



Abusers almost always show a need for control

APRIL 24, 2013 3:05 AM • [KELLY VOLL THE CITIZEN](#)

Although abusive people and their loved ones often try to find excuses for the abuse, such as being an abuse victim in the past, alcoholism, mental illness or anger management, experts say it usually comes down to one underlying issue — control.

"These are people who want to control every aspect of their own life, as well as every aspect of their partner's life," said Heather De Stefano, an assistant district attorney for Cayuga County specializing in domestic violence, sexual assault and sex offender violations. "Abusers tend to control their partners' money, friends, where they go, who they talk to and other aspects of the victims' lives."

Abusers will try to use excuses like past abuse against them as a justification for their own abuse, said Rhonda Stanford-Zahn, a therapist who primarily works with victims of sexual abuse.

"The basic truth is, there is no excuse for this," she said. "It's about power and control. ... They give themselves permission to use violence to get their needs met, their wants met."

Cayuga County Sheriff David Gould, who has been a law enforcement officer for almost 44 years, said the controlling nature of domestic violence offenders is a trait he's seen over and over.

"The defendant, the perpetrator, whatever you want to call that person, whether it be a man or a female — and as you know the stats are it's about 95 to 97 percent male against female — but that person is a dominating, controlling person," Gould said. "And that reflects in every relationship they have, even from a younger child, and certainly into teenagers and into a young adult and an adult. It's hard for that trait, that dominating trait, that controlling trait to go away."

Dr. Michael Lynch, a Buffalo-area board-certified psychiatrist who has practiced for 50 years, said there are other traits a domestic abuser might display, including antisocial tendencies, paranoia, poor relationships and temperamental behavior. An abuser tends to be one who externalizes blame, uses physical altercations to get his or her way, has poor impulse control, is unable to put off gratification, and shows immaturity, a sense of entitlement, narcissism and a lack of empathy.

Stanford-Zahn also spoke of abusers' having a sense of entitlement and a stunted personal reality. With both sexual abuse and domestic violence, "there are cognitive distortions in the abuser. They rationalize, they justify and they have a sense of entitlement."

"These folks actually ... they really do work on their victims until their victims start to have cognitive distortions, too," she said. "This is all about distortions of your reality."

Lynch said sometimes hard drug use can play a part in domestic violence, and Gould said that although drug use doesn't cause domestic violence, it can make an abuser more uninhibited in his or her violence.

"They tend to be more severe, but that doesn't mean you have to be an alcoholic or a drug abuser to be a violent person and be involved in a domestic violence incident," Gould said.

Past experiences could also influence someone to abuse, Lynch said. If a man had a poor relationship with his mother as a child, misogynistic tendencies could cause him to abuse a female partner.

And even if the problem stems from a troubled childhood, an abuser rarely realizes he or she needs help.

"They don't have that self awareness and they don't seek therapy," Lynch said.

Lynch also said male perpetrators of domestic violence have a higher incidence of having witnessed domestic abuse at home as children.

De Stefano agreed that domestic violence offenders can learn the abuse from childhood or have a personality that lends itself to control and abuse.

"We see a lot of ... that it's generational," she said. "Sometimes it's learned behavior, other times it can be a personality issue."

Although there are some traits abusers share, many times neighbors and acquaintances of the victim wouldn't suspect that his or her partner is abusive.

Zahn said abusers tend to be obsessed with becoming accepted in their community.

"Many, many times when we discover these folks, the woman is not believed because the men have made an extended effort to become a very well established and esteemed member of the community," she said.

"The general public has this image of a brutal person," she continued. "(But) these are very sophisticated individuals in the way they operate."

De Stefano agreed that it can be hard to spot an abuser from the outside.

"You would be surprised sometimes," she said. "People from all walks of life commit this type of violence."

Gould also reported seeing instances of abusers who seem like healthy, productive members of society.

"A lot of times, they're very active in the community. They're active, they're on boards, they're active at their jobs," he said. "They're 'normal' people, until they walk in the door at home and their children are in fear, their wife or girlfriend's in fear. No one knows that

because their wife and children are afraid to tell people, but they're normal people for eight hours a day at jobs and work, and then they get home and turn into animals."

Zahn said abusers sometimes profile their victims, looking for people they know are vulnerable in some way, who can be discredited in the public eye, should the victim ever try to get help.

"Abusers think, 'How am I going to discredit the person that discloses? How can I continue to network positively in my social system so I can find people to support me?'" Zahn said.

Gould said when abusers manipulate those coming to the aid of the victim, it makes it tough on law enforcement personnel and others who are trying to get to the bottom of a situation.

"A lot of times they're very intelligent people," he said. "That goes along with the domination, the manipulative attitude of these people. They're professionals at manipulating people. ... And it makes it tougher for everyone involved because when we arrest these people, they try to make themselves look like they're the victims."

When asked if he believes abusers can change, Gould said quitting abuse is like quitting smoking or dealing with alcoholism. Abusers cannot be made to stop, he said. They must want to stop.

"It can be done. It has to be wanted. It can't be court-ordered," Gould said. "You can order somebody to go to anger management and they'll go just because the court orders them. ... It's got to be a wanted thing. It's got to be something that a person really, truly, in his or her heart, wants to do and wants to change."