



# Counseling the Clergy on How to Help Victims of Domestic Violence

By SaraKay Smullens, M.S.W., B.C.D.

## Abstract

In 1995, SaraKay Smullens was instrumental in forming a coalition, the Sabbath of Domestic Peace, to involve and educate clergy of all denominations about the realities of domestic violence. She describes clergy active participation as "the missing link" in addressing this virulent epidemic. The following paper describes the mission and focus of the Sabbath of Domestic Peace coalition, its rotating sponsorships and the process through which it came into being.

## Key Words

Abuse, clergy, coalition, interfaith, violence

When a woman who is a victim of domestic violence first finds the courage to ask for help, her appeal is most often made not in a call to a therapist, a friend or even to 911. Through the years in my clinical practice, as well as in my community efforts with victims of abuse, I have seen that the majority of abused women first turn to their priests, rabbis, ministers or imams.

Religious leaders are seldom trained to be sensitive to the presence of domestic abuse and often do not recognize a cry for help from one of its victims, especially when the message is delivered indirectly by a woman who confesses that things are not going well at home. Sympathetic religious leaders who recognize that these women are in distress — or even in danger — more often than not counsel them to go home, try harder to get along with their partners and pray.

Psychotherapists are all too familiar with the symptoms of domestic abuse and with the reality of domestic violence against women. Nearly one of every three women in the United States experiences at least one physical assault by a partner during her adulthood (American Psychological Association [APA], 1996). By the most conservative esti-

mate, one million women in the United States suffer nonfatal violence by an intimate each year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995); by other estimates, four million women suffer a serious assault by an intimate partner during an average 12-month period (APA, 1995).

While working with victims of domestic abuse as a consultant to the district attorney's office in Philadelphia during the spring of 1994, I realized that no link existed between the clergy of all denominations and the many civil servants, mental health professionals and others who were working to eliminate domestic violence in the Philadelphia region. It seemed imperative to form a union between these groups, with the following communication and education priorities: To assist religious leaders in understanding the complexities of domestic violence; to help them

respond to incidents of domestic violence within their communities; to support congregations in taking action to prevent and reduce domestic violence; and to provide religious leaders and members of their congregations with psychologically sound information and referral sources.

## **We stress that a woman should be asked if it is safe for her to go home; and, if not, whether she has a place to go.**

With the help of the district attorney's office, I compiled a list of representatives from three major professions and interest groups working to prevent domestic abuse: family therapy, social work, law, law enforcement, medicine, academia, feminist organizations and volunteer groups. Letters were sent to 30 representatives of these interest groups, asking them to join a coalition to educate clergy about domestic violence. I elicited the support of the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Jewish Congress, whose president, Jeff Pasek, agreed that the chapter would be the inaugural sponsor of our new association, to be called The Sabbath of Domestic Peace.

In its mission statement, The Sabbath of Domestic Peace identifies itself as "an interdisciplinary, interfaith coalition to encourage and support the involvement of religious leaders and congregations in the greater Philadelphia area in their efforts to prevent and reduce domestic violence by raising awareness and providing educational and resource materials."

Nearly every one of the original invitees agreed to help organize this new coalition, and we began to plan for a citywide observance one weekend in October, 1995, to communicate to our area's myriad religious communities the realities and the impact of domestic violence. Members of the coalition compiled a list of active community programs, shelters, and other resources devoted to assisting victims of domestic violence. We also gathered existing resource materials on the subject, which we used to prepare a set of realistic, reliable guidelines to be printed and circulated to clergy of all denominations for their use in counseling victims of domestic violence.

A next step was to obtain an endorsement from Philadelphia's Mayor Ed Rendell (now running for the Democratic Nomination for Governor of Pennsylvania). Mayor Rendell not only agreed, but provided space at City Hall for two open houses, and we sent letters to the leadership of the major religions in the Philadelphia area, asking them to send representatives. Those who came helped us to compile biblical references of hope and support, affirming that no one should endure marital abuse; some provided copies of their own sermons to be added to our materials for distribution. With the help of these representatives of the cloth, we contacted other clergy who were receptive to our mission, urging their participation. Gradually, representatives of all the major religions complemented and enhanced the professional membership of our coalition. We became a most interesting and diverse group.

Within a few months, we were able to begin an intensive outreach effort for our first Sabbath of Domestic Peace in October, 1995. Our goals were threefold: (1) to make personal contact

with as many clergy as we could, offering any input they requested, including resource materials, workshops, speakers, and in-house training sessions; (2) to ask all houses of worship and faith communities in the Philadelphia area to offer sermons or workshops on domestic violence during the Sabbath of Domestic Peace weekend; and (3) to provide clergy with the written materials we had compiled for their use and circulation. Mailing lists were provided by various religious dioceses and the Board of Rabbis, and individual mailings were sent to churches in the Yellow Pages not represented in our administrative lists.

