



Hearts Pierced with Deep Wounds: Understanding Abuse in the Family

*Unhealthy patterns can develop in any relationship.
Recognizing them can uncover abuse or stop it before it starts.*

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Recently I was called by a broken-hearted father. His daughter Jenna (names have been changed) was away at college in a new relationship, and it was moving fast. Her boyfriend, Jake, was pushing for marriage and limiting Jenna's communication with her parents. Jenna apologized to them, explaining it as Jake's strong love and desire to spend time as a couple.

Jenna's family became concerned when they discovered that Jake had an ex-wife and child he had not mentioned to Jenna. They called the ex-wife, who said Jake had an ugly temper and was jealous. When Jake found out he became enraged. He said Jenna's parents were "controlling" and cited a time they disapproved of a sarcastic joke he made about Jenna's intelligence. Jake ironically insisted that Jenna make her own decisions by cutting them off. Jenna's parents were desperate as their calls and texts were now going unanswered.

Everyone wants a happy family, but even when people try to live the gospel, relationships can become

hurtful. Some challenges are a result of the misunderstandings and frictions common to families. However, in healthy homes, people apologize for poor behavior and mend rifts, while in unhealthy situations, there are ongoing patterns of harshness or maltreatment that become abusive.

Domestic Abuse and the Gospel

"Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives and lost the confidence of your children" (Jacob 2:35).

Abuse consists of actions intended to hurt or control. It consists of a range of behaviors that may include neglect, manipulation, verbal criticisms, and physical or sexual violence.¹ Unfortunately, abusive behaviors are common, with some scholars estimating that about a quarter of children worldwide are mistreated physically, sexually or emotionally.² Adults also have high rates of victimization, with approximately 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men experiencing physical violence from a spouse.

Abuse can happen in any relationship, and both men and women can be perpetrators. However, men



“The voice that bears profound testimony, utters fervent prayer, and sings the hymns of Zion can be the same voice that berates and criticizes, embarrasses and demeans, inflicts pain and destroys the spirit of oneself and of others in the process. ‘Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing,’ James grieves. ‘My brethren [and sisters], these things ought not so to be’ [James 3:10].”

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “The Tongue of Angels,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 16.



are more likely to be controlling and to commit severe physical and sexual violence, and women are more likely to be terrorized, dominated, or badly hurt by a spouse.³

Abuse harms the soul of both the offender and the victim and is contrary to the teachings of the Savior. Modern prophets have stated that those “who abuse spouse or offspring . . . will one day stand accountable before God.”⁴ Abusers often ignore or exploit principles of the gospel. For example, I counseled a couple where the husband pursued emotional affairs and gambled away their savings, but instead of apologizing, he pressured his wife to forgive and insisted she had the “greater sin” if she didn’t forgive him. He dismissed her pain and claimed he was right with God or he wouldn’t be a temple worker. When his wife talked to Church leaders, he downplayed his betrayals and exaggerated her concerns, saying she was depressed. The husband was rejecting “principles

of . . . respect, love, [and] compassion”⁵ and mistreating his

wife. Her efforts to live gospel principles could not fix a problem he was creating.

Each of us can give in to unhealthy behaviors. There are certain characteristics common to all types of abuse, and the more severe and frequent these are, the less healthy the relationship will be. Here are five of these typical abusive patterns that can help you recognize unhealthy behaviors in yourself and others.

1. Cruelty

“With their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: . . . [their] mouth is full of cursing and bitterness” (Romans 3:13–14).

One man came to see me for therapy against the wishes of his wife, who mocked him for “needing help.” At church she was friendly and devout, but at home her cold condescension stung like a whip. She criticized his income and called his teaching career “a girl’s job.” She told her son, “I hope you don’t end up a wimp like your dad,” and spent every day on the phone with her mother, where they disparaged their husbands. Critical

DISCOVER MORE

Leaders can find help for dealing with abuse in Leader and Clerk Resources on ChurchofJesusChrist.org. All leaders and teachers of children or youth should complete the training “Protecting Children and Youth” within one month of being called. The training can be found at ChurchofJesusChrist.org/callings/church-safety-and-health.

people feel justified in causing pain and “love to have others suffer” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:13). These family members break Jesus’s commands to “judge not” and “condemn not” (Luke 6:37) as they belittle, show disgust, or call names.

2. Deception

“Thou art possessed with a lying spirit, and ye have put off the Spirit of God” (Alma 30:42).

Deception pervades abuse as perpetrators minimize their actions, blame others, and twist words. This bewilders victims, as one of my research participants described: “[My husband would] freak out and then do the apologizing thing and then say, ‘Well it’s your fault anyway’ . . . on and on until I started believing that.”⁶ This denial of another’s reality is called gaslighting, and it leaves victims confused and insecure about their memories and opinions. Like other forms of deception, gaslighting is used to manipulate conversations and put forth a false front.

Those who abuse others vigorously resist admitting that they are hurtful and often will claim they are victims. When Jenna expressed unease about Jake’s criticism of her parents, he got angry and insisted she was “insulting” him. Jake was among “those who cry transgression . . . and are the children of disobedience themselves” (Doctrine



and Covenants 121:17). He not only promoted his false story but also resented the truth.⁷

3. Excuses

“Acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done” (Alma 39:13).

