

When men batter women:

New Insights from UW professors

Childhood adages such as "sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you" don't carry over into adult life, where an estimated 2 to 4 million American women are beaten every year by the men who are supposed to love them, their husbands.

Despite the pain and bruises inflicted by punching, kicking and worse mayhem, it is the scarring left by an emotionally abusive husband that is more likely to trigger a battered wife's decision to leave her spouse. This finding on the corrosive damage of emotional abuse and the first data on the number of women who actually escape violent marriages are among the scientific discoveries described in a new book, *When Men Batter Women, New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships*. Other new findings examined include the discovery that there are two types of batterers, nicknamed Pit Bulls and Cobras, and data showing that violence rarely ends in abusive marriages.

Written by UW psychology professors Neil Jacobson and John Gottman, the book is based on an eight-year study of 200 marriages, 60 of them marked by extreme battering.

"Emotional abuse is harder to live with than being beaten and it means something different to women when it occurs with physical abuse," says Jacobson. "It is a reminder and takes on some of the characteristics of the beatings experienced by battered wives.

"Emotional abuse is more oppressive, particularly when it is frequent, and among the violent couples we studied it can be present every day, every waking hour, 24 hours a day. What men are doing with emotional abuse is almost like mind control."

Groundbreaking research, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, is the foundation for *When Men Batter Women*. Jacobson and Gottman brought violent couples into the laboratory, videotaped them during arguments and measured physiological responses. No physical violence was permitted in the lab, although some of the men had served jail time for beating their wives and a number of the women had been hospitalized after beatings.

Physiological data yielded the first scientific evidence that all batterers are not alike. Jacobson and Gottman found that there are two distinct types of abusers that they call Pit Bulls and Cobras. The UW researchers said they were astonished to discover that the heart rates in one-fifth of the men actually dropped when they were arguing with their wives. The cold-blooded, deliberate behavior and violence exhibited by these men led Jacobson and Gottman to call them Cobras.

Cobras are also characterized by a history of antisocial behavior. They are likely to be violent outside their marriages, abuse drugs and alcohol and come from violent, traumatic childhoods. They insist on total control in their marriage to get immediate self-gratification. Their violence is swift and ferocious, making it particularly difficult for battered wives to leave them. However, the danger period for a wife who leaves may be shorter because Cobras generally stop pursuing their spouses after a short while and go on to other activities they can control.

Pit Bulls are not as likely to have criminal records, and usually confine their violence to family members. Many have had batterers as fathers. They insist on total control in their

marriages, fearing they will be abandoned by their wives. This can lead to jealous rages and attempts to deprive their wives of independence. Their violence is marked by a slow burn that explodes into anger. Pit Bulls may be easier to leave initially, but can be more dangerous in the long term because some of them are likely to become obsessed with their spouses, stalking and harassing them. O.J. Simpson is a typical Pit Bull, according to the authors.

Leaving a battering husband can be extremely dangerous. Husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends and ex-boyfriends are believed to be responsible for about half of all murders of women in the United States. However, Jacobson and Gottman found that a surprisingly large number of women actually escape from their abusive husbands.

"Battered women do get out, and they get out at a high rate," explains Jacobson, noting that the divorce rate over two years ranges from 2 to 5 percent in the general population. In the study, 38 percent of the women married to Pit Bulls had left and divorced their husbands, while none of the women married to Cobras had left their husbands after two years. But at the end of five years, 75 percent of the women married to Pit Bulls and 25 percent married to Cobras had divorced.

For those who remain married, Jacobson says the prognosis for stopping violence is not good. While the level of violence dropped in slightly more than half of the couples who were still married after two years, 93 percent of all batterers continued some form of physical and emotional violence.

Jacobson is critical of both the justice system and a patriarchal culture that have condoned domestic violence and the idea that men are justified in dominating women. He believes sentences meted out for batterers often are far too lenient and that therapy shouldn't replace punishment.

"Psychotherapy doesn't work with batterers," says Jacobson. "Why should we expect a three- or six-month group program to change a 10- or 20-year pattern of violence in these men? These programs just aren't very successful in stopping violence.

"We should put our money elsewhere, into treatment programs to rebuild women's lives and into education programs to alert them to the signs of domestic violence."

He says the decision to leave an abusive husband and the actual process of doing so can be arduous, stretching over months or even years. Emotional and financial dependence, fear of increased physical violence and a woman's inability to "give up her dream" of having a normal, loving relationship can stop a woman from leaving.

Making that decision is difficult, and Jacobson urges women not to do it in isolation.

"This is our single most important piece of advice. Don't leave without getting trained and experienced professional help. Many therapists and primary care physicians are not trained to understand the levels of violence occurring in these relationships or the planning needed to escape safely. Trying to escape can be dangerous and in some cases the level of violence can increase after a woman leaves or attempts to leave," Jacobson says. "A woman should find the right community support network or call the toll-free Domestic Violence Hotline anywhere in the United States or Canada at 1-800-799-7233."