Several clergy met with members of our coalition for training, and the coalition was invited to supply speakers and to organize workshops for a number of faith communities and volunteer groups. One member of our coalition volunteered her public relations expertise on a pro bono basis, and as result of her efforts, local newspapers published several articles about the Sabbath of Domestic Peace and its work, and members of the coalition were invited to participate in many radio and television programs. At every opportunity we communicated the importance of a relationship between clergy and mental health professionals.

The information which the coalition continues to circulate through the mail, through media, and through workshops and speaking engagements includes material that therapists know well, but which many clergy do not. The coalition's materials are inclusive, and clergy and congregants are able to use them in their own workshops without participation from the coalition. In workshops, discussion groups, speaking engagements, television and radio appearances, and in all printed materials, members of the coalition emphasize the alarming statistics about domestic abuse and share five concise educational capsules that we developed which have proven effective in educating clergy as well as laymen: (1) Effective Clergy Counseling; (2) Myths and Realities of Domestic Abuse and Violence; (3) Why Women Stay; (4) The Emotional Dance of Domestic Violence; and (5) The Many Faces of Domestic Violence.

### **I. Effective Clergy Counseling**

We urge religious leaders to keep in mind that a clergyman may be the first person an abused woman talks to about her situation. We advise them to recognize that it is difficult for a woman to acknowledge that she is a victim of abuse. She may not label what happens to her at home as abuse; instead, she may talk about her partner being upset or things not going well at home. We advise clergy to listen to what they are told, believe what they hear, and understand that women may be embarrassed, confused, or ambivalent about what they are experiencing. We also ask clergy to be aware that it usually takes time for an abused

partner to be able to leave a marriage. We ask them to communicate that no one deserves to be hurt, and that the parishioner's safety and that of their children are of deep concern. We ask that they tell victims of abuse that they are not alone and that help is available. We stress that a woman should be asked if it is safe for her to go home; and, if not, whether she has a place to go. In addition, we advise that she be told about the need for a thorough plan for leaving—when to go, whom to call and whom not call, what to take, and so on. Further, she needs to be provided with an updated list of resources available to help her. Above all, we advise against suggesting joint marriage counseling, because this can be dangerous until the violence has stopped and a woman is safe; an abused woman who speaks openly in counseling sessions with her partner is in danger of being assaulted following a session, as are her children.

## 2. Myths and Realities of Domestic Abuse and Violence

We communicate the most common myths about domestic abuse and their corresponding realities:

**Myth:** Women enjoy being abused.

**Reality:** No one enjoys being abused.

**Myth:** What happens in the home is private. Outsiders should not get involved.

**Reality:** Turning away from abuse in a home is tantamount to condoning violence. Ending domestic abuse is everyone's responsibility.

**Myth:** Women invent or exaggerate stories of abuse.

**Reality:** An abused woman is very reluctant to come forward and reveal what has happened to her. When she does get the courage to reach out for help, she must be believed.

**Myth:** Women are to blame; they provoke domestic violence.

**Reality:** A woman's behavior is not a cause or an excuse for violence.

**Myth:** Domestic violence is a problem only among the poor and minority groups.

**Reality:** Domestic violence happens in all cultures, races, and classes.

**Myth:** Financial security stops domestic violence.

**Reality:** Domestic violence occurs at all socioeconomic levels.

**Myth:** Abusers are violent toward everyone, everywhere.

**Reality:** Abusers may be charming, helpful, and kind to those with whom they work or with whom they are involved in the community. Their abuse may occur only in their homes.

**Myth:** Marriage stops the abuse.

**Reality:** Violence escalates when an abuser marries.

**Myth:** Rape cannot happen in marriage.

**Reality:** When one is forced to engage in sexual acts against her or his will, a rape has occurred.

**Myth:** Prayer and faith alone will stop the abuse.

**Reality:** Prayer and faith alone will not stop the abuse.

**Myth:** Any woman could leave an abusive situation if she really wanted to.

**Reality:** Leaving an abuser is a very complicated process.

**Myth:** Abusive partners will always abuse.

**Reality:** The "honeymoon phase" of domestic violence should not be confused with a de-escalation of violence. However, with the right combination of counseling or therapy, commitment, determination, hard work, and community support, it is possible to change abusive patterns.

## 3. Why Women Stay

In discussing the question of why women stay, we concentrate on their fear, the risks of their leaving, their lack of economic resources, their physical and emotional isolation, their complicity to their partners, and their hope for change. We also address their confidence in the value of counseling for the abuser, which is a long and difficult challenge and only effective when a full commitment is made to a process that is exceedingly painful. We also address the problems of societal denial of domestic abuse, religious and cultural pressures to keep a family intact, the immobilizing impact of shame and humiliation, and the misguided belief that any father in the home, even an abusive one, is better than no father at all.

