

Money is no shelter from a violent household

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Editor's note: This is the second part of a two-day series looking at the domestic violence issue in the region. The names of the domestic violence victims and an advocate in this article have been changed or omitted to protect their identity.

In 34 years of marriage, Suzanne never went shopping - not even grocery shopping - without her husband beside her. He put his wife's name on their credit cards but kept them in his possession. He bought her a car because he wanted others to appreciate he earned enough money to support a two-car family, but he kept the keys. He had enough money to invest in a number of real estate properties but never allowed his wife to have money in her pocket, write a check or even see a bank book. The family had a computer, but before he left for work each day, he'd disconnect it, taking all the cabling. She had no girlfriends; she was rarely allowed to even visit her family without him.

The lesson taught by Suzanne's home life and that of many other women who live in apparent comfort, is that domestic violence isn't about the amount of money one has.

The image of domestic abuse as a demon only abiding in low-income, dysfunctional households is far from the truth, according to those who work with domestic abuse victims everyday.

"Domestic abuse is found in every socioeconomic group ... It's evenly distributed right across the board," said Marylou, a member of Georgetown's Domestic Violence Rapid Response Team. " ... The difference with abuse among those of high income is they hide it better."

Kelly Dunne, associate director of the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center in Amesbury, said she sometimes worries more about women of high income than others.

"I worry because they're less likely to pick up the phone and call the police or ask for help," she said.

The belief domestic abuse in high-income households may not be present or as dangerous as in lower-income households is not supported by experience, according to experts.

In Salisbury, police Sgt. Chuck Scione is the supervisor for the shift running from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m, the hours when most domestic abuse calls come into the department, he said. While he said most of the calls come from transient households living in inexpensive winter rentals near the beach, they see the other side as well.

"The worst cases of domestic violence I've seen have been in families living up town, in very expensive houses," Scione said.

An issue of control

Control and power are the motives of domestic abuse, either mental or physical, according to prevention advocates. Although alcohol and drug use can escalate the level of abuse, the real reason stems from one partner's obsessive need to control the other, Dunne said. More than 90 percent of the time, it's a man trying to control the woman in his life, she said.

Suzanne said the issue of control was paramount to her husband, and he was extremely jealous.

"To my husband love meant control," Suzanne said. "He'd say he loved me, but what he meant was 'I control you.'"

In the case of households of higher than average income, access to money is a common way one party controls the other, Dunne said.

"These women rarely see any of their husband's money," she said. "Their husbands control the money as a way of controlling their wives. I know women who live in million dollar homes who've had to come here to get food coupons so they could eat. I know a man who'd pack up all the food in a cooler every day and take it to work with him, leaving his wife with nothing. These women never see a checkbook; they never have access to money."

The verbal and mental abuse can be the beginning of the problem but often is not the end of it, Marylou said.

"Some women still think if they aren't being used as a punching bag, they aren't being abused," Marylou said. "... Domestic abuse is about control. It may be physical, verbal or emotional. And it escalates."

It wasn't until after her second child was born that Suzanne's husband added violence to his controlling nature, saying he felt she spent too much time with the children. From there, her husband's violence would erupt at least three or four times a year, but each episode was the same - he'd grab her throat, shake her and push her against the wall. She'd never know what might set him off.

"The last time he hurt me he kept pounding me against the wall," Suzanne said. "I blacked out a little and when I came to, I reached for the phone to dial 911. He ripped it out of my hands. He told me if I ever called the police, he'd kill me. I believed him."

Like Suzanne, Nancy is another woman living in greater Newburyport who lived a financially comfortable but abusive lifestyle for more than 20 years at the hands of her husband. He degraded her constantly, she said, and she believed his insults even though she had a college degree.

"He'd say to me, 'If I walk out, how are you going to support this house? Where are you going to live when I throw you out? You'll never see your kids again.'" Nancy said. "A lot of people blame the wife because she made the bad choice she did when she married the man (who abuses her). People shouldn't blame victims."

Breaking the silence

Picking up the phone and calling is what former victims, as well as prevention advocates, strongly recommend, and there are police departments and agencies in greater Newburyport and New Hampshire that are ready to help.

Many domestic abuse victims living in high-income households keep silent. That's a double problem, Dunne said. When these women finally do come forward, there is no "paper trail" of complaints to police or the courts to verify the problem exists. Worse, she said, these women and their children are living in a dangerous situation that can flare up at any time.

Many say women of high means and high education levels stay silent and endure abuse because they feel they have farther to fall. The children may be in private schools and enjoy clothing, sports, activities, hobbies and a lifestyle that takes money to support, Marylou of the Georgetown Rapid Response team said. In addition, these women would be embarrassed if their friends and families learned of their situation.

Suzanne and Nancy have broken free of their abusive homes with the help of family, friends and domestic abuse prevention agencies. They've left behind them the men who controlled their lives for decades.

Both women feel the need to reach out to others living in abusive homes. Both say women need to call police, crisis centers or domestic abuse response teams to help themselves and their children break the cycle of abuse.

"It is possible to leave with only a \$100 in your pocket and make a life for yourself. I did it," Suzanne said. "If I could speak to women in the same situation I was in, I'd tell them to get out. I tell them to call for help and make a plan if they have to and get out. I'm free now, and I feel good about myself for once in my life. I don't really need anything else but being free and feeling safe."