

“Great book!” —John Hamel, Editor-in-Chief, *Partner Abuse*

Abuse OF men BY women



*It happens, it hurts and
it's time to get real about it.*

Ann Silvers M.A.

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Contents—Overview

Preface	xvii
<i>Who am I and what do I bring to this topic?</i>	xix
Part One: Setting the stage	1
1. Women abuse men? Does that happen?	2
2. About partner abuse	11
Part Two: Ways women abuse men	21
3. How they do it	22
4. Verbal abuse	24
5. Sexual abuse	43
6. Financial abuse	58
7. Physical abuse	74
8. Spiritual abuse	93
9. Legal abuse	100
10. Emotional/psychological abuse	109
Part Three: Why women abuse men	139
11. Why they do it	140
12. Taught and thought	145
13. Emotional reasons	156
14. Self-defense	160
15. Physical reasons	163
16. Mental health issues	167
17. Personality disorders	181
Part Four: Men who are abused	195
18. How men get pulled in	196
19. Why men stay	213
20. How abuse impacts men	231
Part Five: What to do about it—For men who are abused	251
21. Getting a grip on your situation	252
22. Experimenting with change	268
23. Protecting you and yours	277
24. If it's over	288
Part Six: What to do about it—For everyone	307
25. For women who are abusing men	308
26. For men's family and friends	318
27. For all men	324
28. For all women	327
29. For helping professionals	329
30. Resources	334
Citations	341

Contents—Detailed

Preface	xvii
Who am I and what do I bring to this topic?	xix
Part One: Setting the stage	1
1. Women abuse men? Does that happen?	2
What are we talking about here?	3
Is abuse OF men BY women really a problem?	4
The pendulum doesn't have to swing freely	6
Anti-male, pro-female climate	7
Art imitates life	9
2. About partner abuse	11
What is partner abuse?	12
Abuse cycle	13
Abusive behavior continuums	14
Gender bias in determining abuse	16
Degrees of abuse	17
Book overview	19
Part Two: Ways women abuse men	21
3. How they do it	22
4. Verbal abuse	24
Overview	25
Abusive tone and body language	26
Threatening	28
Controlling	30
Demanding	31
Histrionics	32
Fault-finding	33
Berating	35
Humiliating	36

Mocking	38
Biting sarcasm	39
Name-calling	40
Pushing and Circling	41
The silent treatment	42
5. Sexual abuse	43
Overview	44
Forcing/pressuring him into sexual activities	45
Withholding sex	48
Using sex as a manipulation tool	49
Using sex to lure and trap	50
“Accidental” or coerced pregnancy	52
Flirting or having affairs with other men	54
Seduction and Sexual teasing	55
Belittling sexual performance	56
False accusations of rape/sexual abuse	57
6. Financial abuse	58
Overview	59
Getting him to buy her things	60
Controlling and restricting	61
Demanding he make more money	63
Misuse of funds	64
Stealing	66
Ruining his credit	68
Keeping the family financially burdened	69
Refusing to contribute financially	70
Limiting his ability to work	72
Destroying his property	73
7. Physical abuse	74
Overview	75
Throwing or breaking things	77
Cat-fighting techniques	79
Burning	80

Shoving	81
Interfering with sleeping or eating	82
Blocking exits	83
Poisoning	84
Hitting with open hands and fists	85
Hitting with objects	86
Forcing him out of the house	88
Attacking, or threatening to attack, others	89
Assaulting with vehicles	90
Assaulting with knives and guns	91
Soliciting the help of others to attack him	92
8. <i>Spiritual abuse</i>	93
Overview	94
Using religion to abuse	95
Enlisting religious leaders to coerce	96
Interference	98
Ridicule and Forcing	99
9. <i>Legal abuse</i>	100
Overview	101
Playing the DV con game	102
Conjuring up a need for protection	103
Depriving him of access to his children	106
Distorting her need for financial support	107
Creating havoc in his life	108
10. <i>Emotional/psychological abuse</i>	109
Overview	110
Isolation	111
Alienation of his children's affection	113
Minimizing his time with his children	115
Playing helpless	117
Abdicating responsibility	119
Neglect and Withholding affection	121
False accusations of abuse	122
Harassment and Stalking	124

Character assassination	125
Manipulation	126
Distorting the truth	127
Unfounded jealousy	130
Gaslighting	131
Unreasonable expectations	132
False promises	133
Brainwashing	134
Corruption	136
Exploitation	137
If I can't have you, then no one will!	138