## 4. The Emotional Dance of Domestic Violence

In examining the emotional aspects of domestic violence, we affirm that abusive partners have an excessive need to control, but that this is only part of their story. Abusers have an impulse to control because their early childhood development needs have not been met. They have not learned how to care for themselves or

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their families in an adult way, and they attempt to avoid facing their feelings of inadequacy or having others discover their shameful secret. We explain that when frustrated by their own feelings of inadequacy, their only recourse is to react with rage. Because of their feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, they expect their partners to constantly parent, nurture, and protect them, and react abusively when their partners do not. We emphasize that abusive partners usually do not realize that they experience these frustrations or that they vent their feelings of inadequacy and helplessness through violence toward others. Further, we point out that women who remain in abusive relationships may not have achieved the self-esteem necessary to feel safe and secure within themselves; to compensate, they develop a strong need to be needed and remain in situations in which their abusive partners depend upon them. Often these victims do not realize that the "honeymoon phase" following an abusive episode is but a phase preceding the next episode of violence. The predictable violence they endure again and again continues to erode their self-esteem.

## 5. The Many Faces of Domestic Violence

In analyzing the many expressions of domestic violence, we define physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse, explaining that abusive interaction results from learned and developmental patterns of behavior. To decrease domestic abuse, it is essential to understand how one really feels about significant people and events, to deal with unresolved anger toward parents, to

recognize differences in how men and women communicate, and to learn effective communication skills. We point out that most children who grow up in abusive homes choose abusive partners or become abusers themselves, and that those who abuse were almost always eyewitnesses or victims of abuse as children. We explain that although they are usually unaware of it, abusive partners are often angry and conflicted about what they saw and experienced as children—how they saw their parents interact, and how they themselves were treated. Frustration and feelings of helplessness heighten the intensity of their anger. We stress that abusive partners have not experienced and learned respectful means of intimate communication and mature social behavior and that they see emotional abuse and physical violence as ways to vent their anger and handle their conflicts rather than facing and solving the problems within themselves.

On October 3, 1995, in response to heightened public awareness of domestic violence following the deaths of Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman the previous year, President Clinton proclaimed October Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Coincidentally, our new coalition's yearlong planning effort culminated in a ceremony less than two weeks later, when Philadelphia Mayor Randall proclaimed the Sabbath of Domestic Peace. That weekend, prayer services were organized throughout the area, and the next year, the Sabbath of Domestic Peace was expanded to a month of observances.

Initially, prayer services were held by individual churches for their respective congregations, but since 1997, the Sabbath of Domestic Peace has featured interfaith prayer services led by Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders. These interfaith observances are organized by the coalition's sponsors, and each October, following the prayer services, resource tables are provided, staffed by professionals who distribute information and make themselves available to counsel individuals. Last year, the coalition published an updated information and resource booklet, "Responding to Domestic Violence: Making Changes, Bringing Hope," which is being circulated throughout Philadelphia and nearby communities. This year, the Women's Center of Montgomery County, a non-profit organization in neighboring Jenkintown, extended the coalition's efforts by distributing an action kit to leaders of local congregations, inviting them to incorporate messages about domestic violence into regular worship services.

Since its founding, the Sabbath of Domestic Peace has been sponsored by a diverse group of secular and religious organizations: The American Jewish Congress in 1995; the Episcopal Diocese of Philadelphia in 1996; The Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1997; the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1998; the Philadelphia Board of Rabbis; the Women's Division of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia; and the Coalition Against Jewish Domestic Violence, cosponsors in 1999; and the Southern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in 2000 and The Eastern Pennsylvania

Conference of the United Methodist Church in 2001. With the support of our sponsors and the help of many highly experienced and dedicated volunteers, we operate on a shoestring budget. Each year a sponsoring organization allows the coalition to work out of its offices, which minimizes expenses for office space and secretarial help. Each year a sponsoring organization also collects all grants and individual donations to the coalition, which enables the coalition to rely on the 501 (c)3 tax status of its sponsor.

We know from our contacts with hundreds of individual clergy during the last six years that significant challenges remain to be overcome in addressing domestic violence within religious communities. The majority of male clergy do not address the problem unless they feel pressured to do so by their leadership hierarchy or by a determined member of their religious community. We know, too, that many abusers are powerful, financially generous congregants whom their religious leaders are especially reluctant to offend. Also, some members of the clergy are themselves abusive. But many caring members of religious communities are insisting that the crisis of domestic abuse be addressed.

As the coalition circulates its message, women and families who suffer from domestic abuse hear of our work, begin to see themselves differently, and recognize that new or previously unrecognized avenues of help are available to them. It is our hope that in future years the coalition will obtain funding to obtain precise data on how houses of worship and faith communities make use of the written materials sent to them each year; and to document the many services, workshops, and other observances during the Sabbath of Domestic Peace each October. With volunteer help we have completed our web site ([www.montco.org/sabbath](http://www.montco.org/sabbath)) to make our resources more widely available, and we also are seeking funding for a professional who will help us further extend the coalition's communication and educational activities.

#### About the Author

Sara Kay Smullens, MSW, BCD, is a Philadelphia psychotherapist and writer whose commentary pieces frequently appear in Philadelphia's major newspapers, *Inquirer* and *Daily News*. A former Director of Family Life Education for Jewish Family Service of Philadelphia, Ms. Smullens' best-selling book, *Whoever Said Life Is Fair?* will be followed by *Enough is Enough: Breaking the Cycle of Emotional Abuse*.

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