



## Abuse: What Is It?

Abuse: *ab-*, away from + *uti*, to use. To use wrongly; misuse. In its most direct and basic form abuse means to mistreat or misuse. A tool, a car, a privilege or a child can be abused. Implied in this simple definition is the presupposition that we know the proper use of things and for that matter, people as well. This basic presupposition has varied some throughout history as well as among different cultures and people groups today. Even so, an essence, a reality has existed throughout time and across cultures whereby good and God fearing people have treated others as they ought; with respect, dignity, and fairness. Conversely, evil, godless men have made a habit of devaluing, oppressing and exploiting those more vulnerable than themselves.

What do we mean when we use the word abuse today? Certainly we mean that one has mistreated another, but the word usually means more than that for most of us. We choose the word abuse when someone has behaved in a way that is not acceptable, when they have crossed a line, when they have harmed another in a particular way. Safe Place Ministries would like to offer the following working definition of abuse for your consideration.

**ABUSE IS A MISUSE OF POWER TO CONTROL AND/OR EXPLOIT  
A MORE VULNERABLE PERSON.**

The presence of a power imbalance and the misuse of power is the central characteristic that distinguishes abuse from other kinds of mistreatment or hurtful behavior. For example, we might say that when two men assault each other that this is wrong and/or harmful, but that when an adult physically assaults a child that is abuse. Or, that two consenting adults having an affair is wrong, but that a coach having sex with a 14-year-old is abuse. With this central feature in mind, let's look at our definition more closely.

### **IMBALANCE OF POWER**

For abuse to occur one party must have more power than the other. There are at least three ways that an individual may possess or gain power. Consider an arm wrestling scenario. All other things being equal, the person who possesses the most physical strength (power) will win. Having personal power then is the first way that an individual may have more power than another. Besides physical strength, other kinds of personal power may include intellect, verbal skills, financial resources, or social status.

Now suppose our two arm wrestlers have the same strength but one gets to place his elbow on a block of wood. All other things being equal, the person with the higher position will win. Similarly, people in positions of power and authority (teachers, coaches, parents, pastors, counselors and other care providers) are in a position, potentially, to control, oppress or exploit those "under" their care.

*Then I looked at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them.*

*Ecclesiastes 4:1*

Cheating (using two hands) is the third way to acquire and misuse power. Most of us play by the rules of common decency, fairness, honesty and mutual respect. Cheaters (abusers) win by breaking the rules. They are not fair, honest, or respectful. They also tend to deny what they have done, blame others and/or act defensive when confronted about their behavior.

## MISUSE OF POWER

Merely possessing more power is not the core problem with abuse. God has given people legitimate power: personal strengths and positions of authority in order to serve and build up those who are weaker and more vulnerable. God instructs kings and leaders, parents and husbands, to love and serve those placed under their care. The scripture says that Christ's followers are not to use their power to "lord it over" others, but to serve even as Jesus, the Son of God, "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:42-45). Abuse is a violation of God's clear teaching about servant leadership. It is also a violation of His law of love (Luke 10:26-28). Love seeks the good of another even at great cost to oneself. Abuse seeks the good of the abuser at great cost to his/her victim.

All of us struggle with issues of power and control at some level. All of us occasionally devalue, attack or neglect those we should be loving and caring for. It's helpful to appreciate the difference between these normal lapses in love and what we are calling abuse. Along with other distinctions, it can be helpful to appreciate that abuse usually involves an **extreme** and/or **pervasive** misuse of power. **Extreme** examples would include such things as child abuse or rape. Few if any of us have a problem using the word abuse to describe these behaviors.

More subtle, but no less abusive, are the scenarios where the misuse of power is perhaps not so extreme, but is instead **pervasive**. Abuse happens when the entire fabric of a relationship is colored by the misuse of one person by the other. Overt acts of physical or even verbal aggression may not be present and yet there is a **pervasive** lack of mutuality, fairness, and respect and in its place the abuser habitually devalues, disregards, blames and/or controls his/her victim.

## CONTROL OR EXPLOIT

The payoff of abusive behavior is to **control** and **exploit** another person to one's own advantage. Abusive behavior is fueled by a flawed value system that, among other things, objectifies and devalues the victim. Abusers at some level believe that they are more important, believe that their desires and needs are more legitimate, and believe that others are responsible for meeting their needs. Early in a relationship many abusers **gain control** by being especially attentive and generous. Adults set up vulnerable children by treating them in special ways. Adults set up each other by "being too good to be true." Then comes the betrayal. Physical violence, sexual violence, verbal assaults and mind-games are then used to control a victim through force, intimidation and/or manipulation. **Control is maintained** by whatever means the abuser has learned will work: a look, a threat, put downs, blaming or turning on the charm.

## VULNERABLE

Victims are vulnerable because they have less power, because they are dependent on others and because they won't cheat. In society they are the poor, the needy and the disenfranchised. In an institution, they are at the bottom of the chain of command. In a family, they are the spouse who doesn't cheat or the child who can't fight back.

Compounding their initial vulnerability is the prolonged effect of being abused. Victims of abuse experience confusion, fear, and a gnawing sense of hopelessness. They are confused because their thoughts, perceptions and feelings are devalued, denied and/or ignored. They are afraid because control, intimidation and manipulation have become a predictable part of their lives. They are hopeless and helpless because no matter what they do, they cannot stop the abuse.

Abuse is real. Abuse is rampant. Abuse is destructive. Abuse is sinful. If you would like to know more about the various types of abuse, please refer to the following SPM Quick Looks and other printed resources: *How Much Should A Woman Take*; *Physical Danger in Abuse Relationships*; *Is Your Abusive Partner Changing or Not?*; *Domestic Violence Safety Planning*; *Stalking: What is It?*; *Civil Protection Orders*; *Sexual Assault*; *Childhood Sexual Abuse*; *Why Does He Do That?* (book); *The Verbally Abusive Relationship* (book); *When Dad Hurts Mom* (book); *The Gift of Fear* (book); [When Violence Comes Home](#) (booklet), [When Trust is Lost](#) (booklet).