Walking Out on Spousal Abuse

By LAUREN R. TAYLOR
Special to The Washington Post

For Cheryl Graham, the moment of truth came when her husband of 13 years threatened to kill her. "I thought about Nicole Brown Simpson," she says, "I could be her. And he may say, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen,' but my kids would be without their mother." Graham, 34, had been abused for years. At first it was verbal: Her husband put her down, accused her of infidelity, blamed her for imagined infusions and shortcomings and tracked her moves. But she was also nice, warm, loving—and a good father. He was apologetic about his outbursts. These things made the relationship last.

After he started hitting her, Graham thought she could control his behavior by meeting his demands. But over the years the violence escalated. He beat her badly enough that she needed to be hospitalized, and the injuries intensified—threats to kill her and even the children. She tried to leave him many times. But realizing he might kill her strengthened her resolve, and now—almost four years later—she feels free of him.

For the 25 percent or more of U.S. women who are abused by husbands, boyfriends or other intimate partners at some point in their lives, the barriers to walking out are great. These women face realistic fears of escalating violence, financial hardship, a host of practical challenges and, sometimes, a lack of family and community support for making the move. They also have to untangle the emotional tides that bind them to their abusers. The process—from the decision to leave through establishing a new life—can take years, but at least 60 percent of abused women do move on.

Face the Challenges

Front and center for most women are fears for their safety and that of their children. When a woman leaves, the batterer feels he's losing control, says Betty Olmeda, 59, who now works at the District shelter where she stayed when she was fleeing her husband of eight years. "He's losing you totally then, and [abusurers] don't like that." Stalking and harassment continue for an average of a year after women leave abusers, says Jacquelyn Campbell, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing who has studied violence against women since 1981. The three months after leaving are particularly dangerous, she says.

Fear about making ends meet also makes leaving difficult. For some women, providing even food and shelter can be a challenge. Even if a couple is wealthy, the woman may not have access to the family's assets. "Often the husband has the person controlling the finances, and there is a lovely home and maybe even a country club," says Deborah Luxenberg, a District attorney who has been representing battered women for 25 years. "The kids have their house and they live. And they don't want to take them away from that. Nothing that they have is in jeopardy."

Social pressures also encourage women to stay: Everyone from the clergy to the police to the family may believe a battered woman or encourage her to stay and "work things out.

Penni Miller, 47, of Harford County, remembers when her husband of five years first hit her when she wanted an abortion and "the police would come. I might have blood dripping out of my mouth," she says, "and my children were terrified. The police didn't make him leave the house—I had to pick up at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and go somewhere—go to a shelter, or go to a friend's house or some place that I knew he didn't know where it was. I remember feeling so angry, and he would smirk. 'See it you, it's not me. You're the one that's wrong—they're making you leave, not me.'"

Becoming ready to walk away is difficult emotionally as well. Relationships are rarely totally abusive. "You're in a relationship with somebody you love," says Luxenberg. "That person does terrible things to you but they can also do very nice things. The pattern is that there's something terrible followed by incredible remorse—crying and apologizing—and lovely behavior also."

So it's common for abused women to leave several times before leaving for good. In a 1996 study in Detroit, Campbell found that "almost always, the first time [a woman] left was very purposeful to get his attention, and she meant to go back. Usually it was very effective. For some women it got him to go into treatment and for some women it got him to stop being violent toward her."

Each woman makes her own way out of an abusive relationship, but successful escapes have common threads: Women find ways to protect themselves from continuing abuse, reach out for support and build new live free of violence.

Plan to Be Safe

Shelter workers and other advocates say that in order to get out safely and effectively, women should plan carefully.

Help from the police and courts can be vital—often, a court order requiring that the batterer stay away from the victim is effective.

"[Court orders] help protect against not only the physical violence but also the stalking and harassment," says Campbell. They can be helpful, and (they do) bring the police when more quickly. At least for some men—like middle-class men, men who are employed, who are attached to their communities—criminal justice intervention is a wake up call," she adds.

But some believe court orders are not helpful—or even dangerous—as abusers ignore them or escalate their violence in response to legal intervention. Olmeda left New York and her husband after he struck their 36-year-old daughter while trying to hit her. Despite a protection order, Olmeda's husband came to the D.C. area and stalked her. "He would follow me. He would go to my family members' jobs or their homes, and he would harass them. He'd hang on the doors and he'd keep coming back. He'd call on the phone all hours of the night," says Olmeda.

Reach Out

Court orders may be controversial, but most agree that battered women should seek support. Sometimes that help comes easily, sometimes it doesn't.

Charlene Barto, 48, of Easton, Md., went first to her priest. "He said, 'God does not want you to be hurt—get out today,'" recalls Barto. "If the priest that day had not heard me, if he had said, 'come back tomorrow,' if he had done anything except sit down and say 'let me help you,' I would have never left," she says. "He saved my life and that of my children."

