

Domestic Abuse Training for (busy) Pastors

An outline for self-directed learners

Pastors often find it difficult to respond to domestic abuse while being faithful to the scriptures. Seminary training may not cover the topic in much depth, yet it is a common pastoral concern. Here is a Training Outline for pastors who have a high view of the scriptures, and want to respond biblically with professional and practical intelligence to domestic abuse.

This outline may be reproduced and adapted, but kindly acknowledge Barbara Roberts as the author and the website www.notunderbondage.com. To suggest correction or improvements, email barbara@notunderbondage.com

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First, a word about secular resources

Some material recommended in this outline is not written from a Christian perspective, but nothing in it would run counter to a Christian perspective on how to handle domestic abuse.

Biblical material can be found scattered throughout this outline, but particularly in the last section titled **Understanding What the Bible says about Domestic Abuse**. However, the secular material in this outline is just as important, if not more important, than the biblical material. This is not because the Bible is unimportant but because most pastors are probably less familiar with the wisdom that God, in his providence, has been developing in the secular professions regarding domestic abuse. This is where pastors may need to put in more work, if they are to become skilled in handling the issue.

If you come across secular material not mentioned in this outline and it seems to have an undercurrent of feminist thinking (such as the claim that domestic violence is caused by 'patriarchy') then be aware that this does not necessarily represent the cutting edge of secular discussion. In fact, the secular domestic abuse field has recognized and is coming to grips with the fact that abuse is perpetrated by gays and lesbians against their same sex partners, as well as in heterosexual relationships. Many workers realize that this fact has confounded the earlier ideology (held by some secular professionals) that patriarchy is the fundamental cause of domestic abuse.

In other words: don't be overly suspicious of secular material when seeking training in domestic abuse.

And do refer victims and perpetrators to secular services:– individual counselling and recovery groups for victims; professionally facilitated behaviour change groups for abusers. Ideally, programs run for Christians by trained Christian facilitators would be widely available, addressing the spiritual aspects unique to believers, but this is far from the case at present. However, secular workers are trained to respect any client's religious beliefs and to work *with* those beliefs, not undermine them. They may not fully understand Christian beliefs, but they will respect them if voiced, and they are usually open to learning how better to work with religious clients so as to promote safe and respectful relationships all round.

Understanding Abusers

Doug Burrell, a Christian advocate for abuse victims, writes: “Emotional and verbal abuse is a form of abuse that people rarely see or understand. You could be sitting right next to an abuser, and not know it. He could be your best friend, your brother, a police officer living next door or sadly, even your pastor. This type of abuser carefully creates a beautifully crafted shield to protect him from suspicion. He joins the ranks of those involved in moral activities and presents himself as a friend to all. He invests time, effort, and finances into these groups to thicken the armor of his shield. However, slowly, carefully and calculated he begins his crusade of abuse.” Read Doug's article [here](#).

Abusers work hard to enlist clergy and other Christians as allies. Many victims who seek help from the fellow Christians get the initial impression that those their confidantes strongly support them, only to find as time goes by that their 'supporters' become doubters, or allies of the abuser, once he has worked on them.

To avoid being manipulated by abusers, read Lundy Bancroft's [Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men](#). Vital reading to understand what the victim is up against.

Note: Bancroft says it is very difficult for even a trained Domestic Violence worker to assess whether or not a man is an abuser and how dangerous he is. An abuser almost never 'looks like the type'. Here are the chapter headings of his book:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. The Mystery | 9. Abusive Men and Breaking Up |
| 2. The Mythology | 10. Abusive Men as Parents |
| 3 The Abusive Mentality | 11. Abusive Men and Their Allies (<i>this chapter is especially important for pastors</i>) |
| 4. The Types of Abusive Men | 12. The Abusive Man and the Legal System |
| 5. How Abuse Begins | 13. The Making of an Abusive Man |
| 6. The Abusive Man in Everyday Life | 14. The Process of Change |
| 7. Abusive Men and Sex | 15. Creating an Abuse-free World. |
| 8. Abusive Men and Addiction | |

Clergy should never underestimate an abuser's ability to smear his wife's reputation, and win sympathy from the congregation by presenting himself as an abandoned husband who is repentant and reforming. If the abuser and victim remain in the same church, this can lead to massive social abuse of the victim. At minimum, leaders should insist that the victim gets priority in fellowship. If the parties remain in the same church but it is

deemed appropriate for one spouse to be moved to a separate campus of the church or a separate home group (to maintain safety), it should generally be the perpetrator who gets moved. Any fence-sitting here condones the perpetrator.

