A perspective on domestic abuse

Domestic violence is a serious problem impacting people from all backgrounds, ages and income levels. Because episodes of family violence are often shrouded in secrecy, the prevalence and impact are not well known by the general public. Abuse and domestic violence statistics portray a grim picture. But they can serve as a message to those that are experiencing abuse that they are not alone, and to society that we must open the door for both victims of abuse and perpetrators to get the help they need.

Opening the door through understanding

Abusive behaviour is generally understood to serve the purpose of maintaining control over another individual, and can take many forms:

- Physical acts such as hitting, kicking, punching, forcing sexual contact, destroying property.
- Emotional tormenting through comments that belittle or instill fear through threatening to do harm to the individual or their children.
- Economic restrictions such as withholding money or keeping a partner from having a job.
- Controlling who the victim sees, where they go or who they talk to on the phone.

Domestic violence tends to follow a predictable cycle beginning with a slow escalation of anger expressed towards the victim, usually in the form of threats, followed by an intense outburst of physical violence.

The final stage is often referred to as the honeymoon stage, where the abuser behaves in a kind and loving way towards the victim, often expressing feelings of shame and promising that the violence will not happen again. The abuse cycle then repeats itself and many families get caught in a never-ending cycle of abuse.

Understanding domestic abuse

People who have not been exposed to family violence often ask the question—why doesn't the victim leave? For the victim, it’s usually not an easy option. Not having a safe place to turn to or the economic means to leave and support children are major obstacles for most victims.

The effects of abuse also leave many victims lacking the confidence they need to take action, even if they very well may know it to be the best thing for them. Still others continue to love their partners in spite of their abuse, and live with the hope that things will improve.

Even though there may be significant periods of time when things are going smoothly, it is important for victims of abuse to develop a plan to ensure safety for themselves and their children. A safety plan should include: telling a trusted friend or family member about the situation of abuse; educating children on how and when to call police; finding somewhere to go to if violence occurs, such as a domestic violence shelter or the home of a friend unknown to the abuser. Most importantly—trust your instincts. If you feel the situation is escalating and may become dangerous, it probably will. Put your plan into action.

Professional assistance

Abuse in any form is never appropriate or justified in any relationship. Knowing this is an important first step towards seeking professional assistance.

Help for the victim. Assistance through a professional can help you examine all of your options so that you can decide what is best for you and your family. The counsellor can assist in developing a safety plan and in identifying community resources such as shelters, legal, and financial services.

Help for the abuser. Abusers are urged to take responsibility for changing their behaviour. Meeting with a professional counsellor can begin the process of looking at your personal attributes and the circumstances that are contributing to your abusive behaviour. A counsellor can also assist by identifying community resources such as programs for anger management and communication skills development.

Abuse should be understood, but never tolerated or ignored. If you need help or suspect someone you know does, seek out professional advice or community resources to create a safety plan.