Part Three: Why women abuse men **139**

11. Why they do it	140
12. Taught and thought	145
Set up to be abusive	146
Cultural sanction of abuse	148
Low self-esteem	150
Dichotomous thinking	151
Confusing aggression with assertiveness	152
Perfectionism	153
Miscellaneous unhealthy reasons	155
13. Emotional reasons	156
Overreactions	157
Anger	159
14. Self-defense	160
15. Physical reasons	163
Hormonal challenges	164
Physical illness	166
16. Mental health issues	167
Overview	168
Depression	169
Anxiety and stress	172

Posttraumatic stress	174
Bipolar disorders	176
Addictions and substance abuse	179
17. Personality disorders	181
Overview	182
Narcissistic personality	184
Borderline personality	186
Histrionic personality	188
Sociopathic personality	190
Dependent personality	193
<i>Part Four: Men who are abused</i>	195
18. How men get pulled in	196
In the beginning	197
Dating Girl	199
The sales job	201
1. Prospecting	202
2. Establish rapport	203
3. Qualify the prospective buyer	206
4. Prepare and package the presentation	207
5. Manage objections	209
6. Close the sale	211
7. Service after the sale	212
19. Why men stay	213
Why they stay	214
Hope	215
Love	216
Denial	217
Overemphasis on certain qualities	219
Shame and Guilt	221
Male shame	223
Fear	224
Economics	225

Isolation	226
Pressure to stay, lack of support to go	227
Relationship benefits	228
Confusion	229
Low self-confidence	230
20. How abuse impacts men	231
Overview	232
Emotional/psychological impact	233
Anxiety	236
Grief and loss	237
Anger and depression	238
Addiction and other poor choices	239
Physical impact	240
Sexual impact	241
Trampled reproductive rights	242
Financial impact	243
Legal impact	245
Spiritual impact	247
Social impact	248
Romantic impact	249

Part Five: What to do about it
—For men who are abused **251**

21. Getting a grip on your situation	252
Start here	253
Try to clear your head	254
Friends and family	255
Assessing your situation	256
1. Length/phase of the relationship	257
2. The categories and types of abuse	258
3. The degree of abuse you are dealing with	259
4. Reasons for her attitudes and behaviors	260

5. Her willingness/ability to change	261
6. How you got involved with her	262
7. Your contribution to the situation	263
8. Your reasons for staying	264
9. The cost of being in the relationship	265
10. Your options	266
22. <i>Experimenting with change</i>	268
Experimenting with improving the relationship	269
If you go for counseling	270
Check your reactions	271
Improving communication skills	272
Setting boundaries	273
Strengthening yourself	275
23. <i>Protecting you and yours</i>	277
Watch your back	278
To protect yourself from financial abuse	279
If she lies or manipulates	280
If there is a threat of physical abuse	281
Make a safety plan	282
Preparing an emergency stash	284
Protecting children	285
Involving police and courts	286
24. <i>If it's over</i>	288
She may call it quits	289
If you decide to end the relationship	290
Preparing to leave	291
BEWARE of the WOOING	292
Hold your boundaries	293
Save yourself from a lot of trouble	295
Prepare for her vengeance	296
Children	297
Custody battles	298
Recovery	300
Relief	302
Dating again	303

25. For women who are abusing men	308
What women who are abusing can do	309
1. Take responsibility	310
2. Listen to your partner	311
3. Figure out what and why	312
4. Set goals for healthy behavior and attitudes	313
5. Make changes	315
A woman's story	316
If the relationship ends	317
26. For men's family and friends	318
Impact on family and friends	319
A sister's story	321
What family and friends can do	322
27. For all men	324
28. For all women	327
29. For helping professionals	329
Helping professionals can help or hinder	330
Earl Silverman's plea	333
30. Resources	334
Internet/phone	335
Articles	336
Books	338
Other publications by Ann Silvers	340
Citations	341

Women abuse men? Does that happen?

Male targets of abuse by women
have a great deal of challenge
understanding the situation they find themselves in.
The phenomenon of abuse OF men BY women is very
widespread but largely ignored or discounted.

What are we talking about here?

A man separated from his wife finds a file box she left by the door to his rental home. He is devastated to discover that the contents reveal that they have several years of unpaid taxes she previously led him to believe were paid.