Don't just advise the victim to be gracious and ignore her abuser's allies. Clergy should actively *stop* the perpetrator from gaining allies, by making it clear to the congregation that the the victim HAS and IS being abused by the perpetrator, and there is to be zero tolerance for slander and other social isolation of the victim. They should also advise the congregation not to pass messages or items between the perpetrator and the victim, without the victim's consent.

Clergy should instruct the congregation that if listening to the perpetrator they must question the veracity of his story, and (at another time) ask the victim what her version of the story is. In professional counselling and behaviour change programs for perpetrators, the gold standard is that counsellors should regularly seek the victim's view of whether the abuser is making genuine change, and how safe and supported she feels.

Myths need to be replaced with facts

One is the myth that women are just as abusive as men. Women can be spouse abusers, but the majority of abuse is male on female. See [What about all the men?](#) by Rev Al Miles; and [Claims about Husband Battering](#) by Michael Flood. There are not many quality resources for male victims. If you find any please let me know!

Facts and statistics from the [USA](#), from [Australia](#) (including a discussion about how violence against women is a men's issue), and [worldwide statistics](#). But facts and statistics should be fleshed out by reading anecdotal accounts from victims. Read [UK stories](#), [video accounts from Australian victims](#) or the novel [Behind the Hedge](#).

[Clergy Responses to Domestic Violence](#) by Steven Tracy discusses the myths.

[RAVE](#) is an organization that offers Religion and Violence E-Learning. They have gathered [data from Christian women](#) and also [data from pastors](#) on their experiences around domestic abuse.

Be prepared for it to be awful

Often a feeling of intense discomfort and shame comes upon people when they get to the point of admitting that domestic abuse is a big problem right in their own purview, which they have not properly addressed. The awfulness of domestic abuse is so appalling that it's hard to live with the shame of knowing it. Pastors who start to address the issue publicly in their congregation will also feel vicarious traumatization as they encounter disbelief, denial, resistance, complacency and denigration from their flock. This vicarious traumatization needs to be acknowledged in any training program.

Understanding and responding to victim/survivors

The first and most important thing to grasp about victims is that often they don't realize they are victims of abuse and it can take years to arrive at this realization. The most common question asked on domestic abuse hotlines is "What is Abuse?"

The [first chapter of *Not Under Bondage*](#) by Barbara Roberts defines abuse and gives examples, including spiritual abuse perpetrated within marriage [click on Chapter 1 when you have opened the link].

[The Difference Between Normal Marital Conflict and Domestic Abuse](#) by Jeff Olsen.

[Spiritual Obstacles to Ending an Abusive Relationship](#) from Hidden Hurt, gives insight into the scriptural perplexities of the victim of abuse. Also see the [Introduction to *Not Under Bondage*](#) by Barbara Roberts [click on the Introduction and look for the subheading 'The scriptural plight of the domestic abuse victim'].

[Why Didn't You Leave?](#) by Barbara Roberts explains the entrapment of the victim.

[Unhelpful Comments by Well-Meaning People, and How to Respond to Them](#) by Barbara Roberts can help people learn what not to say to an abuse victim.

[Honoring Resistance: How Women Resist Abuse in Intimate Relationships](#) This booklet from the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, Canada, explains how everyone resists abuse, and how abusers choose their behaviour.

The flyer [Are You Walking on Eggshells?](#) helps victims get courage to disclose. Leave in toilets and bathrooms.

Making abusers accountable and behaviour change programs

[Changing Men Changing Lives](#) is a 15 min video about a Christian perpetrator change program (possibly the first in the world) by Barb and Ty Schroeder.

[The Circuit Breaker](#) is a program developed by Matt Boulton, a Christian counsellor who is a reformed domestic abuser.

[Assessing and Monitoring Programs for Men Who Abuse Women](#) by Lundy Bancroft

[Checklist for Assessing Change in Men Who Abuse Women](#) by Lundy Bancroft

[Checklist for Repentance](#) by Barbara Roberts (adapted for Christians from Bancroft's checklist)

[Choosing to Change](#) A handbook for men concerned about maintaining their relationships that might be threatened by abusive behaviours towards those they love. [The link takes you to a page where you can download the handbook as a PDF.]

