

## A SAFE PLACE MINISTRIES QUICK LOOK

# IS YOUR ABUSIVE PARTNER CHANGING OR NOT?

Following an abusive incident, many abusive individuals show remorse, ask for forgiveness and promise the abuse will stop. The first few times this sorrow is shown, their partners are usually willing to believe that the abusive partner truly desires to change and things will be different. Sometimes they are, for a few days or weeks. Only time will tell if the abuser's sorrow is genuine or if it is being used to manipulate the victim's heart, relieve tension or persuade the victim to remain in the relationship without the abuser suffering unpleasant consequences for his behavior. If the goal is only to avoid unpleasant consequences, once this goal has been reached the abusive behaviors can continue and escalate.

Real change begins when an individual becomes willing to take responsibility for his own beliefs and behaviors and for the consequences of his actions. Change occurs in small increments as old behaviors and thought patterns are consistently challenged and new ways of believing and acting are practiced. Change requires both a commitment to face the destructive beliefs and behaviors *and* a willingness to enter supportive relationships with others who understand abuse and are willing to confront, support and encourage the abusive partner during the redemptive process.

Some abusers may act remorseful, ask for forgiveness and promise that the abuse will stop. Others may show little remorse, be reluctant to ask forgiveness, blame their partner for their behavior and make no promises to change. A few will accept responsibility for their behavior and commit to a process of real change.

The following guidelines are offered to help you to discern when an abusive partner's actions demonstrate genuine repentance and change.

### THE PARTNER WHO IS NOT WILLING TO CHANGE

The person who is unwilling to acknowledge his abusive behavior may:

- Refuse to get help (batterer treatment or personal counseling). Agree to see a counselor but then not attend sessions, or attend sporadically.
- See a counselor and then use what he learns to belittle, criticize or blame you.
- Choose a counselor who is unfamiliar with abuse issues.
- Continue to blame you for his behavior.
- Demand that you go to counseling also, or pressure you to attend marriage counseling, before he will work on his abuse issues.
- Refuse to tolerate your (or your children's) emotions.
- Pressure you to stay or come back to the relationship using promises, guilt, neediness ("I can't change without you") and/or threats.
- Sabotage your efforts to get support or make positive changes in your own life.
- Work hard to get your children to blame you and side with him.
- Re-write the children's perceptions. (I didn't mean to hurt your mother. She is just holding a grudge.)
- Question the children about you and your activities.
- Threaten to take the children if you seek help or separate from him, even though he does not want to raise them.
- Set up times to spend with the children and then not show up in an effort to punish you.

*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.  
2 Corinthians 7:10*

The person who feigns repentance in order to receive pseudo-restoration may:

- Say he is sorry and show remorse for his behavior but demonstrates no long-term commitment to change.
- Ask for forgiveness and then believe he is not responsible to change the hurtful behavior because he apologized and you have no right to bring it up again when the behaviors continue.
- Convince your pastor, congregation, co-workers, friends or family members that you are the one responsible for the problems in the relationship.
- Convince your pastor, congregation, co-workers, friends or family members that he is truly repentant (confessing his sin, agreeing to counseling, becoming involved in church activities or ministry, etc.) to gain their favor, but nothing changes in your relationship.
- Become less physically violent but become more controlling or intimidating in other ways (verbal, financial, emotional or psychological).
- Make you feel that he will change only if you are around to motivate him.

#### **THE PERSON WHO GENUINELY DESIRES TO CHANGE WILL:**

- Take responsibility for his own actions and accept the consequences of his behaviors in his relationships with you and others.
- Stop denying, hiding and minimizing the abuse.
- Apply what he is learning in counseling to himself.
- Stop using physical force, threats and other intimidating tactics.
- Quit belittling, criticizing, blaming checking-up on you and making you feel guilty.
- Stop pressuring you or the children to forgive and forget.
- Stop putting you down and humiliating you.
- Begin showing empathy for you and others.
- Begin listening to you and others.
- Allow you and others to feel and express emotion, even anger, without fear of physical or verbal attack.
- Begin to show gratitude for the things you and others do for him.
- Demonstrate positive change over many months, hoping for (but not demanding) reconciliation as the pay-off for his hard work.

Wherever your partner is in the process of change, you will find it helpful to get support for yourself and your children. This is a good time to educate yourself about abuse and find a counselor who can help you sort through the confusion you may feel about your relationship with the abuser, your response to the abuse and your faith.

Your children also need safe, supportive relationships that create a climate in which they can begin to understand that the abuse is not their fault (nor is it their responsibility to change the abuser's behavior). No matter how much you have tried to shield your children from the abuse, they have been profoundly affected. A knowledgeable support person can help them work through their own thoughts and emotions.

#### **Additional Resources**

*Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them*, Hegstrom, Paul.

*When Men Batter Women: New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships*, Jacobson, Neil & John Gottman.

*When Love Goes Wrong: What to do When You Can't Do Anything Right*, Jones, Ann & Susan Schechter.

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