A woman's unchecked anxiety compels her to demand that her husband do things her way or deal with her anger.

A man is woken up in the middle of the night by his wife pounding him with the clock radio. She hits him in both arms, the chest, and face—right beside his eye—before he flees the house.

Abuse of men by women goes against cultural expectations for both genders.

Lying, manipulation, misuse of funds, badgering, and physical attack are a few of the many ways women abuse their male partners.

The men who are the targets of this abuse can be shocked and bewildered by it. It goes against cultural expectations for both genders. Women are thought of as considerate and nurturing. Men are expected to be strong and in control.

Although women can and do abuse men in many situations, this book focuses on partner abuse of men by women in romantic relationships: dating, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, post-divorce, and post-breakup.

I am *not* saying women are abusive. I am saying that there are abusive women. I am *not* saying all women, or most women, abuse men. I am saying that sometimes they do, and it is important to talk about it.

Is abuse OF men BY women really a problem?

Yes! And a very common one.

Exactly how much it happens is unknown. Research results of partner abuse statistics are controversial. Accusations of misrepresentation and suppression abound. (If you are interested in learning more about research results, take a look at the articles and books listed in Chapter 30, *Resources*.)

Cultural silence about the abuse of men by women, and male training that teaches men that they should be in control, fix problems, and not talk about personal matters, skew research results by undermining men's willingness to report or admit that they are being abused by their female partners.

What I know for sure: abuse of men by women is happening. It's happening a lot, and it has devastating effects—on the men who are the targets of abuse, their children, their friends, co-workers and family, and the women who are abusing.

“Recognition
doesn't hurt anything.”

The focus, for the last fifty years, on women's rights and abuse of women by men has made abuse by women a very unpopular topic. Some people actively quash discussion of the topic, as if recognition of abuse *by women* undermines recognition of abuse *of women*. In reality, both are happening, both need attention, and acknowledging one in no way undercuts the other.

As one frustrated abused man put it: “Recognition doesn't hurt anything.”

I was at a housewarming party and struck up a conversation with a middle-aged woman who was a friend of my friend. In response to her asking what I do, I mentioned that one of my specialties is the abuse of men by women. She said, “Oh, yeah. I was really abused by my ex-husband.” She backed her statement up by describing some major manipulative moves her husband used against her.

After hearing her out, I said, “Actually, my specialty is abuse *of men by women*.” Her shocked response: “Does that happen?”

Our conversation continued with me explaining some of the ways women abuse men. When I mentioned that one of the ways is purposefully trapping a man with an “unplanned” pregnancy, she said, “That happened to my son!”

She explained, “My son was planning to break up with his girlfriend but came to me crying, saying that she had just told him that she was pregnant. He said he had to do the honorable thing and marry her.”

Luckily for this woman’s son, his mom was savvy enough to ask if he was sure she was pregnant, and had he gone to any of her doctor’s appointments. Her questions instigated her son to question his girlfriend and press that he be allowed to attend her prenatal appointments.

Eventually, the girlfriend revealed that she wasn’t really pregnant at all.

This woman had labeled her ex-husband’s manipulations as abusive, but had not been able to see the malicious manipulations of her son’s girlfriend as abuse until our conversation.

How they do it

Sticks and stones may break your bones,
but words may break your psyche,
and overspending may break your finances,
and manipulation may break your spirit,
and . . .

Individuals have methods of choice for demeaning, exerting control over, or punishing the targets of their abuse. The objective is to manipulate situations, the target of the abuse, and even other people relevant to the partner.

Some ways women abuse men are the same as those used in other partner abuse situations, such as isolating the target of abuse from friends and family.

Some ways are similar to those used by men against women but with a twist: women who are physically violent with their male partners are likely to prefer methods that overcome their size and strength disadvantages.

Some abusive behaviors of women are available to them for use on men specifically because of their genders. For example, an abusive woman can capture a man by getting pregnant with his child in a deceitful way.

Female abuse of male partners includes all the abuse categories:

- verbal
- sexual
- financial
- physical
- spiritual
- legal
- emotional/psychological

Abusive behaviors may cross over different abuse types: seducing a man for malicious purposes using words and body language is verbally, sexually, and psychologically abusive.

Humiliating

When someone sets out to humiliate another person, she works to shame, degrade, and embarrass him. Humiliation is a particularly brutal type of abuse as the feeling of being betrayed heaps more wounding on top of the shame, embarrassment, and fear.

