Bones Heal Faster: Spousal Abuse in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Terence L. Day

While I was serving as a stake high councillor, a Latter-day Saint woman confided in me, "Bones heal faster." She spoke with the authority of a victim of both physical and emotional abuse. When I confidentially shared her comment with the director of a mental health clinic, he affirmed that many abused women would validate the woman's statement.[1] Popular opinion notwithstanding, verbal abuse is harder to live with than physical abuse, can be more oppressive than being beaten, and leaves deeper scars.[2]

History and Prevalence

Family violence always has been of some societal concern, but public acknowledgment in the United States was rare until about 1960.[3] Feminist geographer Joni Seager calls domestic violence "the most ubiquitous constant in women's lives around the world. There is virtually no place where it is not a significant problem, and women of no race, class, or age are exempt from its reach."[4] As public discourse about domestic violence rose with the feminist movement, it also became a matter of increasing concern to religious leaders, as well as to social organizations and civil governments. Now, spousal abuse is recognized as a major public health issue in the United States, Britain, Canada, and France, as well as in most other nations.[5] Domestic violence perpetrated on women has become an issue in all major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism.[6] LDS general authorities have expressed rising concern about abuse in LDS families,

with public pronouncements reaching a crescendo during President Gordon B. Hinckley's administration.

Nature

Abuse is an ugly word for ugly acts of violence, especially when directed against family members. It is uglier still when perpetrated by Christians who espouse the Savior's gospel of love. LDS general authorities have given most prominent attention to the evils of child abuse, but in the 1970s they became increasingly vocal about spousal abuse—both physical and emotional. I have chosen to focus on emotional abuse of wives for several reasons: to narrow the focus of this paper; because it is a major concern voiced by general authorities; because the topic concerned me throughout more than three decades of local priesthood leadership; because I have witnessed the devastating emotional, physical, and spiritual effects upon victims; and finally because, in my view, emotional abuse is greatly under-recognized in the LDS culture.

Definitions

Discussions of abuse quickly encounter the difficulty of definitions and it is important to understand the vocabulary. Emotional abuse, sometimes called emotional violence, includes verbal barrage, withholding love and support, and sending a clear message that belittles and destroys a spouse's self-esteem.[7] Emotional abuse is insidious in nature because it involves incremental repetition of threats and verbal attacks that build up over time and can leave lasting scars.[8] Like drops of water employed in Chinese water torture, experiences of seemingly insignificant consequence can be magnified by repetition into a matter of far greater, more damaging consequence.

Some authorities classify intimate partner violence in two categories: "intimate terrorism"and "situational couple violence."[9] Intimate terrorism is defined as systematic acts through which one partner attempts to control the relationship. Situational couple violence covers abuse arising from day-to-day conflict without a pattern of attempting to control the other partner. Both physical and emotional abuse may be involved in both types of abuse.

Incidence

Latter-day Saints would like to believe that because they have the gospel, they are culturally different from the broader societies in which they live. Unfortunately, where domestic violence is concerned, Latter-day Saints are very likely to adhere to the norms of their macro society.[10] At some time in their lives, twenty-five percent of American women are physically abused by their domestic partners;[11] law enforcement officers and family scientists assert that emotional abuse is even more prevalent. Therefore we might safely conclude that more than a quarter of the women in LDS congregations have been, are being, or will be emotionally abused.[12] We also may take general authorites' public admonitions regarding abuse as tacit acknowledgment that it is a serious problem.

Causes

A basic understanding of the causes of spousal abuse is helpful, perhaps even essential, to preventing abuse and dealing effectively with its consequences. Theologians, anthropologists, biologists, sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, feminists, and others view causation from different perspectives. Perhaps the theological perspective can be summed up in the humor of the late comedian Flip Wilson, who popularized the line, "The devil made me do it." Anthropologists and biologists explain spousal abuse in terms of genetics and other biological phenomena. Sociologists tend to focus on environmental aspects of the problem, with emphasis on learned behavior. Psychologists tend to define the problem in terms of pathologies in the brain, which have both biological and environmental components. Understandably, professionals tend to concentrate on their discipline's perspective, so it is critical to examine the phenomenon of abuse in as many of its myriad facets as possible. In the case of Mormon leaders, this requires understanding abuse from more than a purely theological standpoint, which can lead to naïve expectations such as that a victim's psychological trauma will simply evaporate if she forgives her abuser or that abusers can readily repent. Readers who would like to expand their understanding of these complex contributors to spousal abuse will find suggestions for additional reading at the end of this paper. Because of the constraints of space, this pa-

per focuses primarily on two major contributors, social environment and controlling personalities.

