

“Family Violence – Will it ever end? Exploring the ongoing impact of family violence on children and the complex role of faith.”

Introduction

I would like to acknowledge the great work of the Interfaith Network and the City of Greater Dandenong.

Warning

Unfortunately family violence is highly prevalent and so there are some or many of you who have had the sad experience of having been affected by family violence either directly or of a close loved one. Talking about some aspects of this issue and this topic today can understandably bring up distressing emotions. Please be aware of this and utilise your support systems or if needed professional services about this.

Patient

“Madeline” (pseudonym) is a 15yr old girl, who took an over dose Thursday night. On Wednesday her boyfriend Jayden went with her to the hospital for termination of pregnancy. She was 3 months pregnant. She hadn’t told her mother about the termination because she had had a big fight with mum and was staying at a family friend’s since Christmas. After the procedure she and boyfriend had a fight on the way home and he slapped her and broke up with her. She took the OD that night.

She dropped out of school middle of year 10. She has been depressed since year 8, with intermittent periods of self harming and 3 previous suicide attempts. She was with “Jayden” for the past 5 months and he had also dropped out of school and was using drugs and there was a lot of volatile and emotional interactions between Madeline and Jayden. These would get physical between them around once a week – slamming of things, throwing things, pushing, slapping.

Madeline has 1 full sister who is older and 2 younger half brothers. Biological dad left the family when Madeline was 7yrs old. He was heavy drinker and Madeline and her mum report that he was angry and scary, but they say he never physically hit them. Mum was depressed and drank a lot for the first 10 years of living with Madeline’s dad. She still drinks alcohol excessively but not as much as before. Mother’s next partner was also abusive – he was physically violent mainly towards mum and the kids were generally present when this was happening. He is still part of the family and they all live in his house.

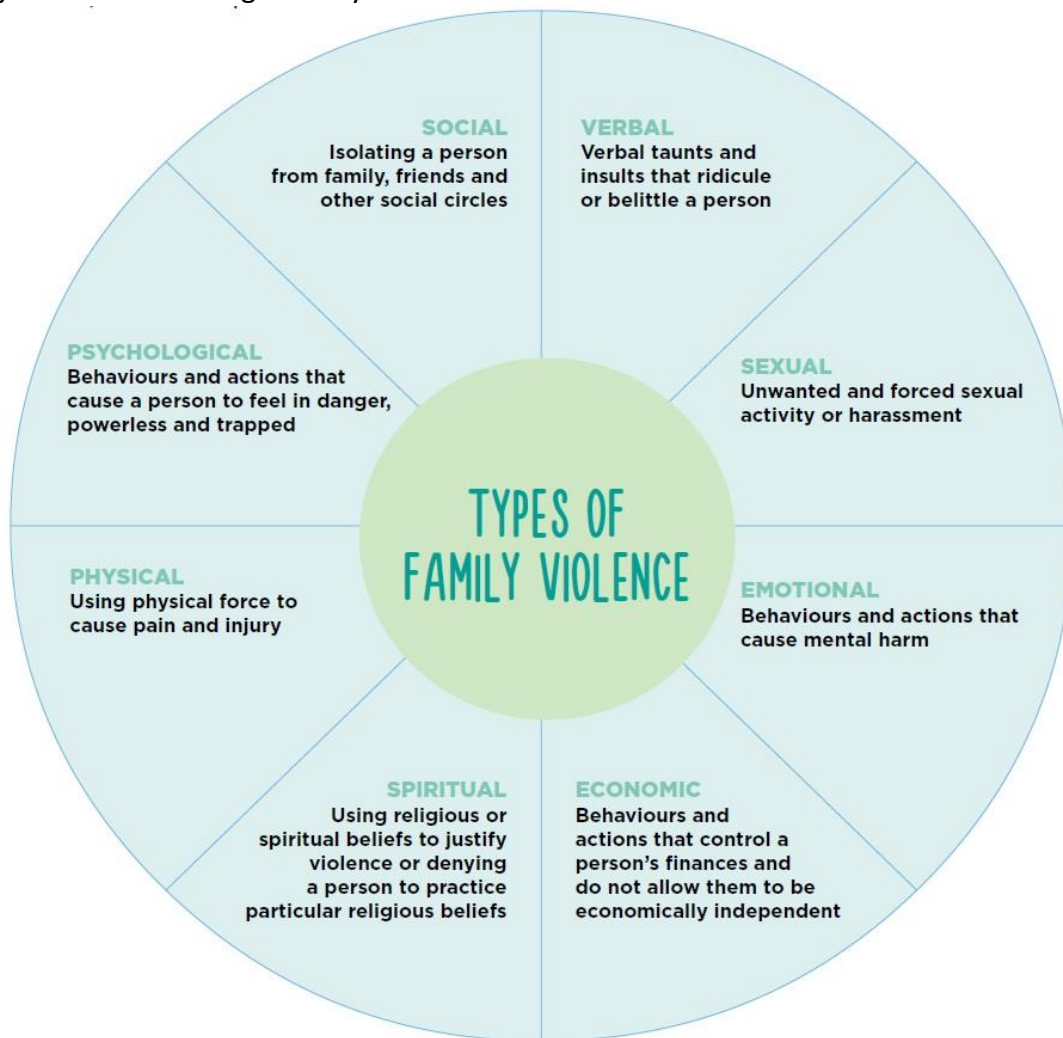
This patient demonstrates many aspects of this complex and tragic problem of family violence and its numerous impacts.

