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RAP

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Dangerous Relationships: Breaking Out of a Pattern

Editor's note: This article is part two of a two-part series. The July 2013 issue of the RAP newsletter covered the warning signs of dangerous relationships.

Even smart, high-achieving people can end up in unhealthy or abusive relationships—and some people repeat the same mistakes in successive relationships.

Getting caught in a cycle of violence can involve a host of emotions, and many abusers are good at manipulating those emotions to exert control.

“Control is important to someone who is abusive, says clinical psychologist Eve Kilmer, Ph.D. “For example, an abusive person may do something we call ‘gaslighting.’ It’s a form of mental abuse in which the abuser manipulates situations to the

point that a victim begins to doubt their own sense of things. The victim may begin to think they are overreacting to abuse, instead of trusting their own instincts that tell them to get out.”

What keeps people in abusive relationships?

In her private practice in Boulder, Colorado, Kilmer provides couples therapy along with other types of counseling. She says the biggest barrier to seeking help from a psychologist, counselor or domestic abuse center is a sense of shame.

“Victims, especially highly-educated ones, often have the idea that they should have been smart enough to recognize an abuser early on,” Kilmer says. “Or, they have started to believe that the abuse is somehow their fault.”

Some amount of conflict is normal in any relationship. In a healthy relationship, a partner should be willing to hear you out and resolve differences together. “An abuser will shut you down or try to derail the conversation,” says Kilmer. “They will focus on what you do wrong, and may try to scare you by throwing or breaking things. The behavior might stop short of hitting, but if the intent is to intimidate and control, it’s still abuse.”

Some victims are too forgiving, and try too hard to make things okay when they’re really not. “An

Breaking out of a pattern—whether it’s a relationship or an unproductive habit—can be difficult. When complicated by the stresses that go along with your residency, making changes can be a real challenge. When it’s time to make a change, you have a resource available 24/7: your Resident Assistance Program. A confidential and caring resource for even the most difficult relationship issues, RAP professionals will listen to your concerns. They are ready to help you navigate relationship rough spots as well as other challenges you may face during your residency.

Contact RAP: 813-870-3344

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abuser can be very convincing,” Kilmer notes. “They may apologize and promise they’ll never frighten or hurt you again. They may deny they have a problem, or they may claim *they* are the victim. They can be so good at it that they believe it themselves. And if you try to leave, the abuser doesn’t make it easy. They may even enlist other people—including friends and family—to get you to stay, and that can make it even more difficult.”

Kilmer recounts a situation in which a woman was slammed up against a car by her partner, who then blamed her for causing it because she was trying to escape. “No one deserves to live that way,” Kilmer says. “It’s never your fault for someone to be physically violent.

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“As long as habit and routine dictate the pattern of living, new dimensions of the soul will not emerge.”

- Henry Van Dyke

"Duluth Models" Show Contrast Between Abusive and Healthy Relationships

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, Minnesota has developed clear, easy-to-understand graphic representations that show the differences between an abusive relationship and a healthy, supportive one. The "Power and Control Wheel" depicts eight categories of characteristics that may be present in an abusive relationship. The "Equality Wheel" shows, with contrasting characteristics, what a healthy, nonviolent relationship may look like. Additional models depict issues related to culture, and the use of children post-separation.

The copyrighted Duluth models are available in English and Spanish at <http://www.theduluthmodel.org/training/wheels.html>

If you feel you are in immediate danger, don't delay.

RAP professionals are highly trained to help with domestic violence situations.

Make RAP your first call:
813-870-3344

Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.

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You should never have to feel frightened in relationship."

A therapist who specializes in couples therapy or relationship issues can help you recognize that a pattern exists, then help you break out of it. Some people, for example, will have had a succession of abusive relationships. A therapist can help you understand why you stayed in a relationship that was not mutually beneficial.

Breaking out of a pattern: start with small steps

"When someone is ready to change their life, they're often motivated by what they *don't* want," says Phyllis LeFevre, life coach, owner and senior practitioner at Inspire Momentum. "We know that people are motivated away from pain and toward pleasure."

While each relationship has differing dynamics, the steps for breaking out of a pattern are the same. "We can get so caught in the routine of life that we don't recognize unhealthy patterns or habits," says LeFevre.

Getting through residency is difficult enough, and there's not much time for reflection. Yet it is exactly during this time that residents can benefit from developing emotional, spiritual and physical health, including healthy relationships. "Residents can be role models to show their partners, families, colleagues and patients that they are committed to reaching their medical career goals and to being healthy at the same time," LeFevre notes.

Certified in Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), LeFevre uses her expertise to help clients identify specific issues and problems, determine their health and personal goals, and work through the process they will use to achieve those goals. The approach takes into account the client's motivation and looks at the obstacles that may thwart success.

"Just as a care plan is needed to guide a patient's health improvements, we need to start with a plan when we look to improve our own work or personal lives," says LeFevre. In her goal planning workshops, she asks participants to state their desired goal and outcome. Then she guides them to devise the steps that will lead to that goal.

"A plan gives you direction," she says. "It should always be stated in the positive. Ask yourself: where am I right now, and what do I want *instead* of that? Then visualize yourself having accomplished that goal."

Then create one-week, and one-month benchmarks, says LeFevre. "If a goal is too big or too far out, it can stop you from taking that first step."

A plan should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-limited, says LeFevre. It's also smart to recognize that you don't have to do this all on your own. "Remember, it is not a sign of weakness to ask for the help of a coach or counselor when you make life improvements. Would you ever think that it's a weakness for a patient to get help from doctor?"

Resources:

RAP counselors are experienced in dealing with the unique challenges of residency including situations of intimate partner violence and abuse. If you feel threatened in a relationship, and fear that a partner may be monitoring your calls, it is safe to call the RAP any time: **813-870-3344**

Safety Planning Checklist: <http://www.thespring.org/safety-planning-checklist/>

References

How to Help a Friend in an Abusive Relationship: <http://www.loveisrespect.org/get-help/help-others/help-a-friend>