Culture

We all are products of our social environment, and male-dominant spousal abuse is deeply rooted in the cultures and subcultures of Western civilization, perhaps especially in conservative religious communities. Although biological factors in the pathologies underlying abusive behaviors must not be ignored, the primary hope for dealing with abuse lies in the socio-environmental realm, especially where the roots of patriarchy are manifest and when controlling personalities are in play.

Gender-violence expert Jackson Katz[13] reports that in the United States peer pressure socializes men to dominate and control women.[14] The association of patriarchy with male-dominant abuse is noted by both LDS[15] and other Christian scholars and observers. Of course it is hardly a new phenomenon: we find crisp insight into the influence of patriarchy on society in Victorian novelist Charles Dickens's characterization of Mr. Bumble in "Oliver Twist," which was published in 1838. As Mr. Bumble and his wife have a disagreement, he asserts that it is the prerogative of men to command and of women to obey.[16] In Dickens's artful narrative of marital relations in the Bumble family, we see a type that exists yet today, especially in religiously conservative subcultures in which men perceive it as their prerogative to boss women around. Members of conservative religions may be particularly susceptible to male-dominant influences. Jocelyn Andersen, author of *Woman Submit! Christians and Domestic Violence*, says that spousal abuse cuts across denominational lines.[17] Significant long-standing and continuing efforts of LDS general authorites to combat the male-dominant mindset of boys and men in the Church notwithstanding, many LDS males still grow up with expectations of Victorian prerogatives. It is extremely difficult to combat ideas of male superiority in an institution governed by patriarchy. Moreover, LDS discourse tends to reinforce many aspects of antiquated gender stereotypes, encouraging women to emulate the endlessly patient and self-sacrificing Victorian "angel of the house" and inculcating a sense of chivalric duty in boys. These earnest, well-intentioned efforts to honor womanhood un-

fortunately construct women as objects for the exercise of male virtue. These roles, and women's learned passivity, become dangerous to women when men fail to behave virtuously.

Another poignant example of unrecognized abuse comes from "The Honeymooners," a popular television situation comedy in the 1950s that was rebroadcast in syndication for four decades and which still influences situation comedy today.[18] Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason) is a blustering, short-tempered, frequently insulting and threatening bus driver. Both Ralph and wife Alice (Audrey Meadows) yell and use abusive language. Ralph frequently "brings down the house" by shaking his fist in Alice's face, exclaiming: "One of these days. One of these days, POW! Right in the kisser." When Alice tries to end the argument by going to bed, Ralph shouts: "You're not going to sleep, Alice! You're never going to get any sleep until we agree." The audience (or the laugh track) rewards every verbal barrage with uproarious laughter. Verbal abuse, threatening gestures, and controlling behavior simply weren't commonly recognized as abuse in the 1950s. Unfortunately, many people still don't recognize them as abusive, especially not as carrying the potential for devastating psychological harm.

Controlling Behaviors

Controlling behavior is strongly correlated with both physical and emotional spousal abuse. Power issues are natural and unavoidable in marriage and sometimes are the source of abuse, but intimate terrorism, which is more sinister, is the main concern in this article. Some authorities describe it as a two-person civil war that often results when wounding quarrels become a way of life in formerly happy marriages.[19] Intimate terrorism often involves a pathology arising from childhood trauma, resulting in arrested emotional development. It is manifest in a powerful need to dominate and control one's partner. It always is abusive and contravenes the Gospel of Jesus Christ. President Thomas S. Monson and the late President Gordon B. Hinckley have spoken strongly on the subject. President Monson told men, "Your wife is your equal. In marriage neither partner is superior nor inferior to the other. You walk side by side as a son and a daughter of God. She is not to be demeaned or insulted but should be respected and

loved."[20] President Hinckley said, "Any man in this Church who . . . exercises unrighteous dominion over [his wife] is unworthy to hold the priesthood."[21]

Communications expert Patricia Evans defines intimate terrorism in terms of running another person's life in a way that rejects equality. This type of control isn't about conflict over decisions; rather, it is about the inability to accept one's partner as an equal and the need to protect an insecure psyche by abusive behaviors. Controlling men are threatened by the very personhood of their victims. They control through intimidation and fear, if not actual physical violence. Tools include belittling, constant criticism, regulating access to family and friends, restricting access to money, and other devices to denigrate and control.

Consequences

The first and most pervasive result of spousal abuse is, of course, unhappiness and sorrow; but often consequences go far beyond this. Emotional abuse harms mind, body, and spirit. Repeated ridicule and belittling eventually cause the victim to feel unloved, unlovable, and worthless.[22] I have grouped the consequences of emotional abuse into three categories; emotional, physical, and social/spiritual. These categories have some overlapping characteristics.