A District police officer was key in Olmeda's transition. "Once, after a beating, an officer said to her, 'There's nothing for you to be ashamed of. This is not your fault,'" says Olmeda. "She was the first person who ever said that to me."

Despite what abusers may tell their partners, support is available. Living in a small town where her husband of 23 years was born and raised, Barto was afraid others would condemn her when she left him. But she was surprised. "People have been incredible once they know the truth," says Barto. "Every person that I asked for help came through. They watched out for my children and me."

Barto, Graham and Olmeda all give much of the credit for being able to move on to the counseling they sought. It helped them overcome a victim mind-set and value themselves enough to stick out the hard times after leaving. Even once separated from an abuser, survivors need to change the thinking that kept them focused on taking care of the abuser and his feelings, believing despite mountains of evidence that he will change, or seeing themselves as worthless outside their roles as spouse or partner.

Build a New Life

Leaving an abusive relationship can cost dearly, and the emotional wounds of battering are slow to heal. Barto's in-laws—her children's grandmother and aunt—cut off communication with the children, who are now young adults. Because Graham's husband destroyed her car and other personal property, she ended up tens of thousands of dollars in debt. Olmeda, who left her husband in 1987, still has nightmares about him.

But women who have done it find the rewards of leaving far outweigh the costs. "My life is different in every way," says Barto. "I never knew that this was how normal people lived. I never knew that you could not be afraid. The last year since the divorce has been the best year of my life."

Miller finds joy even in life's challenges. "I'm totally happy—I have to pinch myself. I have typical, normal problems! I have an appreciation for life. Violence is not in my life."

Graham finds each day worth celebrating: "Every day of my life I mark off on my calendar—I am domestic-violence-free for one more day." These days, she says, "I don't wake up in the middle of the night screaming anymore. I know that it wasn't my fault." Beyond each individual woman's struggle to break free of abuse, families, communities, school and other institutions can play a role in preventing and ending violence against women.

Most people endorse the idea of breaking the cycle of family violence. But those who have not been abused sometimes are quick to judge. And traditional attitudes—which counsel silence about "private matters" and which blame the victim—make asking for help harder for everyone, even batterers. Families, coworkers, neighbors and community groups that want to help can begin by speaking up and reaching out.

Resources:
- National Domestic Violence Hot Line: 800-799-7238 or 787-3224 (TTY) to shelters and programs nationwide.
- Family Violence Prevention Fund: 800-333-8276; free "Take Action" Kit to help stop domestic violence.
- D.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence: 202-783-5332.
- Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence: 800-995-9577.
- My Sister's Place: 202-529-5991.
Helping Yourself or Others

There are many things you can do to help yourself or others who are being abused. Finding them:

- **If You Are Being Abused**
  - Remember, you have a right to live without fear or violence.
  - Break the silence. Develop a support network. Turn to friends, family and community groups, religious institutions, counseling centers and groups that serve abuse survivors specifically.
  - Weigh your legal options. Consider criminal charges (reporting to police) or restraining or protective orders (which direct the abuser to stay away from you).
  - Identify escape routes and places you can go in a hurry.
  - Keep your purse and car keys or cab money ready.
  - Plan where you will go if you leave.
  - Make clear to your children’s school, daycare and other caretakers who has permission to pick them up.
  - Put together an emergency bag with money, checkbook, credit cards, extra keys, medicine and important papers (birth certificates, Social Security cards). Keep it somewhere safe.
  - Teach your children how to get to safety, how to call 911 and not to get in the middle of violence.
  - If you get a protection order, make copies and keep one at your workplace, one at your children’s school, one with you and one with each of several friends and family members. Give one to your local police department or sheriff.
  - Ask co-workers, supervisors and security guards at your workplace to help screen your calls and limit the abuser’s access to you.

- **If It’s Someone Else**
  - Show her you care. Gently ask about her situation. Give her time to talk, and listen without judging. Ask again a few days later. Don’t rush into providing solutions.
  - Listen without judging. Your friend, sister, co-worker or neighbor may believe her abuser’s negative messages about her. She may feel ashamed, inadequate or afraid you will judge her.
  - Let her know that it’s not her fault. Explain that there’s never an excuse for violence in a relationship.
  - If she remains in the relationship, continue to be her friend while expressing concern for her safety.
  - Show her that help is available: Encourage her to get in touch with the National Domestic Violence Hot Line or a local program.
  - If she is planning to leave, remind her to take important papers.
  - Encourage her to tell a medical professional so the abuse can be documented.
  - Remind her that domestic violence is a serious crime and that she can seek help from the police and courts.