The RAVE project has a brief article called [Can Abusers Change?](#)

Seek the abuser's full repentance and reformation if possible, but be aware it will be a long-term process and many abusers do not reform. Refer abusers to qualified and credentialed behaviour-change groups. Do not undertake abuser-reformation work for which you are not trained.

Understanding the situation of children

[The Batterer as a Parent](#) by Lundy Bancroft.

[Understanding the Batterer In Custody & Visitation Disputes](#) by Lundy Bancroft.

[The Connection Between Batterers & Child Sexual Abuse Perpetrators](#) Lundy Bancroft.

Understanding Risk and Making Safety Plans

The preeminent rule is to check and *keep* checking with the victim about how safe she feels. Never dismiss her fears; she is the best expert on her safety and the likelihood of her abuser's choices. Never admonish the abuser without prior consent of the victim or

you may expose her to resentful payback from her spouse. Never advise her not to report crimes to the police. Don't suggest the couple go away by themselves for a holiday: that condones the unreformed abuser and exposes the victim to greater abuse.

Pastors need to know about risk assessment and safety planning but should not consider themselves experts: ideally, they should obtain basic risk assessment training (learn the key principles and 'red flags') but refer the victim to a specialist domestic violence agency for comprehensive safety planning. It's best to seek advice on such training from your local domestic abuse training providers.

Important Fact: the risk level for the victim *doubles* at separation, because abusers don't like to lose control.

To get a taste of what Risk Assessment and Safety Planning involves, check out this [Risk Assessment Framework](#). There is a [DVD](#) which is part of the framework materials; if you look at chapter one of the DVD, it can give you an idea of how to open up a discussion with a victim.

Also see this [Risk Assessment Checklist](#) from a police department in the UK. (But be aware that risk assessment isn't just ticking boxes on a list; it's about having a compassionate, respectful, encouraging conversation with the victim.)

[Assessing Dangerousness in Men Who Abuse Women](#) by Lundy Bancroft.

[Assessing Abusers' Risk to Children](#) by Lundy Bancroft.

[Safety Planning with Children](#) (Excerpt from *When Dad Hurts Mom*, by Lundy Bancroft.)

[Safety plans](#) created by the Christian Coalition Against Domestic Abuse [you will need to scroll down the page once you get there].

See also the safety plans which are included in the three recommended programs and policies in the last section of this outline.

Couple Counselling?

Abuse is caused solely by the perpetrator's beliefs, attitudes and actions. Seeing the marriage problem as a joint problem implies the victim is responsible, which is unfair, invalid, and very hurtful to the victim.

Don't engage in or recommend couple counselling (including mediation where the partners are in the same room) unless and until the abuser shows substantial and persistent marks of reform, and then only recommend it on the advice of a trained domestic abuse counsellor. It is essential not to endorse couple counselling which will convey the implicit message that the relationship problem is caused by *both* parties, as this serves the abuser's purpose – because it says the problem is not abuse.

However, joint meetings with a counsellor or pastor may be all right in a few circumstances such as the following:

- Seeing the couple together for one or two sessions may be all right, so *long as* it is with the informed prior consent of the victim (be aware of safety planning) *and* the counsellor clearly vindicates the victim and blames the perpetrator, actively confronting the perpetrator's lies, manipulations and twisting of scripture. *Do check with the victim first* that she is pretty confident that such a session will not expose her to pay-back from her husband later. (This is only likely to be the case if she is not living with him, and if she is reasonably sure that her protective strategies and safety planning will ensure her safety.)
- The victim may wish to announce to the perpetrator that the relationship is over, and elect to do so in the safety of a joint session with a counsellor or a pastor, using the counsellor or pastor as a witness/protector. This can be a good way to prevent her being subject to violence from the abuser after making the announcement. She can leave the session safely with confidence that the abuser will be detained by the counsellor for a while, so he is not able to immediately pursue her to take vengeance.

Understanding what the Bible says about Domestic Abuse

Forgiveness

This [sermon by Bob Kerry](#) explains what forgiveness is, and what it isn't. Vital for victims.

Suffering

[Domestic Violence in the Church and Redemptive Suffering in 1 Peter](#) by Steven Tracy.