Romantic relationships create unique vulnerabilities to humiliation because:

- there is a natural longing to be respected by your partner;
- your partner has access to friends, family, co-workers, and other people you want to think well of you;
- your partner is often privy to your secrets; and
- it is difficult to defend yourself against false accusations about things that occur in private.

A woman may humiliate her partner in private through demeaning and belittling comments, accusing him of having traits that she knows go against his values, or by attacking him about something from his past that he already has shame about.

As one man put it:
“The person who would know your wounds and use them as stabbing points is not your *partner*.”

Public humiliation can be used by an abusive woman to demean a current partner or punish an ex after the relationship ends. The stories she uses to humiliate may or may not be true.

A man described his abusive wife’s propensity to publicly humiliate him: “No event seemed safe when attending as a couple. With time, I despised showing up at social functions, parties, and family gatherings. Being a very bright lady,

the Ex would artfully manage to introduce her distorted stories about me into conversations with friends, acquaintances, or even complete strangers.

If a woman was caught bragging about her husband's good deeds, often with misty eyes and deep sighs, the Ex would complement the spouse and then tell her how lucky a woman she was in comparison to her. In front of friends and relatives, I was a constant target and openly accused of never doing or saying anything right. If cold looks and mistrust could kill, I would have died a long time ago."

Social media extends the reach of an abusive woman intent on humiliating her target. She might post pictures without consent, spread lies or rumors, pretend she is her partner or ex-partner online, or send disparaging texts or emails.

The National Crime Prevention Council says cyberbullying happens "when the Internet, cell phones, or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person."²

An abusive woman may expand her circle of humiliation to include people that her partner or ex-partner cares about or is associated with.

A woman got a call late at night from a friend. The friend had just received an email accusing the woman of having had sex with the friend's husband several years prior. The email was sent by the woman's boyfriend's ex-girlfriend. (It's challenging to follow this cavalcade of characters.)

The ex-girlfriend sent the email to the adult children of both her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend, as well as other family members and friends. The story wasn't true or believed, but the couple felt terrorized by the ex's efforts.

Mocking

There is a taunting quality to mocking. It involves making fun of someone. It shows a lack of respect for the targeted person. When the mocking is witnessed by the target's children, friends, co-workers, or family, it is particularly stinging and embarrassing.

Teasing can run off course and be unintentionally hurtful, but mocking is intentionally (subconsciously or consciously) demeaning. It can result in the mocked person feeling incompetent, inadequate, and inherently flawed.

Mocking men has become an American pastime. It's a sport. It is entertainment. Commercials, movies, and TV sitcoms depict men as stupid, inept, and unable to take care of themselves without the help of a woman.

A woman who mocks her partner or ex-partner may be doing it for the sport of it, or she may be trying to provoke him in order to entrap him so she can call him abusive or get a restraining order.

One man's wife had a repertoire of imaginary inadequacies she repeatedly mocked her husband about. She was particularly fond of mocking him about what she saw as his lack of ability to do manly things. In front of friends and family she would make comments like, "He's useless in practical things" and "You know how useless he is."

This man worked very hard. He had a successful career and did most of the household work as well. He had done plenty of manly things, like building a porch on his house. Despite all the evidence that he wasn't "useless," his wife made her negative comments so often that he began to believe them.

Biting sarcasm

Humor is a wonderful thing. It can increase the joy in life and make difficult circumstances easier to deal with. Sarcasm is an art form that can be fun and witty.

Biting sarcasm, while it may be witty, is not fun for the target. Biting sarcasm is a backdoor way of getting in a dig.

The *sarcaser* (person who expressed the biting sarcasm) acts like they are getting away with the dig against the *sarcasee* (subject of the biting sarcasm) because it is couched in humor.

The sarcasee generally feels hurt and confused, with little ability to address the impact of the sarcasm because, after all, “It was just a joke.”

A person that uses sarcasm in a healthy way looks for cues indicating how the subject of the sarcasm reacted. If there are markers that feelings were hurt, then they’ve gone too far and need to back off. Apologies may be appropriate.

Anyone who uses sarcasm and responds with “You’re too sensitive” when the targets of the sarcasm complain that their feelings were hurt is not able to use sarcasm in a healthy way.

“Funny
doesn’t trump hurt.”
—Kim Wayans

In healthy sarcasm, the desire to be funny isn’t more important than the target person’s feelings.