Emotional

Emotional abuse can cause confusion, doubt, mistrust, fear, and feelings of hopelessness, leading to a variety of mood or anxiety disorders. In the interest of brevity, this paper deals with only two major disorders, symptoms of which often go unrecognized in LDS wards. Even when symptoms are recognized, both members and local leaders can sometimes be very naïve and unsympathetic about them and may not recognize they may be caused by abuse. They are major depressive disorder (MDD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

During episodes of MDD people may experience diminished interest in daily activities, sleep disruption, intense restlessness, or sluggishness, fatigue, loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, guilt, self-blame, diminished ability to think or con-

centrate, indecisiveness, and other symptoms, including thoughts of suicide.[23]

PTSD, frequently in the news these days, is not a fad or "pop" psychological diagnosis. It is a very real, even life-threatening, disorder. Victims live in fear and repeatedly alter their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, denying their own needs to avoid further abuse.[24] It illustrates the extremity of abuse and is manifest in the LDS culture; yet often is unrecognized by Latter-day Saints as a serious consequence of emotional abuse. Symptoms include hyperarousal, hypervigilance, difficulty sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, feelings of detachment or estrangement, and diminished ability to experience loving feelings. PTSD was first recognized among World War I soldiers. It was then called "shell shock." In World War II it was called "combat fatigue." Both physical and emotional abuse can lead to PTSD.[25] Perhaps if we employed this military rhetoric formerly used to describe PTSD we would be better able and more likely to recognize the reality and enormity of its connection to spousal abuse. The marriages of abused women who develop PTSD are both figurative and literal combat zones. Studies show that people with PTSD have elevated rates of alcohol abuse, drug dependency, depression, hospitalizations, and suicide.[26]

Physical

In recent years research has developed a growing body of evidence that stress affects brain development and function. Perinatal psychobiologist Vivette Glover and her colleagues at Imperial College London are studying the damaging effects of maternal stress on brain development in fetuses, and researchers in Spain and Italy have found that traumatic stress can modify the structural and functional aspects of the brain in adults, leading to the development of a range of psychiatric disorders.[27] Emotional abuse is also associated with physical ailments such as breast cancer, chronic pelvic pain, and irritable bowel syndrome, along with other ailments and conditions.[28]

Spiritual/Social

The faith of victims may be seriously damaged, regardless of

their religion, but the testimonies of LDS women who are raised to revere priesthood authority are especially vulnerable to abuse by priesthood-bearing husbands. When bishops or stake presidents fail to respond sympathetically and appropriately, victims may lose trust in them, in the Church, and sometimes even in God. Abuse also damages social relationships, especially within families and within congregations, particularly when it leads to divorce.[29]

All respondents to a study of divorced women who re-entered Brigham Young University as undergraduates said their divorces resulted in negative social reactions. Insensitive treatment by leaders during divorce precipitated spiritual crises; some women ended Church membership. Some women reported they were chastised and shunned by ward members and leaders. Divorced LDS women may also suffer long-lasting physical and mental health problems exacerbated by stress and guilt related to the centrality of marriage and family in LDS theology and discourse.[30] This theological focus makes being divorced in the LDS Church particularly painful. The loss of social and sometimes ecclesiastical status often leaves divorced women with feelings of unworthiness and of being second-class citizens.[31] Respondents who reported shunning, chastisement, and rejection by members of their wards seriously questioned their Church membership.[32] Even where abuse contributed to divorce, divorcées reported that ward members seemed to blame them. Some women who felt their bishops were dismissive of their complaints and took no action against their abusers subsequently requested that their names be removed from Church records.

Carol L. Schnabl Schweitzer, a Lutheran minister who writes about violence against women, says that leaders' and friends' unwillingness to believe victims can be the product of cognitive dissonance, especially when the perpetrator is a known and respected man. Nonetheless, Schweitzer says when clergy and church members respond with disbelief they are in essence siding with the abuser. Abusers often present in public as nice guys, but in reality may have a narcissistic personality or other antisocial personality disorder. If people express their disbelief when a woman reports behavior that is incompatible with her abuser's

public persona, she may be viewed as destroying "the perfect family," even though that perfection was illusory.[33] In the LDS context, if the victim divorces her abuser she may be wrongly viewed as breaking her temple covenants.

