

Spotting the signs of domestic abuse

By MC1 (AW) Tim Comerford, The Flagship Staff Writer

NORFOLK, Va. -- Sailors from Naval Station Norfolk learned more about domestic abuse and what to do if you see the signs of abuse, Oct. 21.

"We do this training at least every year and there is a reason for that," said Amanda Burbage, Domestic Violence prevention educator at Fleet and Family Support Center Norfolk. "Just in Hampton Roads for the Navy and Marines there were 1,600 reports of spouse abuse. Of those reports almost a 1,000 were substantiated. What substantiated means is that family advocacy learned about the suspected abuse, convened a Case Review Committee (CRC), comprised of medical, legal and FAP (Family Advocacy Program) personnel, they look at a definition of domestic abuse set forth by the Navy and say whether they think it falls under the definition."

The process though is not to penalize the Sailors.

"It is not a legal process, it is a therapeutic process," said Burbage. "There is a big difference. In a legal process there is evidence, in the CRC process there is information. A legal case can find a person guilty or not guilty, the FAP can only say that they think that it did or did not happen. If they think it happened, they can get a referral for service that they think can rehabilitate the victim, the offender or both. That way the cycle of violence stops."

There are three phases when it comes to an abuse relationship.

"Relationships start in the honeymoon phase," she explained. "The honeymoon phase is when we really like our partner, we think everything is so cute about them like, 'it is so cute that you always wear the latest fashion, I love how trendy you are. I like the way that people look at you when we go out and I know that I have a fine man on my arm or I have a fine woman on my arm.' But the staying in the honeymoon phase is not easy because life happens."

"Then every relationship goes to the next phase - the tension building phase. And in that phase life sets in. Suddenly 'its not so cute how trendy you are because you are spending our rent money on clothes and I don't like that. Its not so cool that you always look so good because who are you trying to impress. Why does it always take you three hours to leave the house? We are always late for everything.'"

"In a healthy relationship they would talk about these issues and try to find a resolution to the problem and prevent it from reoccurring or they might break up," said Burbage. "In an abusive relationship, it escalates into the explosive phase and that when you see the elements of abuse."

Elements of abuse can be physical, but the abuse is ultimately about power and control.

"When you hear people say, 'hey I have to check in every 30 minutes,' that is an indicator that someone is one the other end of that phone waiting for them. It is really easy to use children as spies, Children love to tell stories and they love to tell them at inappropriate times."

Victims of domestic abuse may cover up for their spouse.

"Victims are phenomenal about hiding the abuse," she said. "They may say, 'oh, I pulled a box off the shelf and it hit me in the eye' or 'This? Oh, no I walked into a door jam.' It seems kind of trite. But when you are in that moment you want to believe them. Because you don't want to believe what may be true, it's a little scary."

Children abused may do the same.

"Adults are good at coping and so are children. Children can be open about what is happening, but more often than not they know to hide it just like the victims knows to hide it or they will face the wrath of the abuser.

Being abused does not make you less of a person.

"There are lots of reasons that people stay in these relationships," said Burbage. "It doesn't make them bad, or weak or stupid. Each person has their own reasons why they might stay in the relationship, sometimes it may have to do with the nature of the abuse."

"If you are abused economically then you probably don't have the financial means to leave the relationship. Many people have the memory of the honeymoon phase and don't want to leave because they are still in love. That doesn't make them wrong, it just makes them human."

And many problems in our relationships can come from the people who taught us what a relationship is supposed to be and how to interact with people - our parents.

"Many of us learned our relationship skills at the 'university of home,' and let's face it, we may not have had the best professors," explained Burbage. "So we may have to learn new skills. Part of breaking the cycle of domestic violence is stopping the abuse from happening in the first place. The way to do that is looking inside of yourself and make sure you are a strong and healthy individual and getting into relationships with other strong and healthy individuals. As the relationship progresses you have to keep doing that gut check and asking yourself 'Are we healthy? Are we safe?'"

If a Sailor is being abused, they should speak with a Domestic Violence Victim Advocate (DVVA).

A domestic violence advocate is someone whose primary interest is the safety and protection of victims of domestic violence. Navy families have domestic violence advocacy resources in both the civilian and Navy communities.

The Navy Victim Advocate Program provides services to victims of domestic violence. Although Navy victim advocates cannot provide totally confidential services, there are many ways that they can be helpful. Services include:

- Support, safety planning and crisis intervention.

- Assistance obtaining military protective orders and civilian injunctions.

- Accompaniment to court hearings, legal proceedings and investigative interviews.

- Victim rights information.

- Referrals to military and civilian resources.

- Transportation to medical, legal and counseling appointments.

- Liaison for the victim with commands and community agencies.

Under the restricted reporting option, victim advocacy assistance can be provided without a report being made to command. The Family Advocacy Program does not have to be involved with the victim / family in order for a victim to receive services from a Navy victim advocate.

"Victim Advocates are an excellent resource, they can just sit and listen or they can take you all the way through the process," said Burbage.

If you think you may be a victim of domestic abuse, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE or visit your installation Fleet and Family Support Center for information on available resources.

The cycle of violent relationships

In 1979, psychologist Lenore Walker found that many violent relationships follow a common pattern or cycle. The entire cycle may happen in one day or it may take weeks or months. It is different for every relationship and not all relationships follow the cycle - many report a constant stage of siege with little relief.

This cycle has three parts:

The honeymoon phase - The abuser may exhibit loving, kind behavior, generosity and helpfulness.

Tension building phase - Tension builds over common domestic issues like money, children or jobs. Verbal abuse begins. The victim tries to control the situation by pleasing the abuser, giving in or avoiding the abuse. None of these will stop the violence. Eventually, the tension reaches a boiling point and physical abuse begins.

Acute battering episode - When the tension peaks, the physical violence begins. It is usually triggered by the presence of an external event or by the abuser's emotional state - but not by the victim's behavior. This means the start of the battering episode is unpredictable and beyond the victim's control. However, some experts believe that in some cases victims may unconsciously provoke the abuse so they can release the tension and move on to the honeymoon phase.

The honeymoon phase - First, the abuser is ashamed of his behavior. He expresses remorse, tries to minimize the abuse and might even blame it on the partner. He will genuinely attempt to convince the partner that the abuse will not happen again. This loving and contrite behavior strengthens the bond between the partners and will probably convince the victim, once again, that leaving the relationship is not necessary.

This cycle continues over and over and may help explain why victims stay in abusive relationships. The abuse may be terrible, but the promises and generosity of the honeymoon phase give the victim the false belief that everything will be all right.