How men get pulled in

Abusive people do a sales job on their targets.
They get them to buy in to a relationship with them and
then continue to sell them on living with their requirements.

In the beginning

It's easy enough to see why mildly abusive relationships keep going: abuse may be a relatively small part of the relationship. It may be challenging to understand how more severely abusive relationships make it past a first date.

A major factor that contributes to a man being drawn into a relationship with an abusive woman is that he simply doesn't expect it. Lack of discussion about the phenomenon of women abusing men sets men up to be blindsided.

Many men who find themselves in the position of being the target of partner abuse didn't see it coming. Possibly:

- the relationship started out well and then went sour;
- the markers of an abusive nature were present early but went unrecognized;
- the woman initially camouflaged her true self; or
- the man recognized the abusive behaviors/attitudes of his new partner but chose to look past them.

A man may be pulled towards a woman who is in need of rescue. Helping a Damsel in Distress may seem like the manly thing to do. Fulfilling the role of saving a woman who has been wronged by other men (or so she says) can be particularly heady. A man may endure a lot of pain in order to rehabilitate the image of his gender.

The abundant hormone exchange of a new, exciting relationship can be intoxicating. There is good reason for the common phrase "Love is blind." The feel-good chemicals stimulated by intense love and sex make the draw to the object of affection (and/or source of orgasms) very great. The danger red flags might be there, but they are rendered invisible by the hormonal haze.

Possible reasons why a man might be pulled into a relationship that is on the higher end of the abuse continuum include that he is:

- abusive himself (sometimes abuse is mutual);
- blinded by love;
- blinded by the sex;
- desperate to be in a relationship;
- attached to her positive qualities;
- a nice guy who wants to prove that guys can be considerate, flexible, dependable, nurturing . . .;
- in denial about the red flags of danger;
- convinced she needs him; or
- too quick to commit.

It may be that he:

- witnessed his parents abuse each other,
- was abused as a child,
- thinks the abusive behavior or attitudes are just the way women are,
- has a distorted idea of what love looks like,
- was raised in a healthy household and doesn't recognize abuse,
- doesn't realize the potential of women being abusive because of the lack of cultural conversation around the topic,
- wants to help a Damsel in Distress,
- commits because she is pregnant,
- thinks her bad behavior must be his fault,
- enjoys her attention,
- falls for Dating Girl, or
- becomes "sold" on the idea of the relationship.

How abuse impacts men

“When I was married,
I wondered how was I so inadequate
as to not be able to make her happy?

Now, when I look back on my marriage
and see that I was manipulated, I feel foolish.

How did I not see it?
How did I get myself into this situation?”

“I didn’t know other men were going through what I was going through. It felt like I was the only man in the world this was happening to.”

Overview

Male targets of abusive women have a great deal of challenge understanding the situation they find themselves in. We (both men and women) are culturally programmed to not be on the lookout for abusive attitudes and behaviors in women.

Male abuse targets find little support in the media or society. Men tend to be isolated by man-law: be strong, don’t talk about personal stuff, don’t feel, and don’t ask for help. Even if they do seek help, the deck is stacked against them finding someone who understands their situation.

Some of the repercussions men experience from being abused, currently or in the past, are the same as women experience in similar situations. Some repercussions are different than those typically experienced by women.

The impact of partner abuse is conditional upon the type of abuse; the degree, frequency, and amount of abuse; the level of entrapment; and the phase of the relationship the couple is in. The impact of being in an abusive relationship may be multifaceted:

- emotional/psychological
- physical
- sexual
- financial
- legal
- spiritual
- social
- romantic

Emotional/psychological impact

The goals of abusive behavior and attitudes are to demean, control, and punish, so it is not surprising that the target of abuse typically feels demeaned, controlled, and/or punished. Being in a relationship with an abusive person can feel like being with an enemy, a spy who is vigilantly watching for any slip-up on your part so she can capitalize on it.

People who are the targets of abuse have different feelings and reactions:

- when it is just beginning,
- while they are enduring the abuse but not understanding what's happening to them,
- when they awaken to the reality of the situation,
- while they struggle to make things better, and
- as they recover from the aftermath (whether the relationship improves or ends).

All forms and types of abuse have emotional and psychological components, so all forms and types of abuse have an emotional/psychological impact.

