

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

We are very concerned about our twenty-nine-year-old daughter. She has been in a relationship with her boyfriend for over 4 years. She has no direction, takes anti-depressants, misses works, hates her job, and has a college degree that she has no plans to use. She has no girlfriends because her boyfriend does not allow her to have any that don't like him – and no one does. A few months ago, she was taken to the emergency room. She apparently fell but she could not remember how it happened. The doctor took us aside and suspected abuse. Her employer has called us and also suspected abuse because of her pattern of missing work. She does not visit us because he feels uncomfortable in our company, and she will not visit alone. She calls only when he is not there. Please don't tell us there is nothing we can do unless she asks for help. What can we do?

-- Concerned Mother

Dear Concerned Mother,

Your daughter's very life may be in danger. Battering is a pattern of behavior intended to establish power and control over another through fear and intimidation, including threats of violence. The first step is isolating the victim from other sources of support – such as family or friends – as your daughter's boyfriend is doing. This behavior alone should cause you to be concerned that she is in a very unhealthy and potentially dangerous relationship.

Battering sometimes takes the form of psychological abuse: name calling, excessive possessiveness, withholding of physical or economic resources, and the destruction of property. This kind of abuse often escalates from the verbal to the violence in her presence (such as punching a fist through the wall, threatening or hurting a family pet) to even more physically dangerous forms such as slapping, restraining, kicking, biting, and sexual assault. The abuse can become life-threatening, through choking, breaking bones, and the use of weapons.

The horrific scope of domestic violence is almost unimaginable. Most often women, children, and the elderly are the victims. Estimates suggest that their husbands or boyfriends abuse more than three million American women every year. In fact, statistically, the most dangerous place a woman can be is not walking down a dark alley, but in her own kitchen. Around the world, at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused during her lifetime. And, on average, three women are murdered each day by boyfriends or husbands.

After four years of abuse, your daughter may be afraid to leave, and afraid of what her boyfriend may do if she tries to get away. Her self-esteem is undoubtedly low, and she may not have the confidence to extricate herself from this abusive relationship. A pattern of coercion and control is often established whereby psychological or physical abuse is followed by apologies, and promises that the abuse will never happen again. The victim holds out hope, but unfortunately, the pattern of abuse doesn't really change. Time passes, anger mounts, and once again, violence erupts.

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But there is help for your daughter. Our society has a new and changing consciousness about domestic violence, and there are many sources of support. We now understand that abuse happens in every country, culture, age group, race, and economic class.

If your daughter is being threatened, she must call 911. She can also get help through The National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE); The Family Violence Prevention Fund (www.endabuse.org); The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (www.ncadv.org) among many other national and local organizations that offer resources to victims of domestic violence. (Note to readers on NC's Outer Banks: Hotline is an excellent local resource for victims of abuse. Call the Crisis Line at 252-473-3366 -- www.obhotline.org).

This will be the most difficult conversation you may ever have, but you must find a way to have a private talk with your daughter. Show up at her workplace if you have to, but get her alone.

Don't focus on her boyfriend. Don't tell her how he disgusts you, or that he doesn't deserve her. In fact, keep him out of the discussion altogether. Focus on your love for her, and her safety. Tell her that the doctor in the emergency room suspected abuse was the cause of her injuries after her "fall."

Tell her that her employer has called and is concerned. Say that you believe that she is being abused, and that you are there for her. Help her to understand that there are resources and options – she doesn't have to live like this. She is an adult and will have to make her own choices, take her own actions. But make certain she knows that you and her father are there for her—anytime, anywhere -- and together you can help her turn her life around. Do this today.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.