LDS physician John C. Nelson, who served as spokesperson of the American Medical Association's Stop America's Violence Everywhere program, says listening to a victim's story is important:

> When we listen, the very fact that someone is acknowledging that what is going on is wrong may be the first step in the victim's realizing that the abuse must be stopped. We need to listen carefully, we need to listen non-judgmentally.[34]

Church Response

As spousal abuse became increasingly known and understood in the American culture, LDS general authorities responded with sharp condemnation. Equality between marriage partners is the paradigm in LDS doctrine and spousal abuse is clearly viewed as sin. The abuse entry in Gospel Topics on the Church's Web pages states that "Abuse . . . is in total opposition to the teachings of the Savior. *The Lord condemns abusive behavior in any form–physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional.* Abusive behavior may lead to Church discipline."[35] (Italics added by author.) Injunctions to equality in marriage are ubiquitous. In 1995 the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles jointly issued *The Family: A Proclamation to the World.* That document avers that "men are to preside over their families in love and righteousness," but also that "in these sacred family responsibilities fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners."[36] The LDS Church's official policy on spousal abuse, including emotional abuse, is one of unequivocal condemnation. The *Church Handbook of Instructions* categorizes spousal abuse as serious sin, saying that "abuse cannot be tolerated in any form. Those who abuse or are cruel to their spouses . . . violate the laws of God and man. Such members are subject to Church discipline. They should not be given Church callings and may not have a temple recommend."[37] President Monson strongly reiterated the principle of equal partnership during the priesthood session of the April 2011 General Conference.[38] Words literally can hurt worse than broken bones, causing

injuries far more difficult to heal, and the Church makes no distinction between emotional and physical abuse. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles devoted an address to emotional abuse during a general conference in 2007. In "The Tongue of Angels," he cited Ecclesiasticus 28:17[39] (a book of the Apocrypha): "The stroke of the whip maketh marks in the flesh: but the stroke of the tongue breaketh bones." Elder Holland went on to warn, "A husband who would never dream of striking his wife physically can break, if not her bones, then certainly her heart by the brutality of thoughtless or unkind speech. Physical abuse is uniformly and unequivocally condemned in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . . Today, I speak against verbal and emotional abuse."[40]

Local Priesthood Response

How bishops and stake presidents respond to reports of abuse is critically important. General Church leaders have made abundantly clear what that response should be. It should be swift and sure, both to protect victims and also to protect others who may be vulnerable to future abuse.[41] Both of those objectives demand that abuse be investigated and that abusers be held responsible for their actions. President Hinckley said that when a Melchizedek Priesthood holder is "out of line," his stake president is obligated to summon him to a disciplinary council if he persists, "where action may be taken to assign a probationary period or to disfellowship or excommunicate him."[42]

It is very important for Church leaders to diligently deal with reports of spousal abuse because children who see parents abusing each other—either emotionally or physically—are at high risk of becoming abusers themselves.[43]

Ways Local Leaders May Fail

One hopes that most bishops and stake presidents deal compassionately and effectively with victims of spousal abuse, but the problem of inappropriate ecclesiastical response is significant enough that it has been publicly addressed by Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve, who said:

> As a bishop, when you counsel with a husband and wife who are in marital difficulty, do you give the same credence to the statements of

> the woman that you do to the man? As I travel throughout the world, I find that some women are short-changed in that a priesthood leader is more persuaded by a son rather than a daughter of Father in Heaven. That imbalance simply must never occur.[44]

There are many ways in which bishops may fail. Among them are: dismissing allegations; suggesting to victims that they may be responsible for the abuse; failing to appropriately investigate charges of abuse; permitting perpetrators to continue in Church callings and to hold temple recommends before they have owned their sin and demonstrated repentance; permitting priesthood bearers who are guilty of abuse to continue to exercise their priesthood; failure to support victims by referral for professional counseling (either to LDS Social Services or to private counselors, with financial support from the Church if necessary); asking victims not to report the abuse to legal authorities; counseling victims that divorce violates temple covenants; and failing to provide victims with support from the Bishop's Storehouse in the event of separation or divorce.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a fundamental gospel principle[45] as well as an important component in emotional healing, but when bishops focus too quickly on forgiving the sinner they get the cart before the horse. A rush to counsel forgiveness can be very damaging to victims, who may get the impression that their bishop is more concerned for the welfare of the perpetrator than in protecting a victim or helping her heal. LDS psychologist Wendy I. Ulrich believes forgiveness is the last step in healing from abuse. She counsels:

> Forgiving will take time for such serious offenses. When the offender is not remorseful or denies the abuse, the victim needs justice from other sources. The victim may wish to pursue legal action or restitution to pay for therapy and should not be shamed for doing so. . . . Victims must not be rushed in the healing process.[46]

Divorce

The doctrinal importance that Latter-day Saint theology places on marriage makes divorce a very difficult topic for leaders and members alike. Church members are taught from childhood that divorce should be avoided at almost all cost.

