

Finding a Way Out

PART II OF A GUIDE FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

BY LAURA MILLER

Many present or former victims of domestic abuse have found psychotherapy immensely helpful. While victims don't cause the abuse they suffer, some find they seek out or stay in abusive relationships for reasons they do not understand. A psychoanalyst can help some victims find those reasons. Therapists can also help victims recognize when and how they are being abused, and realize that they are not to blame. Many abuse victims are self-confident and emotionally healthy, with little or no need for extensive psychotherapy — unlike their abusers. However, being a victim is a traumatic experience, and a therapist can help victims overcome the anxiety and depression that can result.

The thought of seeking professional help can be daunting. Many victims worry about expense or ending up with a therapist who does more harm than good. GLBT victims in particular may worry about being "pathologized" by homophobic therapists who will not understand their problems or respect their relationships.

While these concerns can seem overwhelming, they can be overcome. Many health insurance plans provide at least partial coverage of counseling. Moreover, many therapists will negotiate an affordable hourly rate or employ a "sliding scale" based on income, especially if your insurance does not cover professional counseling. All therapists are bound by doctor-patient privilege, which means you should not have to worry about being "outed." Finally, plenty of therapists, both straight and gay, are accustomed to working with patients in same-sex relationships and will not pathologize your sexuality. Ask GLBT friends for referrals, or ask the Same-Sex Domestic Violence Subcommittee (see sidebar) for their list of recommended therapists.

Another option, especially if you are worried about costs, is to call your local community health center. Most Vermont counties have community health centers, many of which maintain 24-hour adult crisis hotlines. Such hotlines can not only provide emergency counseling, but may also

be able to help you find low-cost or even cost-free therapy.

Shop around and trust your judgment when looking for a therapist — if costs are an issue, try to see therapists who offer free initial consultations. Make sure any therapist you visit is licensed by the state and discloses his or her qualifications to you. Don't hesitate to express your preferences, and feel free to leave any therapist who gives you bad vibes. You will often explore uncomfortable topics in therapy, so it is important to find someone who generally puts you at ease, who feels trustworthy, and whom you feel respects, understands, and cares about you.

If you do seek therapy, understand that you will not change your abusive partner by undergoing therapy yourself. Abusers do sometimes seek therapy, but you should not enter therapy with the intent of helping your abuser or "saving" your relationship. If you do it, do it to save and protect yourself.

There are other legal and social services available in Vermont to victims of domestic violence, although none currently cater specifically to the GLBT community. The Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault maintains a statewide 24-hour hotline that connects callers to support groups or shelters in their area. The Vermont Network, according to its own official statement, "believes the roots of violence against women lie in the patriarchal structure of society and the family, which condones violence as a method of control." Accordingly, its primary focus is on battered women and their children. Most Vermont shelters can only accept female victims, for reasons of security, but hotline operators are trained to help victims of both genders and taught not to assume that the abusive relationship is heterosexual.

The Victim Compensation Program, administered by the Vermont Center for Victim Crime Services, provides domestic crime victims with counseling, compensation for medical bills and lost wages, and transportation to and from doctor's appointments and court appearances. Eligibility for the program requires that you have contacted the police and they have found that a crime occurred. Many individuals in same-sex relationships may be hesitant to involve the police. Nonetheless, Diane Zamos, a prosecutor with the Vermont State Attorney General's Office, emphasizes that the police should be contact-

ed if you are threatened by actual violence. Vermont police are instructed to put all crime victims in touch with the Victim Compensation Program.

If you do not want to initiate criminal prosecution against your abuser, there are civil remedies. Vermont's Abuse Prevention Act allows domestic violence victims to obtain a civil court order from a judge, known as a Temporary Relief from Abuse order, which effectively orders the abuser to stop the abuse. The purpose of a TRA, which can be upgraded to a Permanent Relief from Abuse Order, is to prevent further harm, not to punish the abuser for past acts. The Abuse Prevention Act does not apply to casually dating couples who have never lived together in a sexual relationship, but protects couples who are living together or have lived together, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender.

