

# Empowerment For The Abused Wife

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When a woman, who is the victim of domestic violence, comes for therapy, she presents quite a challenge. She may have spent most of her life being demoralized and become a victim through and through. She may have lost the belief that she can actually do something good with her life.

To understand the principle of **Battered Wife's Syndrome** one can look at the psychological experiment in which a dog was placed on one side of a kennel with his food on the other side. In between was an electric field which the dog could not see. Each time the dog tried to go to the food, he received an electric shock. He would turn back and lie down. As he got more and more hungry and tried to get to the food, he received the electric shock each time. After a time, the dog stopped trying to reach the food and instead lay helpless in the cage, starving. Even after the experimenters removed the electric field, the dog would not try to cross to the food. The result of this experiment was labeled "Learned Helplessness." This same syndrome is created in a spousal abuse situation. The wife has learned not to see options in her life and has lost the determination to even try.

Her therapist must resist the temptation to tell her what to do. The prime objective is to enable her to begin to make decisions for herself and to give her the necessary social and

emotional skills to carry them out. To start with, any decision is praiseworthy. Often the decision to come for therapy was not hers -- someone else insisted. In seeing someone so weak and vulnerable, it may seem plain to the therapist what she should do. However, if the therapist begins telling her what is best for her, it mirrors the role of the batterer, even though the intention is different. The therapist could become just one more person who directs her path.

The victim of domestic violence lacks self-esteem and ego strength. She needs constant praise for independent thoughts, for considering what is good for her, and for making a decision, however small. There may be areas of her life outside the home where she exhibits great competence. The therapist can use those accomplishments to point out to her that if she can conquer that area of her life, she has the potential to conquer her self.

The victim will often ask the therapist what she should do. The therapist turns these questions back -- "What do you see as your options?" When she responds, "I don't know," the therapist must challenge her further and ask, "How can you go about finding out what your options are?" The victim must come up with at least one option for herself. Then, the therapist can propose at least three additional options. (If the therapist presents only one other option, she may think that this is the best choice because the therapist knows best.) The victim must consider each option by looking at the positive and negative consequences of choosing that course of action. She may make a bad choice and needs to be allowed to make that choice. When she discovers that her choice was a poor one, the process starts again, and she looks at

her other options. This is the process of rebuilding a fractured ego. It is painstaking and slow. The therapist needs to respect her autonomy by constantly treating her as an autonomous person, whether she currently is or not. At the end of the first session, the victim asks, "When should I come back and see you again?" This is a therapeutic question and of no small importance. The response must be, "What do you think is best for you?"

Counseling the victim of domestic violence involves reality therapy and includes an educational component. She needs to know about the laws of the land and about the good husbands who would never hurt their wives as she was hurt. She will learn about the cycles of abuse from examining the cycles in her own marriage. The therapist will encourage her to think about assertiveness training and other self-improvement courses. The victim will come to understand that she is a valuable person and deserving of respect from everyone, including her husband. The therapist works to empower her and teach her how to draw on her own resources and resources in the community that can help her achieve her goals. She needs to learn that she has a mind of her own and is competent and capable to direct her life, with or without her husband. Her therapist wants to teach her that no one is more of an expert on her than she is. She's the only one who knows what is good for her. The therapist may spend a year or more helping her to think and figure out what she really wants and how she can go about getting it.

The therapist must resist being her expert and must constantly defer power back to her. At the end of therapy, she may say, "If it weren't for you, I never would have gotten healthy." In

fact, if it weren't for the victim's own drive and determination, she never would have succeeded.

The victim needs to take all the credit for her success. The therapist did not mold her; she merely learned the skills of how to mold herself.