For men who are the targets of abuse, the abuse may:

- undermine his self-confidence;
- consume him with trying to figure out how to be good enough, do enough, not upset her, fix the situation, or make the “right” decision to stay or go;
- stimulate him to become hypervigilant and uber-alert, watching for changes in her mood; and/or
- burden him with desire to keep the abuse hidden from others.

Getting a grip on your situation

“The challenge to overcome the abuse in relationships is to know truth.”

Start here

If you are a man who is abused by a female partner, the #1 thing for you to know is that you are not alone. You are *not* the only man this is happening to.

#2 on the need-to-know list: *Not all* women are controlling, demeaning, or punishing. It's *not* just the way women are.

In order to figure out what to do about the abuse, you need to assess your particular situation. This can be more challenging than it sounds. It is much harder to recognize abuse from within a relationship than from the outside.

What you can and should do about being the target of abuse depends on many factors, including:

- whether you're in the relationship because you want it or just because she wants it,
- how long you've been in the relationship,
- what types of abuse are happening,
- where on the abuse continuum her behaviors and attitudes fall,
- reasons (not excuses) for her behaviors and attitudes,
- your reasons for staying,
- whether there are children involved,
- whether you and/or children are in physical danger,
- the quantity and quality of ways you have already tried to improve the situation,
- her openness to hearing your concerns and her self-motivation to work on improvements,
- whether the abuse is mutual,
- financial considerations, and
- availability of resources and support.

Setting boundaries

Boundaries are your limits on what you want and don't want to happen. *Tactfully* expressing your boundaries tests the relationship to see if your wishes can be respected.

Just because you tell her clearly what you want and don't want does not mean that your limits and requests will be honored. An abusive partner may push and manipulate her way through boundaries you attempt to set.

“Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves, even when we risk disappointing others.”
— Brené Brown

You may want to prepare yourself for ways you anticipate she will react to your limits or requests so you can reiterate your boundary rather than let it be ignored. (If she continually resists your reasonable boundary, then that is information for you about her and your situation.)

If she is attached to what she is doing because it works for her, she will resist your boundaries. She may push your boundaries in a variety of ways:

- in-your-face resistance
- an end-around
- creating the illusion of compliance
- distraction
- guilt infliction: tugging on your heart strings
- flattery
- quiet subversion

To take a look at each method of resisting your boundaries, let's use the example of you setting a boundary about

finances. Let's imagine you calmly and assertively tell her you want to know what's going on with the finances. Resistance to that boundary could look like:

In-your-face resistance:

She has a temper tantrum or simply says no.

An end-around:

She switches the attention around on you: "I can't go over the finances because you didn't do _____."

Creating the illusion of compliance:

She shows you some of the finances but withholds other information.

Distraction:

"Sure, we'll do that later. Now I have to _____."

Guilt infliction:

"How am I supposed to have time to do that?" or "You don't trust me!" or crying

Flattery:

"You do so much. Don't you worry about that. I'll take care of it."

Quiet subversion:

She says she'll go over it with you but always has an excuse why she can't do it when you have time.

Strengthening yourself

Being the target of abuse by a partner tends to be draining and debilitating.

Your partner may have kept you so focused on pleasing her that any time and energy for taking care of yourself has been greatly diminished or is non-existent. Your sense of being your own man and your self-confidence may be severely eroded.

Abusive people don't want their targets to be strong. The more abusive they are, the more they want others to be malleable to their whims.

Remember that her opinion of you or anything else is just her opinion. It may not be how you see things. It may not be right. It may be distorted by her history, health, or motivations.

We are each made up of our biology (genetics and health), everything that's ever happened to us, and everything we've ever been exposed to. That combination creates our thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, problems, and opinions in the moment.

Let her own her thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, problems, and opinions, and you own yours. You can consider hers, but you still get to have yours.

It will take some work to build yourself back up if you have been torn down or worn out.

Reviewing Chapter 19, *Why men stay*, and Chapter 20, *How abuse impacts men*, may give you some ideas where to start to undo the damage that has been done.

For women who are abusing men

“Nobody can go back and start a new beginning,
but anyone can start today and make a new ending.”

—Maria Robinson

What women who are abusing can do

The #1 thing for women to know is that it's *not* OK for women to abuse men.

If you think that a particular behavior would be abusive if a man did it to you, then it's abusive if you do it to him. If you have been treating your partner in ways that you would see as abusive if the genders were reversed, then ask yourself why you have thought it was OK for you to treat him that way.