Just for completeness, what is family violence:

Family violence is any behaviour that is physically, sexually, emotionally or psychologically abusive, threatening, or in any other way controls or dominates the family member or makes them fearful. Violence is used to gain power and control over a family member.

Violence is not just physical. Family violence can also be sexual, emotional, psychological, social, economic, verbal and spiritual.

(From *Promoting equality and respect: An interfaith collaboration on preventing family violence* part of a project called 'Challenge Family Violence'.



To highlight just a few examples of the impact of violence in Madeline's life:

- The effects on a child's self-view and self-esteem:

Children from abusive homes can look fine to the outside world, but inside they are in pain. They may feel worthless and powerless. They may blame themselves for the abuse thinking if they had not done or said a particular thing, the abuse would not have occurred. They may also become angry at their siblings or their mother for triggering the abuse. They may feel rage, embarrassment, and humiliation.

Children of abuse feel isolated and vulnerable. They are starved for attention, affection and approval. Because mom is struggling to survive, she is often not present for her children. Because dad is so consumed with controlling everyone, he also is not present for his children. These children become physically, emotionally and psychologically abandoned.

- Effects on the mental health of children or adolescents?
There is an increase in depression and anxiety as well as self-harm behaviours and suicide thoughts and suicide attempts. There is increase in alcohol/drug abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- The impact on a young person's attitudes about violence? What might boys think about violence and what how might girls view violence?

Most experts believe that children who are raised in abusive homes learn that violence is an effective way to resolve conflicts and problems. They may replicate the violence they witnessed as children in their teen and adult relationships and parenting experiences. Boys who witness their mothers' abuse are more likely to be abusive of their female partners as adults than boys raised in nonviolent homes. For girls, they may feel that threats and violence are the norm in relationships and may learn not to question violence used against them.

Also, studies show that children become sensitized to interadult conflict – instead of “habituating” to such conflicts they become increasingly reactive: some “internalise” their emotions and become withdrawn and quiet, and many “externalise” their distress shown in excessive irritability, oppositionality or aggression. Madeline’s relationship with her boyfriend was volatile. Jayden probably also grew up in an abusive environment. And it seems like they were following what they are used to in relationships - intense emotions with aggression and violence, and each reacting to the other’s aggression with aggression.

And this is thought to be one of the mechanisms through which intimate-partner-violence is “transmitted” from one generation to the next. This is sometimes referred to as the “cycle of violence” (there is another sequences that is called cycle of violence but that refers to the timing sequence of violence: tension -> violence -> honeymoon -> tension etc.). A child exposed to family violence repeats violence or being in violent relationships as an adult and as a parent, and their children themselves then repeat this when they grow up and the cycle continues. There are a number of theories developed to try to explain the ways this repeating of childhood experiences happens – social learning theory, attachment theory, neurophysiological theory.

This cycle of violence or trans-generational repetition of family violence is one reason for the title of the talk “*Will it ever end?*”

If such transgenerational transmission takes place, is there any hope of reducing and preventing family violence?

It is important to note that although such “transmission” does take place, it is certainly not universal or inevitable. In fact many if not most individuals exposed to family violence as a child do not become violent individuals as adults or end up in violent relationships. This doesn’t mean we ignore this “cycle of violence” phenomena, but it does mean that there are other factors at play.

Factors/“Causes”

What these other factors are is complex and subject of debate. There is general consensus that gender inequality and male patriarchy are at play. Family violence is “caused” by or is result of multiple factors – male patriarchy and or environmental pressures seem to be necessary pre-requisites but which become explosive because of the individual emotional, psychological make-up or state of the violent party. There is also one or more pressures or stresses on the individual or couple.

