

VICTIM OR ABUSER? OR BOTH? – HOW TO TELL*

When working with couples it can often be a challenge to work out just who is the victim and who is the abuser. Sometimes there's an obvious abuser because there has been some kind of physical assault, but is that person the only or more serious abuser? Has the male partner experienced physical abuse that he doesn't bother to mention because he's less distressed by her physical attacks than her verbal ones? Does the female victim of physical abuse use the ADVO as a means of controlling her partner? Is this abuse or justified self-protection? Sometimes the abuser is also a victim, and sometimes the victim is also an abuser. We have to find a way to work with both parts of the person when this is the case.

One of the most unusual couples I encountered was one in which only the wife had perpetrated any physical assaults and yet it was her husband who was in charge of the relationship, controlling every aspect of their relationship and family life, depriving her of any of the family finances. It seemed that no one else who had contact with this couple had been able to identify his controlling behaviour, and saw him as the martyr he presented himself to be. In another case there was the young woman who said she was the victim of physical and financial abuse because her partner would not allow her access to their main bank account, and had grabbed her and shaken her. He was labelled the abuser because he had grabbed her by the shoulders when she had yet again spent the rent money at the hairdresser and the beauty salon. But what about the toddler and the baby he was trying to provide a home for?

Sometimes it can be helpful to have a good check list that we can apply to each person in the relationship, even when it seems apparent just who the abuser and victim are.

Abusers are likely to:	Victims are likely to:
Underreport, hide, minimize, or justify their own abusive behaviour	Underreport or hide their partners' abusive behaviour
Describe themselves as victims	Blame themselves in part for the abuse they experience
Feel hard done by when their partners disagree with them or don't do what they want	Try to placate and please the abuser
Label their partners' behaviour as abusive	Not label obviously abusive behaviour as abuse
Attribute malevolent intent to their partners' positive behaviour (manipulative, deceptive) Pathologise their partners (emotional or personality disorder, incompetence) Use negative labels (irrational, hysterical, lazy, unreliable)	Make excuses for the abuser's behaviour
Have great difficulty describing their partners' perspectives	Bend over backwards to see the abuser's perspective
Show little or no compassion	Describe the abuser at least partially in sympathetic terms
Exhibit self-righteousness and even martyrdom	Exhibit self-doubt

However ... be aware of the genuine victim who has also developed a sense of entitlement as a victim. If they've been abused for a long time before getting acknowledgement and support, they may be angry and aggressive – to their own detriment. They may also fear owning up to some of their own past behaviour in case they lose their victim label.

It's an unfortunate consequence of the dichotomy that has arisen as a result of historically segregating the response to victims and offenders of partner abuse. It hasn't allowed a space for genuine victims who have also been unskilful in their relationships to take responsibility for that part of their behaviour.

Another useful way to understand what's going on with a couple is to step back and ask yourself: "Who is in charge of this relationship?" This isn't necessarily the person being physically aggressive, though it may be.

Sometimes the answer is no one is in charge. Or maybe the partners are competing to be in charge. Maybe they're not competing, they're just mutually frustrated. Or maybe one is definitely trying to have power over the other in the relationship, whether that is patriarchal power by the husband, a sense of entitlement by the wife, or just wanting to be in the one up position by either partner.

Working successfully with the victim

Rather than urging them to become more aggressive, encourage their innate strengths around being compassionate and helpful in ways that do not lead to further victimisation by any one. Help them to develop wise compassion so that they learn how to not lose themselves in relationships but can attend to their own needs on a par with the needs of others. They will develop autonomy and agency in their own lives, while still staying connected with others. This is far more helpful than encouraging them in their entitlement, and will not feed their anger and resentment.

Working successfully with the abuser part

Rather than beginning with shaming them for what they have done, first help them access the inner compassion for themselves that they have lost touch with. As they do that, they will no longer need to shield the ego from the pain of the shame by blaming their victim. They will be able to face up to what they've done, and use their shame to help them connect with their deepest values and with those they love. When that happens, shame is operating as it is intended – to bring healing and wholeness rather than wounding and division. They will no longer need to control, hurt or blame others in defence of their own egos.

* Adapted by Toni McLean from a blog by Steven Stosny at:
<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-of-entitlement/200905/the-line-between-victims-and-abusers>

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