If you are a woman who is being abusive to her male partner now or has been abusive to a partner in the past, then kudos to you for reading this book and trying to figure out how to have healthy relationships.

What to do:

1. Take personal responsibility for your behaviors and attitudes.
2. Listen to your partner.
3. Figure out the what and why of your abusive behaviors and attitudes.
4. Set goals for healthy behaviors and attitudes.
5. Make changes.

Abuse may be mutual. You and your partner may each be abusing each other. You are each responsible for your own behavior and attitudes.

It is important to do a realistic assessment of the part you play in the situation. Recognize if you have a tendency to push the blame onto him when he is reacting to your abusive ways.

For all men

“Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!”

—The Robot in *Lost in Space*

The #1 thing for all men to know is that some women abuse some men. It's important to recognize the possibility. This book can serve as a cautionary tale, helping you see what to look out for.

The second most important thing to know is that *not all* women are controlling, demeaning, or punishing. It's *not* just the way women are. Don't accept being abused as if it is expected.

Use the information in this book to:

- learn to pay attention to the red flags of an abusive woman,
- inoculate yourself against the persuasive powers of a Damsel in Distress and the manipulations of a malicious woman,
- help you question male training that doesn't serve you well,
- help you see where a relationship can be headed if she shows early signs of abuse,
- motivate you to get out of abusive relationships early before you become more entangled, and
- educate your sons and daughters about the potential of abuse in relationships.

This book can make you more aware of abusive relationships around you and help you learn how to be supportive of your sons, friends, brothers (biological and figurative), father, and other men who are dealing with an abusive woman. (See Chapter 26, *For men's family and friends*.)

To protect yourself against false accusations of sexual abuse: know that a very malicious woman can conjure up an accusation of sexual abuse with no basis in reality. It's impossible to completely protect yourself from being

For all women

“The moment we begin to fear the opinions of others
and hesitate to tell the truth that is in us,
and from motives of policy are silent
when we should speak,
the divine floods of light and life
no longer flow into our souls.”

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton

The #1 thing for all women to know is that it's *not* OK for women to abuse men. The second most important thing for women to know is that some women are abusing men.

Women need to examine themselves for anti-male, pro-female prejudices.

If you think that a particular behavior would be abusive if a man did it to a woman, then it's abusive if a woman does it to a man. If you think otherwise—why?

Open your eyes to see the evidence around you that we have become a culture that treats men as if they are less than women: less smart, less valuable as parents, less worthy of being treated with respect . . .

Notice how men are represented in the media when they are in relationships with women, how abuse of men by women is treated as expected, funny, and righteous. Stop accepting it. Stop laughing at it. Stop applauding it.

Pay attention to how your friends, mothers, and sisters treat men, and how you treat men. Raise your daughters to treat their partners with respect and expect to be treated with respect. Raise your sons to treat their partners with respect and expect to be treated with respect. Warn them that some men and women are abusive.

Do what you can to bring the reality of the abuse of men by women out of the shadows. Women are, in many ways, in a better position to help with the problem than men are. Men are more likely to be seen as whining about nothing when they try to bring up the topic. Women are more likely to be taken seriously and not be discounted as having ulterior motives. You are in a powerful position to initiate change.

Earl Silverman's plea

Many people have suffered the frustration and desperation that has come with trying to help men who are abused by women. One such advocate, Earl Silverman, could take it no more. In April 2013, Earl ended his misery by ending his life.

Earl had opened the Men's Alternative Safe House (MASH) in his Calgary, Alberta, home three years before his death. It was the only domestic abuse shelter for men in Canada. Earl's home served as a haven for twenty abuse-escaping men and their children before Earl was forced to sell it and close the shelter's doors.

The only funding Earl could find for the shelter's food and expenses was out of his own pocket. When his pocket was empty, he had to give up the shelter and his home.

Earl had fled domestic violence himself twenty years earlier. When he reached out for support at that time, he was treated as an abuser and directed to anger management classes. He felt re-victimized by "helping" professionals.

A friend described Earl and his struggle: "He was a very caring person, very emotional, very direct and honest. He believed very much in fairness and justice and he was just staggered, constantly, that over a period of twenty years that something that is so simple and so logical as gender rights and equality would be so impossible to access for so many people."¹

Jen Gerson of the *National Post* passed on Earl's plea, "In his note, Mr. Silverman also said he hoped his death would bring more awareness to the issue of male abuse."²