

Same-Sex Domestic Abuse: A Guide for Victims

PART ONE: RECOGNIZING AND UNDERSTANDING ABUSE

BY LAURA MILLER

Do you think I'm f—king stupid?" she bellowed at her partner, who had just reminded her to roll up her car windows before it started to rain. "Huh? I mean, do you think I'm f—king stupid? I don't think I even want to come home with you now."

health & wellbeing

This anecdote was related by a lesbian in Vermont who had recently broken up with her partner over this and other incidents of psychological abuse.

A week later, they were back together — for the fifth time.

Another lesbian recounts numerous occasions of both psychological and physical abuse. She describes her former lover "slamming a coffee mug down and cracking a sink, kicking out and breaking one of the safety glasses on the oven door, pushing over a piece of furniture that she was renovating and because it wasn't turning out right, grabbing my neck with both hands and shoving me back then letting go, throwing things across the room at me, pulling out the phone wire and throwing the phone, slamming doors so hard the latch was broken, yelling at me constantly for doing things the wrong way, or slamming closet doors so hard they all fell apart."

She was with this partner for five years.

Domestic abuse in same-sex relationships may be one of the best-kept secrets in the GLBT community. The term "domestic abuse" tends to evoke images of working-class men beating meek, unassertive women, a relationship encouraged and condoned by the power imbalances of a patriarchal society. Enlightened feminists who regard lesbianism as some sort of liberation from male domi-

nation can scarcely believe that women are capable of abusing other women. But it happens.

And it happens within male same-sex relations, too. David Island and Patrick Letellier, in their book *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them*, argue that "[d]omestic violence is not a gender issue, since both men and women can be either batterer or victim. Domestic violence is a crime, and perpetrators are criminals."

In truth, abuse knows no boundaries. It occurs among all races, classes, walks of life, and sexual orientations. In any relationship, abuse can be strictly emotional, or it can be physical or even economic abuse — as when one partner makes the other beg for money or withholds "allowance."

Studies indicate that domestic violence occurs within same-sex relationships with the same statistical frequency as in heterosexual relationships. About 25-33 percent of all relationships involve some domestic violence; factoring in relationships involving forms of psychological abuse, the percentage would undoubtedly be even higher.

Island and Letellier believe that "batterers suffer from a diagnosable, progressive mental disorder," while "[v]ictims, by and large, are normal people who are unfortunately in relationships with violent partners" and simply need to get out of the relationship.

That may be true as a general rule. However, one must wonder about the people who stay in abusive relationships, either because they don't recognize that they are being abused or because they simply don't believe that they deserve any better. Simply put, it should not take anyone five years to figure out that they are in an abusive relationship and need to get out.

But abusers often have an uncanny ability to manipulate victims into coming back for more. In fact, key warning signs that someone is or could become abusive are continual attempts to isolate a partner so that he or she feels there is nowhere else to go.

Chris Wilder, in her essay "Imagining Battering in the Lesbian Community," describes how an abuser often cuts off the victim from the rest of the world: "She will tell you how she hates your house, your car, your dog, your occupation, your friends. She will alienate your friends. You will lose those who do not love you. Those who do care will ask to see you as an individual without her. This will make her more angry. You keep trying to break up with her. Sometimes you separate for a while. However, when she sees you on a date with another woman, it's an invitation to go after you until you come back."

Burlington psychologist Dr. Louise Miglionico has worked with a large number of both gay patients and patients who have suffered abuse. She says that, almost without exception, people who stay in abusive relationships are people who are not in touch with their anger. Women in particular are taught by society not to show anger or to feel anger.

When anger is suppressed, it tends to be channeled into depression and low self-esteem. Moreover, when one person in a relationship is incapable of feeling anger, she often needs the abuser to be angry for her. Thus, the abuser, in abusing his or her victim, actually expresses that victim's anger.

Such relationships are usually very frustrating for friends of the victim, who may try repeatedly to convince the victim to leave it. As the victim goes through various cycles of abuse, he may repeatedly leave the relationship, reach out to friends, and then alienate those friends when he decides to go back to his abuser. Dr. Miglionico says it is not unusual for victims to turn on would-be rescuers. Staying in an abusive relationship involves a great deal of denial; many victims of abuse, in this denial, convince themselves that it is their friends, not they, who are the "crazy" ones. ▼

This series continues next month with guidelines for getting out of abusive relationships.

Vitamin Connection
 VERMONT'S FINEST
 - Vitamins
 - Herbs
 - Homeopathics
 - Books
 - Body Care
 - Pet Care

Knowledgeable & Professional Service

Open Mon-Sat 10-6 862-2590 • 1-800-760-3020

Lower Main Street • Downtown Burlington

Across From the Downhill Edge

Mail Order Worldwide www.VitaminConnection.com

Sari K. Wolf, RN, CCRN, TMP, CAP, Reiki III

Release Fatigue and Pain

massage/myofascial therapies, reiki, deep tissue, aromatherapy, acupressure in Montpelier, by appointment 802-223-4715

802.660.8396

Diane M. Felicio, Ph.D.

mediator

Trying to work it out and getting nowhere? Conflict can be productive.

separation • divorce • employee relations • consumer disputes

Susan McKenzie MS.

Licensed Psychologist—Master

Experienced therapist specializing in the individual and relationship issues of Lesbian Women and Gay Men

Quechee
 802 295-5533

Insurance Accepted—Sliding Fee Scale

WOMEN'S CHOICE
 GYNECOLOGIC ASSOCIATES

Cheryl A. Gibson M.D.
 Susan F. Smith M.D.

23 Mansfield Avenue
 Burlington, Vermont 05401
 802-863-9001
 Fax: 802-862-9637

BOB GREEN M.A.

LICENSED CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR

Special Focus on Couples Therapy

(802) 658-2390
 (800) 830-5025

PWA
 Coalition of Vermont

Events
 Activities
 Advocacy
 Education
 Networking
 Buyer's Co-Op

Vermont
 People With AIDS
 Coalition
 P.O. Box 11
 Montpelier, VT 05601-0011
 in Vermont 800-698-8792
 or 802-229-5754

PRIMARY CARE IN FRANKLIN COUNTY

Mara Vijups, M.D.
 Family Practice Specialist
 NMC Rural Health Services

Caring for Adults & Children

Enosburg 933-5831 Swanton 868-2454 East Fairfield 827-3032

Feminist Therapy

Leah Wittenberg
 Licensed Mental Health Counselor

Psychotherapy for individuals and couples

2 Church St, Burlington
 sliding fee scale (802) 865-4568