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Kathy Bosch

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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When Words Are Used As Weapons: Verbal Abuse

(Part 1 of a four part series)

Kathy Bosch, Extension Specialist, Family Life Education

(NOTE: The majority of those who are abused are women and most abusers are male; therefore, respective pronouns will be used in this material. However, men also can be abused.)

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Do you remember hearing or saying this when you were a child? How much wiser people become as they mature into adulthood and realize that words can indeed be weapons; words can hurt very much. Why would someone who supposedly loves another say things to make a partner feel sick inside, betrayed and confused? Those who are verbally abused often think they may have caused the abuse or are at fault. Some even believe the terrible things said about them may be true. But they're not. The following is a summary of what is known about verbal abuse and the impact it has on women, men, children, families and local communities.

Statistics show that domestic violence (also known as partner abuse, spousal abuse and battering) continues to be prevalent well into the 21st Century. Gaining dominance and control over someone else are some reasons behind domestic violence. Physical and sexual violence are tools used by the abuser to gain control and dominance in the relationship. There are other types of partner abuse that are often less obvious to outsiders such as economic abuse, spiritual abuse, manipulation, threats, using children, and emotional abuse, including verbal abuse.

Most physical and sexual abuse begins with verbal aggression or abuse. In a study of rural women, emotional abuse, which includes verbal abuse, was endured by 100% of women living with an abusive partner (Bosch & Bergen, 2003). Although canny abusers use tactics to hurt their partners where clothing often hides the marks, physical abuse is relatively easy to identify and assess; you can see a black eye or broken bone. But verbal abuse is difficult to measure. Most laws do not define verbal abuse which, therefore mostly goes unreported. Verbal abuse might be interpreted by some as a bad habit, strong expression, or "just the way the person talks." Verbal abuse can be a weapon used by either partner in a couple.

When verbal combat leads to physical assault, men have the distinct advantage because men are usually stronger than women and often inflict physical harm. Those primarily abused through physical violence are women; 90-95% of reported abuse survivors are female. Given the physical differences between men and women and the fact that verbal abuse nearly always precedes physical assault, it is necessary to be aware of the verbal abuse some women experience. Women and men, whether they are parents,

advocates, professionals, teachers, neighbors, or family members must work together to stop verbal abuse.

What is verbal abuse?

Verbal abuse sometimes is disguised as good-natured humor or pet names. However, the receiver of verbal assaults knows exactly what they are. By the tone of his voice and words, a partner cannot mistake the hurt and embarrassment she experiences. If a woman feels confused, frustrated, rejected, humiliated, sad, disappointed, shocked, or fearful after her partner has said something to her, then verbal abuse likely has occurred. Assaulted women frequently try harder to explain themselves and to understand what he said or meant to say. They try to be understood and to figure out what they did wrong in the conversation.

The result is an assaulted person who tries to communicate with and understand her partner, but whose attempts are useless because the assailant works at keeping his partner confused and unbalanced. The abuser tries to maintain dominance and control over the situation and his partner. Often the assaulted individual will think, "If only I would try harder, be more understanding and patient, then he would be kind and caring to me. No one can be cruel to someone they love." What the assaulted person may not understand is that the verbal abuser often lacks skills to effectively communicate his true feelings and beliefs. However, there is no excuse for abuse.

The abuser often demonstrates feelings of uncertainty, fear, insecurity and anxiety as anger. He is unwilling to share his feelings with his partner. He distances himself by using verbal weapons that confuse and hurt. Regardless of his real or perceived inadequacies, verbal and/or physical abuse is unacceptable and should be stopped. Abuse of any form is a learned behavior. It is the abuser's choice to use abusive behaviors. He also may choose to end the abuse.

Verbal abuse might end if the abuser makes a personal commitment and willingness to change behavior with counseling and therapy. Those suffering verbal abuse may attempt to seek help with counseling, treatment and support from an extended network. However, they rarely call for assistance. It is often difficult for professionals to validate verbal abuse and for assaulted persons to get appropriate help. Understanding the types of verbal abuse and knowing about available resources are several ways individuals might arm themselves against verbal abuse.

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