

Intimate Terrorism

The New Face of Domestic Abuse May Be More Familiar Than You Think By Gemma B. Allen

The bruising may not be visible on the outside, but inside, the victim – usually a woman – suffers deep emotional wounds, hesitates to seek help and frequently lacks the courage to leave.

It's called "intimate terrorism," and is a new term for a form of domestic violence that is now recognized by psychologists and the courts as a potent and potentially deadly form of emotional and sometimes physical battering. Especially in its early stages, it is bullying so skilled and subtle that the actions of the perpetrator are not considered measurable on the personality disorder scale typically used by psychologists.

A phrase originally coined by researcher Michael P. Johnson, Ph.D., "intimate terrorism" is typically perpetrated by a man who is often educated and financially well-to-do. He makes threats, wields economic control, applies privilege and punishment, manipulates and threatens the children, isolates the victim and inflicts sexual abuse. It is an abuse that, if not stopped, frequently escalates over time.

Spotting the Signs of Intimate Terrorism

Believe it or not, intimate terrorism may even start in the dating phase. If your significant other always wants to know where you are and what you are doing, beware. If he "surprises you" by showing up at your work-related social gatherings or just at your office, be careful. We've all had girlfriends who were dating someone incredibly possessive. She may think it's flattering, but that level of possessiveness can be a sign of an intimate terrorist in the making. How many of us have watched our favorite outgoing friends turn meek and subdued when they are out with their alleged "Mr. Right"? The fact is she may already be under the spell of an intimate terrorist who wants her to behave "his way."

The local news media has cast a spotlight on recent cases of intimate terrorists taken to its most fatal extremes. Families and friends of missing or murdered women have described how a controlling, significant other had limited the victim's access to money or even the car. They had been threatened that if they did not behave in a certain way and please and appease the intimate terrorist, they or their children would be endangered.

The Exit Plan

Like victims of other forms of domestic violence, women who are victims of intimate terrorists usually cannot leave the spouse until they get fortified both financially and emotionally. Until then, there are steps a woman should take to protect herself and her children.

- Carry with you or commit to memory emergency phone numbers of the police or local sheriff's office, a domestic hotline, a counselor, member of the clergy and an attorney.
- Keep spending money with you at all times to use in an emergency.
- Document every incident in handwriting (not on the computer) and store these notes in a safe place.
- Have a code word to use with a family member or friend that signals you may need urgent help.
- If you work, confide in your boss or supervisor about the potentially volatile situation. Request confidentiality.
- Have valuable papers, such as your social security card, bank statements and birth certificate, documentation of previous incidents, et cetera in a safe place that you can take with you if you leave.



- Report the incidents to the authorities. The response by police and the courts has changed in recent years, and they no longer view domestic abuse as strictly a family matter that can be resolved with a "time out" period where one spouse leaves the home for a short period.
- Have the courage to see a qualified therapist or member of the clergy. Many victims fail to come forward because of the "shame" factor.
- Take steps to become financially knowledgeable and, if possible, independent.

During the Legal Process

In court, the batterer may try to look like the best dad on earth. He likely projects a non-abusive image and presents himself as the parent most willing to cooperate and communicate. More often than not, he's able to fool some of those in the court system.

In contrast, women exposed to intimate terrorism manifest post-traumatic stress syndrome: they are depressed, often victims of substance abuse, have difficulty maintaining focus and are often in poor health. They may come across as angry or emotional, and may overreact to seemingly trivial issues.

Luckily the court system is becoming more sophisticated. It now recognizes that not every form of violence is the same, and sometimes, the more subtle forms can be equally destructive. If you decide you want out of this type of relationship, find a good psychologist and a strong attorney to counsel you through the warfare that almost inevitably includes a custody battle.

Beginning the Next Chapter

The intimate terrorist may continue his activity even after the couple has separated or divorced, so the victim should continue to provide for the safety of herself and the children, changing locks on the doors, varying her routine and asking a trusted neighbor to keep an eye out for her "ex."

The carefully drafted parenting plan with exact schedules and clear lines of decision-making authority will help the former victim in her next chapter; so will the final division of assets, which will hopefully provide her with time, money and a safe place for herself and her children. ■

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