Some leaders and members view divorce as breaking the marriage covenant, although in reality when divorce is the product of abuse it is the abuse—not the divorce—that violates the marriage covenant.[47] Divorce and cancellation of temple sealing are but the legal mechanism whereby the Church recognizes that the union has failed. The emotional and spiritual burden attending divorce is accentuated by the extreme caution in affirming the appropriateness of divorce. Bishops and stake presidents are forbidden to counsel members to divorce. However, they are not required to counsel against divorce.[48]

Overemphasis on cautioning against divorce or slighting LDS leaders' affirmation that divorce sometimes is justified can cause victims to remain longer than they should in abusive relationships and contribute to unrighteous judgment by members. This is especially true depending on the context in which counsel is rendered. For instance, in 1991, Gordon B. Hinckley said:

> There may be now and again a legitimate cause for divorce. I am not one to say that it is never justified. But I say without hesitation that this plague among us, which seems to be growing everywhere, is not of God, but rather is of the work of the adversary of righteousness and peace and truth.[49]

In and of itself, this is a very reserved recognition of the appropriateness of divorce. But it takes on an even more restrictive tone at the hands of the editors of the *Eternal Marriage Student Manual* used in Institute of Religion courses Religion 234 and Religion 235. There, editors have added topical headings and President Hinckley's statement appears directly under a bold, black heading: "Resist Satan's Entreaties."[50] This treatment introduces a hurdle for readers to surmount in receiving the message that divorce is sometimes appropriate, a message already couched in a negative framework. Members may also draw mistaken or over-generalized conclusions when general authorities speak of examples in which couples overcame serious marital problems to become happy in their later relationship.[51] The statements of general authorities need to be considered in context, and in the whole, rather than focusing on only one side of an issue.

President David O. McKay (1951–1970) counseled that there

are "circumstances which make the continuance of the marriage state *a greater evil than divorce* [italics added by author]." He offered examples such as physical violence, habitual drunkenness, long imprisonment, unfaithfulness, and other "calamities in the realm of marriage."[52] Larry James Hansen, a former bishop and former chair of the Department of Family Studies at the University of New Hampshire, has defined "other calamities" to include emotional abuse. Similarly, in counseling that "the remedy for most marriage problems is not divorce, but repentance," Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve acknowledged that "members who have experienced . . . abuse have firsthand knowledge of circumstances worse than divorce. When a marriage is dead and beyond hope of resuscitation, it is needful to have a means to end it."[53]

Hansen rejects the notion that abuse victims should remain in a harmful marriage out of loyalty to temple covenants. He said, "To suggest . . . that Church policy requires people in abusive relationships to stay together to preserve the sanctity of marriage would be accusing the Church and its members of institutionalizing abuse in the name of God . . . [M]any faithful members of the Church are often reluctant to leave dangerous and abusive relationships even when conditions become physically, emotionally, and spiritually destructive. Some have even concluded that their covenants compel them to endure abuse as if it were just one more hardship designed to test their faith or pioneer-like endurance."[54] Hansen says that well-meaning but often uninformed people tell victims that if they will just live the gospel better, forgive, and love unconditionally, the abuse will stop. This naïve denial of reality and judgmental attitude toward women who pursue divorce to terminate abusive relationships compounds the pain of abuse and demonstrates the LDS community's inadequate or inappropriate responses to victims.

Church Discipline

The purpose of disciplinary councils is, first, to protect victims, including those who might be victimized in the future; second, to protect the Church; and third, to help sinners repent.[55] When local leaders fail to hold disciplinary councils for unrepen-

tant abusers, they forego an opportunity to help them recognize and forsake their sin,[56] and allow them to compound sin upon sin. Disciplinary councils also clearly establish in the minds of victims, family, and others who know of the abuse that the perpetrator and not the victim is responsible for the abuse.[57]

Toward a Better Future

The Church's challenge in creating a safer, happier, more spiritual atmosphere for family life does not seem complex or particularly difficult. It doesn't require fundamental changes in doctrine, policy, or practice. It does require concerted effort. It involves measures that general authorities can institute, things that bishops and stake presidents can do, and things that members can do.

Church-wide measures

General authorities could back initiatives in awareness, policy, training, accountability, and premarital education and counseling. Both socially and theologically, healthy marriages require equality. This is emphasized by LDS prophets, who speak of marriage as a partnership of equals.[58] Richard B. Miller, director of the Brigham Young University School of Family Life, says healthy marriages consist of an equal partnership between husband and wife, and that unequal power relationships are associated with marital problems.[59] In unhealthy marriages, one partner unrighteously dominates the other. Whether a companion is dominated by situational couple violence or through intimate terrorism, the principle of unrighteous dominion—forcefully condemned in scripture[60] and by modern-day prophets[61]—is involved.

