Sometimes women describe their partner as a hardworking and stable man. Sometimes their partner appears to be a "good family man" in that he seems to be good with children or to value family connections. Sometimes women will reflect on how thoughtful their partner was or that they found their partner easy to talk with or fun to be around.

You may describe different things that attracted you to your partner. Whatever they were, they were positive qualities. Think back to your first experiences of your partner and all the things that you were attracted to in him. What interested you about him? Remember, you are making a list of the qualities you saw in him when you first met him, not those you see in him now.

Look over the characteristics you thought your partner had. Don't they seem to be attractive and positive? It's important to remind yourself that you were attracted to good things in your partner. You were not attracted to the abuse. The list you've made above is a list that anyone, in any relationship, could generate about their partner.

When you first began your relationship, much in it seemed positive to you. If that hadn't been the case, you probably would have ended the relationship before it really began. And, of course, your partner still has some good qualities.¹

How did I get here?

When you first met your partner, you probably experienced a period of courtship that was enjoyable and that firmly established your relationship. At some point while dating him, however, something may have happened that made you uncomfortable. Perhaps your partner raised his voice, accused you of having an affair, swore at you, argued relentlessly or threw something.

For some women, the first experience of abuse can be even more subtle. For example, perhaps he was very late for a date and didn't offer an appropriate apology or explanation. Or maybe your partner told mutual friends a private and embarrassing story about you. Remind yourself, however, that regardless of what your partner's first disrespectful or abusive behaviour was, it happened within the context of lots of positive things.

You probably overlooked that first instance of bad behaviour. You had some good reasons for overlooking it. Your partner probably offered explanations for his behaviour or may have apologized to you. Because you are a generous person, you probably accepted his explanation or apology. Perhaps you reminded yourself that no one is perfect and that it is normal for couples to disagree. You may also have reminded yourself of all the good qualities in your partner—the things you appreciated about him. So, after some discomfort over his behaviour, you tried to let the incident go so that you could feel connected and close to your partner.

If your partner's poor behaviour had been a one-time incident, there would be no problem. But there was a next time and a next time and a next time.

What can I do?

Our goal in writing this book is to offer you an opportunity to make sense of your relationship for yourself. We have noticed that many women who have been subjected to their partners' opinions and interpretations do not feel safe in expressing their own ideas. As you read through this book, we hope that you will be able to interpret your

¹ Note: Sometimes women are abused in more than one of their intimate relationships. If this is true for you, simply evaluate one relationship at a time as you work through this book.

relationship and your partner's behaviour in a way that reflects your own experiences, thoughts, feelings and insights. Through this process you can describe for yourself who you are, what you expect and what you need from your partner.

You are probably already doing many things to make sense of your situation—meeting your needs and planning your immediate and long-term future. Perhaps you don't realize or appreciate all the mental and emotional work this entails. Reading this book and other books, getting appropriate counseling, resting during a lull in the relationship, making lists, putting money aside, trying to nurture your children and keep them safe—these are all examples of actively looking after yourself. Remember that each of these small steps is extremely important!

Something else you can do at this time is to observe your partner's behaviour and compare this with the promises your partner has made to you. We call this work evidence gathering. It means looking at your partner's behaviour as the clearest sign of his intentions. It is giving his actions more weight than his words. For example, if your partner promises to be more truthful with you but continues to lie, you might begin to wonder if what he does is more meaningful than what he says.

While women find the concept of evidence gathering helpful, many also struggle with having to gather evidence about their partner. For some women, it feels wrong to assess their partner's behaviour in this way. However, women so often tell us that their partner doesn't fulfill his promises, the very promises that have kept them hopeful and encouraged about the possibility of change in their relationship. We therefore think that focusing on the evidence of his behaviour rather than on his promises can help to clarify what's going on in your relationship and help you feel less confused. We hope that the information you gather will help you make the best plans for any future action.

In the next chapter, we will explore some of the evidence in your relationship so that you can begin to understand what is happening for you.