Efforts are underway to develop services specifically for GLBT victims. The Same-Sex Domestic Violence Subcommittee of the Chittenden County Domestic Violence Task Force meets regularly to discuss and advocate for specialized services, and seeks support and involvement from the GLBT community. The Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services is in the process of launching an initiative called the Victim Services 2000 project to identify underserved populations of victims and improve services for victims of all crimes. Jeri Martinez of the Vermont Network points out that part of the difficulty in providing GLBT-specialized services is that there are often not enough GLBT volunteers, especially male volunteers. For example, a "safe house" in western Massachusetts for male victims of violence closed due to lack of interest. The more interest and support the GLBT community demonstrates for such endeavors, the better such services will eventually become.

In the meantime, if you are not yet comfortable with seeking outside assistance, there are protective measures you can take on your own. The Nashville, Tennessee Metro Police Department has published an excellent "Separation Safety Plan" that gives victims a checklist of ways to prepare for violence. For example, you can tell neighbors about the violence and request that they call the police if they hear suspicious noises from your house. You can leave your car keys, wallet, and change for a public telephone in a place where you can easily reach them on a quick exit. You can plan in

• **Community Health Centers**
Complete list: Vermont Agency of Human Services Web site
www.state.vt.us/dmh

• **Crisis Hotlines**
check community service numbers at front of phone book under "Crisis" or "Health and Mental Health"

• **Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence**
24-hour hotline for domestic violence
(800) 228-7395

• **Victim Compensation Program,**
Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services
(800) 750-1213

• **Same-Sex Domestic Violence Subcommittee,**
Chittenden County Domestic Violence Task Force
Kim Selig, (802) 864-7423 x 213;
Charyti Reiter (802) 864-7423 x 201

• **Victim Services 2000 Project,**
Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services
Stacie Blake, (802) 865-7750

• **"Separation Safety Plan,"** Nashville Metro Police Department
www.telalink.net/~police/abuse/safety_plan.htm

• **Advocates for Abused and Battered Lesbians**
www.aabl.org

• **The Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault**
vnadvsa@sover.net www.vnadvsa.together.com

• **"How an Abuser Can Discover Your Internet Activities,"**
American Bar Association
www.abanet.org/domviol/internet.html

advance where you will sleep if you have to leave your house, and leave extra clothes, money, ID cards, and keys there. You can open up your own post office box, so you can receive mail without your partner's knowledge and without having to go home. You can also try to avoid arguments in the bathroom, kitchen, or garage, where sharp objects or other weapons may be lying about. Any of these measures increases the likelihood of safe escape from violence.

You can also find advice, solace, and companionship on the Internet. Advocates for Abused and Battered Lesbians has an excellent Web site offering testimonials from former victims of abuse, key signs of a battering personality, questions to ask yourself about your relationship (applicable to gay male relationships as well), and links to domestic violence resources nationwide. You can also contact the Vermont Network by e-mail or via its Web site, which has a link to the especially informative Women Helping Battered Women site.

However, e-mail is not confidential; before you use your computer at home, you should read "How an Abuser Can Discover Your Internet Activities," published by the American Bar Association. The

ABA gives several tips on how to "cover your tracks," but no method is foolproof; the best way to avoid discovery by your abuser is to use a computer at a friend's house or public library.

Keep in mind that physical safety can be a very real issue. One study on female victims of abuse found that nearly 75 percent of women treated for medical emergencies received their injuries after leaving their abusers. It also found that women are most likely to be murdered when trying to break off an abusive relationship or reporting an abusive incident to authorities. Unfortunately, no similar studies appear to have been conducted on same-sex couples or male victims, but you and your friends should be aware of the very real dangers in extracting yourself from the relationship.

It is not embarrassing, shameful, or even unusual to be a victim of domestic abuse. Some of our community's best and brightest have found themselves in abusive relationships, and stayed in them for years before finding a way out. If you are or have been subjected to abuse, know that you are not alone, and that many individuals will help protect and support you. Draw upon your courage and reclaim your life. ▼