Clear definitions and specific examples of both negative and positive spousal interactions coupled with better education and more clearly enunciated and more uniformly applied policies could go a long way in fostering healthier, happier marriages with greater celestial prospects.

Psychologists who counsel abuse victims generally believe that holding perpetrators accountable is important both to the recovery of victims and to prevention of future abuse. Katz writes that just as abusers must be held accountable for their conduct, social institutions must be held accountable for the way they respond, or fail to

respond.[62] If we accept Katz's analysis of the role of accountability in reducing patriarchy's contribution to gender violence in our society, it is vital that Church leaders not only condemn abuse, but also hold men accountable for abusive conduct. Failure to do so is a common problem in the Church. Some leaders apparently even send abusers to the temple, hoping that they will feel God's spirit there and repent. This practice has been reinforced in at least one *Ensign* article that reported a couple was sent to the temple a week after the husband confessed to his bishop that he had both emotionally and physically abused his wife.[63] One wonders; would a member who is still contemplating whether to give up coffee, tobacco, alcohol, or illegal drugs be sent to the temple in the hope that he will feel the spirit there and decide to make the effort? It is understandable that, in light of the Church's increasing emphasis on frequent temple attendance as a source of spiritual sustenance,[64] some ecclesiastical leaders may be tempted to send unrepentant abusers to the temple in hopes that they will be touched there by the spirit. But allowing abusers to continue to hold Church callings and go to the temple after their behavior has been revealed but before repentance is demonstrated sends a very spiritually and emotionally damaging message to victims.

Accountability

Abuse is learned behavior. Home is the classroom and parents are the teachers. Katz writes that efforts to protect women from abuse must focus not on the victims but on the perpetrators. Most men are profoundly influenced by both the example and the expectations of people around them, especially by male peers. Katz therefore urges use of male peer pressure to help combat male-based gender violence.[65]

Chronic negative interaction in relationships damages both adults and the children who live with them. Negative interaction includes patterns of frequent escalation of conflict, criticism, invalidation, contempt, and other behaviors. Elder F. Melvin Hammond, emeritus seventy, poignantly addressed the damaging effect of witnessing abuse:

> The way we treat our wives could well have the greatest impact on the character of our sons. If a father is guilty of inflicting verbal or

> physical abuse in any degree on his companion, his sons . . . are likely to follow the same pattern of abuse with their wives.[66]

Barbara Thompson[67] calls spousal abuse a form of child abuse.[68] Holding spouse abusers accountable for their actions is essential not only to the rescue of women from abusive relationships, but also for the protection of any children in the home and future generations. Forty percent to sixty percent of men who abuse women also abuse children, and more than three million children in the United States witness domestic violence every year.[69] Women who experience verbal abuse from an intimate partner also are at risk of abusing children. They are only slightly less likely than physically abused women to physically abuse children.[70]

Awareness

In a culture that defines the gospel in terms of "the great plan of happiness," many abused women wear false faces to church to hide their unhappy marriages. There is a great need for members and local leaders to be more aware of the existence and consequences of spousal abuse in the Church. Although LDS leaders have mentioned spousal abuse with increasing frequency in general conference over the past three decades, most references have been brief mentions in talks, rather than the main subject of addresses. Awareness could be elevated by more frequent and more prominent treatment in general conference addresses, in satellite broadcasts of regional stake conferences, and in worldwide leadership training broadcasts; encouraging stake presidents and bishops to assign talks on the subject in stake conferences and sacrament meetings; and posting telephone numbers for local women's shelters and the National Domestic Hotline, or local hotlines, on meetinghouse bulletin boards. Such posting would deliver a subtle message both to abusers and to their victims that the problem is recognized and condemned, and thus may give victims courage to seek help. Longer-term efforts could include revision of publications, especially those used as curriculum, or creation of new manuals.

Policy

Important policy considerations include (1) developing a

clear, workable definition of emotional abuse that rises to a level that warrants—if not demands—ecclesiastical intervention; (2) mandatory, loving, but rigorous enforcement of Church policy as set forth in the *Church Handbook of Instructions*; and (3) encouraging local leaders to treat the subject in stake conferences and sacrament meetings and to be quick to publicly censure abusive behavior. Part of the objective is to increase social pressure against spousal abuse.

Training

Local leaders' understanding of the nature of emotional abuse is vital to any prospect for progress toward a more spiritually healthy family environment, yet the Church provides essentially no training in this area. When bishops are set apart, they are blessed with the spiritual gift of discernment.[71] As with all gifts, some people seem to enjoy greater powers than do others. Surely there are occasions on which we may perceive knowledge by sudden inspiration, which we attribute to the gift of discernment; but often, exercising this gift requires recipients to do their homework: e.g., pray and study.[72] Leaders who are unaware of the symptoms of abuse are less likely to discern it, and leaders untrained in appropriate response are at risk of making damaging mistakes.

