

YWCA: Friends, family can help domestic violence victims after trauma (Guest column)

By MLive/Grand Rapids Press opinion

Tom Cottrell, LMSW, is the vice president of counseling services at the YWCA. In his 30 years at the YWCA—as a therapist, supervisor, and program director—he has observed victim services from a variety of perspectives. Tom is a qualified expert witness in 15 counties and has been a vital part of YW's growth in shaping the community's response to domestic and sexual violence.

By Tom Cottrell

GRAND RAPIDS, MI -- One in four women has been a victim of domestic violence. Victims are our friends, siblings, children, co-workers, neighbors, and members of our faith communities.

Though tragic news headlines can feel so distant from our own lives, statistics reveal we all interact with victims of violence, whether we know it or not. My hope is to briefly offer some information on the neurological response a victim has, why ending a relationship is difficult, and how we can help support victims in their journey.

Science tells us that, in a moment of trauma, our brains instinctively focus entirely on immediate survival.

Blood vessels expand, adrenaline and cortisol steroids flood our bodies, and our capacity for complex problem solving is temporarily suspended so that our brain can focus on the immediate threat.

Our brain then develops new neural connections, pairing fear and stimulus, so that we will respond immediately to similar dangers in the future. For a victim in an abusive relationship, an assailant's repeated abuse causes these neural processes to occur again and again, affecting how trauma victims perceive the world.

This is one of the many ways that domestic violence reshapes how victims respond to their environment. For example, external messages contrary to an assailant's (such as offers of support) are not easily heard or even believed.

When helping victims of violence, an appreciation of this instinctive and involuntary process is vital for friends/family/neighbors/etc. and helping professionals. The YWCA is a strong advocate for this approach termed "trauma-informed care" and equipping those around the victim to aid in planning and strategizing to keep the victim safe.

Domestic violence breeds in isolation and is nurtured by our silence. As the brain rewires in order to keep the body alive, a victim's life begins to focus on just that: survival. But when a victim sees that we care—even if they don't initially believe us—they form new neural pathways that counter the effects of trauma. We must counter the assailant's actions.

Since victims, in order to survive, have already adapted to someone's expectations of them, we should not perpetuate this by trying to force or require them to leave, though it's easy to wonder why they stay. Remember that ending even a non-violent relationship is never easy.

These are just a few of the additional challenges to ending a violent relationship:

- You and your children have to find new housing and keep its location a secret.

- Your new budget is based on your income only; legal bureaucracy could mean child support is a year away, if at all.
- If you pack in the assailant's sight, your physical risk increases. If you flee in haste, you leave critical possessions behind, such as a child's medical records or birth certificate needed when you enroll them in a new school to keep them safe.
- You may have nowhere to turn because family and friends "can't watch you go through this anymore" and have stopped reaching out to you.
- Once you leave, your risk of further assault at the hands of your assailant increases exponentially.

Each of us is responsible for carefully helping undo the damaging effects of victimization. A victim's decisions may not seem logical to us, but, by simply demonstrating compassion and honoring their right to choose their path, we begin to neurologically undo the harm done by the assailant and help a victim build the capacity needed to achieve safety.

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Be a SAFE PERSON. Do you gossip, raise your voice, rant on Facebook, or tell people what to do? Though seemingly benign, these reinforce for a victim that reaching out for help will only make them more vulnerable.

Be a PROACTIVELY SAFE PERSON. Be the person who expresses concern and elicits input without judgment. Bring the discussion of domestic violence to your workplace and faith community. Act as if victims are watching...because they are.

EDUCATE YOURSELF. You can't make a victim choose to end a relationship, but you can let them know what their choices are. You don't have to be the expert, but you should know how to direct someone to one.

If you or someone you know is in a violent relationship, call the [YWCA's](#) 24/7 confidential hotline at 616-451-2744. The YWCA offers counseling, safety planning, emergency and longer-term housing to victims, and assailant counseling. Safe Haven Ministries is also available at 616-452-6664.

Guest columns can be submitted to Dave Murray, the Grand Rapids community engagement specialist. Email him at dmurray@mlive.com and follow him on Twitter [@ReporterDMurray](#) or on [Facebook](#) or on [Google +](#).