Protection Orders – can you take a brother to court?

1 Corinthians 6:1 is to be counterbalanced by Romans 13.

1 Corinthians 6:1 is about people suing each other over civil matters (non-payment of debts, etc). Romans 13 shows that God has ordained the secular courts to protect the vulnerable, to restrain sin and to punish the wicked.

Submission and Headship

Victims have variously been counseled that they've been *too submissive*, or *not submissive enough*. This points to the fact that submission or lack thereof is not the cause of domestic abuse; what causes abuse is the choices of the abuser.

Nevertheless, submission is a big issue because it's a controversial doctrine in Christianity that is deeply misunderstood by many victims and grossly twisted by many abusers.

This outline does not take a definitive stand on different doctrines about submission (complementarian versus egalitarian), so here are relevant statements from each side.

The complementarian view:

Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood [Policy Statement on Abuse](#)

Note: I am concerned because I think CBMW's Statement on Abuse can be damaging to victims of abuse. See [Critique of CBMW's Statement on Abuse](#). As of November 2010, I have been given to understand that CBMW are planning on revising their Statement.

[Fifty Crucial Questions](#) by John Piper and Wayne Grudem.

The questions most relevant to domestic abuse are questions 8, 14, 36 and 46. Other qns relevant to marital submission and headship are 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 24, 42 and 45.

The egalitarian view:

[Statement on Men, Women and Biblical Equality](#) by Christians for Biblical Equality.

[A Challenge for Proponents of Female Submission to Prove their Case from the Bible](#) by Gilbert Bilezikian.

[PASCH](#) (Peace & Safety in the Christian Home) is a loose coalition of clergy, academics, professionals and lay people addressing domestic abuse from an egalitarian framework.

The middle position:

For thoughtful analyses by soft complementarians, see:

[Patriarchy and Domestic Violence](#) by Steven Tracy

[What Does Submit in Everything Really Mean?](#) by Steven Tracy

[Sabotaged Submission](#) by Carmen Bryant

Separation and Divorce

[Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion](#) by Barbara Roberts. As well as a thorough examination of all the divorce texts, the book includes discussion on biblical rebuke and things to consider in church discipline of perpetrators.

The Mandate of the Church:

- Take a stand: [Why Be Involved?](#) by the Christian Coalition Against Domestic Abuse.
- Neutrality or silence equals siding with the perpetrator, either inadvertently or deliberately.
- Build the capacity of the church to respond biblically to domestic abuse; be light and salt in the world and in the church.
- Rebuke the offender and do not let him deceive you. (Prov. 26:24-26 ; Gal. 6:1, 2)
- Have on your armor when handling an abuser. (2 Sam. 23:6-7a)
- Make the abuser accountable. Support secular processes that bring consequences to bear for abusive conduct (Romans 13).

- Appropriately discipline abusers, e.g. stand down abusers from leadership positions and music ministry; unrepentant abusers should be treated as unbelievers (Matthew 18:15-17).
- Don't allow yourself to fall into the trap of hubris, and forgive yourself if your dreams of reforming an abuser don't come true. If God himself could not bring Cain to reform, why imagine that *you* will be uniquely able to bring an abuser to reform?
- Mediation is dangerous for the victim, and for the mediator (Jonathan mediating between Saul and David).
- Do not issue cheap grace or promote 'easy forgiveness'.
- Do not spiritualize the problem away; don't simply tell a victim to 'pray about it'.
- Set free those who are bound and burdened (Isaiah 63).
- The injunction to care for widows applies to all women who are bereft of a husband, no matter what reason. (Some dictionaries give the definition of 'widow' in both Greek and Hebrew as 'woman bereft of a husband'.)

Church Programs and Policies

Don't reinvent the wheel. Look at these examples of what others have done:

- [Promoting Peace in Families](#) by the Casey Pastor's Network / City of Casey / Cardinia & Casey Community Health Service (Victoria, Australia).
Look at their Model Package PDF to get an idea of how 16 churches ran a capacity-building program on domestic abuse (especially p 39 onwards).
They also have study resources and cartoon concept-cards for people with low literacy or limited English. Brilliant.
- [Church Pack \(draft 2\)](#) by Reformed Relationships, UK & international.
- [Church Policy on Domestic Abuse](#) and [Disclosure Flow Chart](#) by the Christian Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, USA.