Family scientists believe that most clergy lack knowledge and training for dealing with abuse and therefore sometimes compound emotional trauma of abuse victims by sending them back to their abusers.[73] Inclusion of basic information about the causes, nature, dynamics, and consequences of emotional abuse also would be helpful.[74] This likely should be a component in a larger training effort on all types of abuse. Currently, the Church provides a 12-minute DVD, "Responding to Child Abuse,"[75] designed to be played at ward and branch councils, and a pamphlet, *Responding to Abuse: Helps for Ecclesiastical Leaders*.[76] While helpful, these materials lack the depth needed for improved awareness, understanding, and handling of abuse issues. Development of improved training might include information on the consequences of abuse, learning how to spot signs of unreported abuse, counsel on how to deal with suspicions or allegations of abuse,

and specific training in the very delicate matter of when and how to interview and counsel abuse victims. This would include whether to undertake counseling themselves, or to refer members to LDS Social Services or private marriage or psychological counselors in the community.

Even many marriage counselors and other social workers are inadequately trained to recognize verbal abuse, or physical abuse when physical evidence is not apparent. Social workers' responses to victims of domestic violence may hold biases and stereotypes about abuse that interfere with their response.[77] Surely this also is true of bishops and stake presidents. Although enjoined to seek out abuse victims,[78] they don't receive training in how to recognize evidence of ongoing abuse in their congregations.

Member Education

LDS doctrine declares that marriage is essential to God's eternal plan, the First Presidency has warned that disintegration of families will bring dire consequences,[79] and presidents Spencer W. Kimball (1973–1985) and Gordon B. Hinckley (1995–2008) have counseled that selection of an eternal companion is the most important decision members will make during their mortal life.[80] Given the importance of mate selection, the absence of concrete premarital education and counseling in the Church is perplexing. Surely large dividends would accrue from better training of our youth in healthy human relationships, mate selection, and rational expectations of married life.

The closest that general authorities come to specific advice is President McKay's counsel that, "In choosing a companion, it is necessary to study the disposition, the inheritance, and training of the one with whom you are contemplating making life's journey."[81] Elder Scott has enjoined members to "look for someone who is . . . kindly understanding, forgiving of others, and willing to give of self."[82] While this counsel is good, it remains both sparse and general in light of the importance that prophets place on families. The Church's youth are essentially left to cope as best they can, which is to say with romance and naiveté in a social environment that encourages poor choices in marriage partners. Macro environmental influences presumably are well understood, except by those smitten by the "love bug." Micro influences

are much less well recognized. The LDS culture exerts both official and unofficial pressure for early marriage with ubiquitous counsel from parents and sometimes even from local Church leaders to marry in a temple, and to "marry a returned missionary." Although temple marriage assures reasonable prospects for church activity, which does portend well for LDS marriages, it isn't a reliable measure of conduct in the marriage relationship. As a measure of faith and commitment to the Church, missionary service is relevant in mate selection, but it is not the only measure of religiosity. The unfortunate truth is that some returned missionaries make poor mates, while members who haven't served missions may make wonderful husbands.[83] Indeed, as heretical as the idea may appear to the faithful, some not of our faith make better husbands or wives than do some members of the Church. Ideally, sons and daughters will marry mates who exemplify both faith and commitment to the Church and who love their spouses as they love themselves,[84] treating them with gentle respect, honor, and love; but it is important to acknowledge incongruence between that ideal and reality. Although preparing children for marriage is and should be the primary responsibility of parents, the Church could share in teaching vital skills that will increase the prospects for happiness in marriages that will truly be eternal. Formalized programs in premarital education for all youth and single adults, and in premarital counseling for all couples who will be married under priesthood authority, could be very helpful.

Premarital education and premarital counseling are separate concepts, but are sometimes used interchangeably.[85] In this article, the two are treated as distinctly different.

Premarital Education

Premarital education is associated with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment in marriage, lower levels of conflict, and reduced risk of divorce.[86] Premarital education generally is a formal curriculum taught in group settings to help individuals develop skills that increase their prospects for successful marriage. Usually this effort is aimed at youth before they become engaged, but is available to engaged couples who haven't had the training. One study found that marital satisfaction increases significantly

with the number of hours in premarital education, up to ten hours.[87] Couples who received premarital education also had a thirty-one percent lower risk of divorce than couples who didn't receive such education. The Church provides analogous training via its website on employment, family finances, food storage, disability resources, and other topics, but not for what President Hinckley described as the most important decision of members' lives.