A humble person feels regret at hurting others and repents and does better. Someone who is abusive resists the call of conscience with excuses. As one of my research participants recalled, “I’d feel horrible about the physical abuse, and then later I would think it might not have happened if she would have just kept her mouth shut.” His “sorrowing was not unto repentance” (Mormon 2:13) but instead was pushed aside with bitter anger and blame.

In therapy, I once told a wife that I had never witnessed her showing godly sorrow for years of criticizing her husband. Her response was not regret but sulking: “Great, here is another thing I am not doing!” Abusive people reject responsibility and are touchy and defensive. They are easily offended by small things.

4. Pride

“In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Philippians 2:3).

Pride includes entitlement and self-centeredness. One man lashed out at his wife and children every time he thought they were “disrespecting” him. If their opinion didn’t comply with his, they were “undermining” him or “not being obedient.” Pride is competitive and focused on power and winning. In contrast, a healthy family is cooperative, where there is a balance of fairness, and members “deal justly one with another” (4 Nephi 1:2). Spouses should be equal partners,⁸ where each has a say and all opinions are valued.

5. Control

“When we . . . exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, . . . the heavens withdraw themselves” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:37).

Although we value agency, it is surprising how often family members tell each other how to think, feel, and

act. Some even control through intimidation, shame, withdrawal of love, or threats. One husband had rigid expectations that his wife should prepare breakfast every day at a certain time, meet specific intimate requests, and listen to him regarding his “concerns,” which usually involved how she could improve. He monitored her spending and became angry if she didn’t quickly respond to his texts.

Another mother expressed regular disappointment to her teenage daughter any time the girl showed sadness or didn’t live up to the mother’s standards. If the expectations were not met, or if her husband expressed concerns, she icily gave everyone the silent treatment.

Hope and Healing

“I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee” (2 Kings 20:5).

Although abuse is heartbreaking, change is always possible. Victims can reach out to spiritual and professional resources and seek the power of the Savior’s



Atonement to heal their wounds. To find help, go to **abuse.ChurchofJesusChrist.org**.

Those who have been abusive must repent and seek help. This requires going “down into the depths of humility” (3 Nephi 12:2) and accepting full responsibility for their behavior. Change takes more than short-term promises and surface efforts. The pain of deep repentance is soul-wrenching, and some will not be willing to do it, which leaves victims with difficult decisions about how to protect themselves.⁹

Our Heavenly Father is concerned about us just like the anguished father who called me about his daughter. God’s love is as “wide as eternity” (Moses 7:41), and He is deeply pained when His children hurt each other. In a tender conversation with Enoch, He weeps. “These thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, . . . and [I have] given commandment, that they should love one another, . . . but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood” (Moses 7:32–33). There is weeping in heaven and on earth when bodies and souls are wounded. Yet, with humility, God’s power, and professional help when necessary, it is possible to stop damaging behavior and create a home of dignity, safety, and love. ■

NOTES

1. For more information on physical violence, see abuse.ChurchofJesusChrist.org. For more information on sexual abuse and assault, see Benjamin M. Ogles, “Agency, Accountability, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ: Application to Sexual Assault” (Brigham Young University devotional, Jan. 30, 2018), speeches.byu.edu; and Chieko N. Okazaki, “Healing from Sexual Abuse” (Brigham Young University conference, Oct. 23, 2002).
2. See Maryam Ajilian Abbasi, Masumeh Saeidi, Gholamreza Khademi, Bibi Leila Hoseini, Zahra Emami Moghadam, “Child Maltreatment in the World: A Review Article,” *International Journal of Pediatrics*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2014), 353–65.
3. See Sherry Hamby, “Current Controversies: Are Women Really as Violent as Men? The ‘Gender Symmetry’ Controversy,” in Claire M. Renzetti, Jeffrey L. Edleson, and Raquel Kennedy Bergen, eds., *Sourcebook on Violence against Women*, 3rd ed. (2018), 78–82.
4. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2020, 81; see also abuse.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
5. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 81.
6. Jason B. Whiting, Megan Oka, and Stephen T. Fife, “Appraisal Distortions and Intimate Partner Violence: Gender, Power, and Interaction,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (2012), suppl: 1:113–49.
7. For other scriptural examples of resenting the truth, see John 3:19–21; Acts 7:54; 2 Nephi 1:25–26; and 2 Nephi 4:13.
8. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 81; see also H. Burke Peterson, “Unrighteous Dominion,” *Ensign*, July 1989, 6–11, for more information about the doctrine of equality and questions to consider in regard to covenant relationships.
9. Those in abusive situations often are faced with choices about how to protect their own safety, or that of others, as well as whether they need to set boundaries or limit their interactions with those who are hurtful. President James E. Faust (1920–2007) discussed this difficult situation when someone is trapped in “a prolonged and apparently irredeemable relationship that destroys a person’s dignity as a human being” (“Enriching Your Marriage,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2007, 5); see also the “Help for Victims” section on the Church’s abuse prevention website for more information and options.



DISCOVER MORE

To find additional information or to contact professional and other helpful resources, visit the Church’s abuse website at abuse.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

To learn more about how to help victims, read the sidebar “How Can I Help? For Friends and Leaders” in the digital version of this article at ensign.ChurchofJesusChrist.org or in the Gospel Library app.

RESOURCES FOR LEADERS

Leaders who become aware of abuse where minors are involved as victims or witnesses should contact the Church’s helpline found at counselingresources.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.