Venn diagram of 3 intersecting circles –

- 1. Psychological functioning and behavioural templates of the individual:** anger control problems, childhood exposure to violence, views about violence, about women, alcohol/drug abuse.
- 2. Culture of gender inequality/patriarchy** – inequality of gender roles in society – workplaces, leadership; attitudes that support or condone violence against women.
- 3. Internal or external pressures** – financial, mental ill health, other health problems.

When there is overlap of two or three of these circles, that is when violence takes place.

What can we do?

Since there are multiple factors involved in resulting in family violence, this gives us opportunities to intervene or influence at multiple points or levels:

- Addressing cultural norms of gender inequality
- Changing values that accept violence as a legitimate conflict resolution strategy
- Reducing internal and external stresses and pressures that strain families.
- Addressing psychological functioning – deficits and strengths – of family members – both perpetrators of violence as well as victims.

Each of us here has multiple and different roles in society. Some of us work in the justice system such as in the police force, or as youth workers, some are teachers, health professional, mental health professionals, social service professionals, religious leaders or persons of influence. We are all family members, friends, neighbours, some of us could be victims, and dare I say perpetrators. We all can play a significant part to reduce family violence. And many of you are already doing so. There are many many ways can or are doing this.

I'll talk about just one or two points.

Role of Faith

Given that this breakfast is organised and hosted by the Interfaith Network and we are celebrating UN's World Interfaith Harmony Week, let me start by looking at some aspects of the role of faith.

Values and Principles

The abolition of family violence needs multiple approaches. We need the necessary legal framework, we need the social services and structures to support families and victims. We need health services to help those affected by and perpetrating family violence. We need education systems in place to promote respectful relationships.

As much as all these elements are essential, and all need expanding, they are not and will never be sufficient. What do I mean by this?

The primary challenge in dealing with issues of violence is to raise the context to the level of principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism and practical aspects. Because, in essence, non-violence and peacefulness stem from an inner state supported by a moral, ethical or spiritual attitude.

There are ethical spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem, in this case family violence. The essential merit of spiritual principles or values is that it resonates with what is inherent in human nature. It also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration and motivation that helps the person and the family to bring about change in behaviour and practical conditions of life.

All of us, in whatever role or capacity that we may be, in our efforts and contribution to preventing family violence will be well served if we would first seek to identify the principles or human values involved in the situation and then be guided by them.

I'm sure you can think of a number of principles involved in abolishing and preventing family non-violence. There is the principle of justice, respect, the nobility of human beings, trustworthiness, compassion, just to name a few.

When we are trying to prevent violence, or to help those already exposed to or perpetrating violence, when we include these principles – justice, nobility, trust and so on - into their efforts, it resonates with the person, it motivates the person more towards action.

Principle of Equality

Culture of gender inequality and patriarchy is one of the major contributors and causes of family violence. Patriarchy is an age old religious, cultural and social disease that has plagued us for thousands of years. At its core, patriarchy is a process of reducing human beings and their worth to their physical biological characteristics.

Religions and Faith have traditionally played a powerful role in cultivating the values of a community. But unfortunately the principle of the equality of men and women has not been easily observable in many of the Holy Books. Even though the many of the followers of these Holy Books believe in gender equality, sometimes it is difficult for them to reconcile their modern convictions with some of their recorded scriptures. We need to address this if we want to use teachings from a religious faith to achieve family and gender harmony.

In the international sphere, we find societies who continue to flagrantly violate the human rights of women based on interpretations of religious law. (In some countries, for example, marital rape remains outside of the law; a man's honour is a viable defence for murdering a female member of his family. In other countries, women have no right to divorce or to inherit; their education is considered optional or unnecessary.

Religious leaders have a pivotal role to play. If they are to be worthy partners in the construction of a more just and peaceful society, religious leaders must unhesitatingly raise their voices against the violation of human rights, against all forms of violence and fanaticism, and against the denial of equality perpetrated in the name of religion.

They must examine the ways in which their words, their actions, or their silence have enabled the status quo.

Religious leaders as well as those who are part of religious communities need to combat interpretations of religion that promotes discrimination against women. They also need to find new interpretations for those parts of scripture that seems to contradict gender equality. This is a confronting and uncomfortable challenge.

It is with much praise and gratitude that we note the Interfaith Network's and the City of Greater Dandenong's dedicated and practical contributions to promoting interfaith harmony and the issue of family violence.