Premarital education can foster careful deliberation and lower the risk of marital distress and divorce.[88] This comports well with Elder Oaks' injunction that, "The best way to avoid divorce from an unfaithful, abusive, or unsupportive spouse is to avoid marriage to such a person."[89] This implies taking time to get to know a prospective mate and, where possible, taking time to observe and to get to know his or her family.

Premarital Counseling

Premarital counseling usually consists of meetings of an engaged couple or a couple contemplating engagement with either trained clergy or a professional counselor. The Catholic Church and some other denominations require premarital counseling if the wedding ceremony will be conducted by clergy.[90] Counseling usually consists of more than a single session and is much more detailed than temple marriage interviews customarily conducted by LDS bishops.

Effective premarital counseling explores the personality traits and expectations of couples as they contemplate marriage. It gets specific, helping each member of the couple evaluate their prospects for successful marriage to the other. It explores their individual backgrounds and expectations with respect to such things as balancing job and family, any debt being brought into marriage, managing family finances, communication, handling anger, sexual relations, expectations of each other about household tasks, and other mundane but important matters. The process of spiritual development and religious expectations of each other also would be important subjects for LDS counseling.[91]

What Members Can Do

It is primarily a parental responsibility to prepare children to

go into society as functional adults, and preparation for marriage is one of many areas that demand far greater attention than youth now receive either through the Church or through public schools. The most important thing we can do to help our children avoid the tragedy of abusive marriages is to set the example for them by ensuring that our marital relationships are abuse-free.[92] Members, and especially parents, should inform themselves about premarital education, mate selection, and spousal abuse. Taking literally the injunction to "seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom, seek learning even by study,"[93] they should avail themselves of reliable sources on the internet, in local libraries, and through reading newspapers, magazines, and books on relevant topics.

If parents suspect abuse they should observe carefully and inquire gently, remembering that victims may deny their abuse. Parents should not hesitate to report it confidentially to the bishop if their concerns persist.[94] If someone—whether a married child, a ward member, or another associate—asserts she is being abused, she should be encouraged to report it, and confidants should especially avoid any reaction that may make her feel that she is not believed. If parents witness emotional abuse, they should challenge the abuser. If a daughter discusses an abusive relationship with her parents or a sibling, they should consider the possibility that she may be making only a partial disclosure of the seriousness of the abuse and therefore should not counsel her against divorce or encourage her to continue living in an abusive relationship. Parents, siblings, or friends may appropriately encourage a victim to discuss the matter with her bishop and to seek professional counseling. If there is any indication of physical violence or even threats of physical harm, the victim should be encouraged to report it to police and, if necessary, go to a women's shelter. Most of all, members should ensure the victim that they will fully support her in decisions aimed at ending the abuse, even if that means divorce. Finally, we all should be nonjudgmental about couples that separate or divorce. We don't know what goes on behind closed doors.

Conclusions

The Church condemns abuse, including emotional abuse, in strong, unequivocal rhetoric; but as demonstrated here, it does

not meet the full measure of the need to protect present and future generations of women, the sanctity of temples, or the reputation of the Church. Examined in the whole, the policy for responding to abuse is sometimes ambiguous. More could be done to educate members to avoid abusive relationships, to train local leaders for response to abusive relationships, and to hold abusers accountable. Regardless of what the Church provides, it is primarily the responsibility and province of parents to set the example of righteous, healthy relationships and to educate themselves about emotional abuse and then teach their children how to objectively evaluate prospective mates and choose wisely. Through the Book of Mormon prophet, Jacob, the Savior excoriated husbands for sinning against their wives, saying, "I, the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people . . . because of the wickedness and abominations of their husbands. . . . Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them; and the sobbings of their hearts ascend up to God against you."[95] While these verses specifically address unauthorized polygamy, there is an analogy with the sorrow and mourning of victims of spousal abuse in today's church who cry out in agony to the Lord, and to his servants in priesthood office, as victims of wicked and abominable behavior. Many victims so read these verses, and President Gordon B. Hinckley cited this scripture in the context of spousal abuse.[96] Surely the Lord is no less empathetic with the plight of his daughters today than He was with the Nephite wives and daughters. The Lord has commanded His church to purify itself, warning that if it fails to do so he will seek another people, "So long as unrighteous acts are suffered in the Church, it cannot be sanctified, neither can Zion be redeemed."[97]

Additional Reading

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Notes

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13. Katz is an internationally recognized authority on gender violence prevention education. He was a member of the U.S. Secretary of Defense's task force on domestic violence in the military from 2000–2003, and co-founded the Mentors in Violence Prevention program at Northwestern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society.

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