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Ask a psychotherapist

QUESTION: My sister is an abused woman. Her husband has a terrible temper and I've seen him scream at her and call her names out in public even when their kids are with them. I'm sure much worse goes on at home. Here's my problem: in one breath, she says she's abused and in the next, she says she can't leave him because she loves him! Meanwhile, I can see the toll this is taking on her and the kids. What gives? And what can I do to help her?

ANSWER: The reality of the situation ? an all-too-common one ? is that there is only a limited amount that any sympathetic person can do to help if the emotionally abused adult is not ready to make a change. In the case of domestic physical assault, if police are called to the scene, they are obliged to lay a charge. If children under the age of 18 are witnesses of domestic violence, the Children's Aid Society (CAS) can be called to investigate the situation. They may impose sanctions on one or both parents to seek therapy, anger management training and/or parenting instruction.

But from what you have said, the abuse sounds more emotional than physical and while arguably just as damaging to both victims and child witnesses, it is harder to prove. One of the effects of ongoing emotional abuse is the steady erosion of the victim's self esteem. Paradoxically, to observers, the meaner the abuser gets, the less capable the victim feels of managing on their own. This has been well-documented in hostage-taking events where hostages shift from hating their captors to idealizing them. It even has a name: The Stockholm Syndrome.

So what can you do for your sister at this point? Remind her that she does not deserve to be treated this way. Build up her self-esteem by telling her what you like about her and what she does well. Ask her what effects her husband's angry outbursts are having on her kids. Urge her to go to therapy or call the Assaulted Women's Hotline to chat about her situation with a professional. Written materials and advice for witnesses to domestic abuse can be had from both My Sister's Place and from The Elizabeth Fry Society.

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