

# straight talk about abuse

WRITTEN BY **KATE VANSKIKE SMITH**

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:** WHILE THE WORD violence certainly conjures up uncomfortable images, it seems to lose its punch when you put a word like domestic in front of it.

Think about it. You hear domestic goddess and you think of Martha Stewart and warm apple crisp served on hand-painted dessert plates. You hear domesticated cat and you picture a former stray now resting cozily on the top of a plush sofa, tenderly purring away. Domestic and violence just don't go together.

But abuse—well, there's a word that gets to the heart of the matter. It just doesn't allow us to soften the blow. So let's call domestic violence what it is—*abuse*.

## **a motley mix of wounds**

Abuse comes in many forms, affects millions of women and sets itself up for generations of repetition. It costs women their jobs, their children, their sanity, security, sensibility and sometimes, even their lives.

The most common type of abuse portrayed on TV is physical. While abuse

most certainly occurs in physical ways that leave visible scars and causes real bodily harm, not all situations involve hitting, kicking, or pushing.

"What someone says to you can be worse than what's done," Jean\* shares. Indeed, verbal abuse can be the most devastating of all, leaving victims with wounds so deep it may take years of counseling to reverse. She adds, "Having someone throw things at the wall and intimidate you is abuse. It's scary even if you're never actually hit."

## **cycles of violence**

"I'd been in a domestic violence shelter once, and then went back to my husband," shares Jean. "But I ended up back at a shelter once again."

Countless other women are caught in the all-too-familiar cycle of violence. The woman reaches a breaking point, finally musters the resolve to leave the man, the man pleads and makes promises never to hurt her again, and she returns to him, hoping for the best. In the vast majority of cases, the underlying issues of the abuser—like addiction and/or anger issues—have never been resolved and he is very likely to continue the abuse.

After her second trip to a shelter, Jean says she learned to look back and see why she was caught in the pattern. For her, it centered on her desperately low self-esteem.

For others, going back to the abuser is purely a financial decision. If a woman has never worked or can't make ends meet and still care for the children, she may figure she can put up with the abuse if it means having a roof over her head. Of course, there are those who go back simply thinking, "If I do all the right things, he won't hurt me anymore."

Cathy, who had moved 2,000 miles to escape her abuser, ended up back in his arms again after being convinced things would be different. "Out of desperation,

I went back to him and it was worse this time," she recalls. "I was emotionally broke. He took everything I had and then I'd get backhanded or knocked down."

Cathy's abuser was an alcoholic who, on multiple occasions, nearly killed her and others with his drinking and driving. "There were a few times that I prayed in the back seat. I just knew I was going to die," she says. "I pleaded with him to stop, please stop." When he finally did stop and Cathy ran to call for help, he grabbed her and said if he ever saw her again, he'd kill her. Afraid he would do just that, she hid at a motel where the receptionist let her use the phone to call her mom in Spokane.

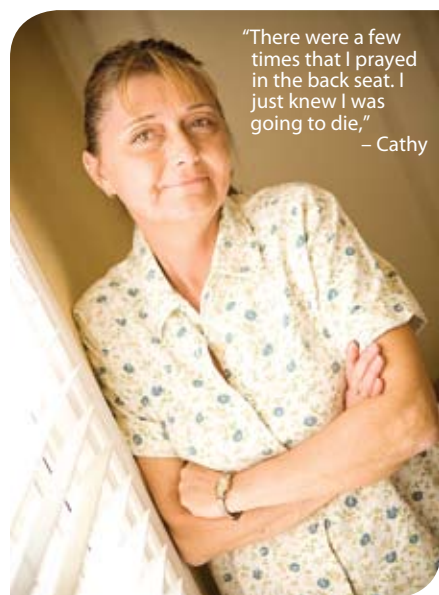
Upon her return to Spokane, Cathy's first priority was to get connected with downtown programs for women. "I was withdrawn and needed a lot of support," she admits. "My counselors made me think about why I'd been in shelters before and about the abuse and how it shouldn't have happened." But, Cathy says, when you're in that kind of situation, you think you deserve it—and abusers will take advantage of that mindset. "When they had a bad day, I'd get beat up. My whole adult life was this way," Cathy says, shaking her head. "It was so weird to have someone tell me I didn't have to get beat up."

## **finding safety and healing**

Fortunately, both Jean and Cathy are feeling more secure and sure of themselves these days, thanks in no small part to the support they have found at Transitions programs. Both women have benefited from support groups and classes at the Women's Hearth, a downtown drop-in center, and have also been residents at Miryam's House, a place where battered women and women coming out of crisis can live while they are putting together the pieces of their lives.

"At Miryam's House, I'm learning to set boundaries," says Jean. "It's hard, but I am learning to assert myself. Drawing boundaries is not only kindness to yourself, but kindness to others as well." Cathy comments, "Miryam's is very much a healing place. The staff are here 24/7. And they're so good to us—I even felt I was spoiled!"

Now living in an apartment with her



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— Cathy

## GETTING HELP

If you are in a relationship where heated arguments turn into hateful, volatile fights, you are putting yourself at risk for abuse of one kind or another. Before it becomes a pattern, before children are at risk, before you reach a point of sheer desperation, get help.

### OASIS

North Idaho crisis line: 208.773.1080

### SAFeT Response Center

Counseling: 509.747.8224

### Spokane Domestic Violence Team

Legal services and reporting assistance: 509.835.4500

### Women's Hearth

Daytime drop-in center, classes and referrals: 509.328.6702

YWCA 24-hour hotline: 800.562.6025

YWCA Shelter 509.326.2255

two teenage sons and beginning a job training program, Cathy says one of the great things about being alumni of the Miryam's House program is that you still have all the support even after you've left the home. Today, Cathy stays connected with friends she made during her 15 months there and volunteers her time to lead tours of the facility.

"It's a very kind program," Jean says of Miryam's House, "and it was through kindness that I realized I needed to find myself again." Once a very reserved woman afraid to open up to anyone, Cathy now sports a bubbly, happy demeanor, helping newcomers to the Women's Hearth feel welcome. "I'll do anything for Transitions," she says with a smile.

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*Transitions offers support programs for women recovering from addiction, abuse, mental illness, homelessness or other tragedies. To learn more, please join us at **People Who Care Helping Women Who Dare** fundraising event featuring stories about real Spokane women who have found hope and healing. Choose to attend the breakfast on October 10th or a lunch on October 11th. For details or to reserve your spot, call 509.328.6702.*