



Close to Home Study Guide

Dealing with Spouse Abuse

1. Opening (2 minute)*

Acknowledge that this is a difficult subject which touches people in differing ways; and it's okay to leave the room if necessary. If possible, have someone be prepared to accompany those who need to walk out.

Psalm 55 especially conveys some of the feelings victims of abuse often experience. Ask the group to read verses 4-8 together.

2. Story-telling (4 minutes)

Summarize Carla's story. Note especially the way she felt isolated, afraid, embarrassed, and trapped. Also notice how this abuse was hidden and invisible to those around her.

3. Review of pamphlet (10 minutes)

- Turn to the description of abuse on pages 4 and 5. Ask the group to look over the various forms of abuse. Are there any which they have questions about? Are there other behaviors they would add? (See pages 6-7 in the booklet *Abuse: Response and Prevention* for a more complete list.)
- Highlight the element of control which is present in abusive relationships, and how this is different from sudden anger or losing one's temper. (For instance, in abusive situations, the "angry" person will break only items of value to the other person, or if the police come to the door, they will suddenly become very calm and reasonable.) Point out that anger management classes can actually be harmful since the abusive person learns how to use anger in a more controlled and dangerous way. Only specific counseling which addresses abusive behavior and its underlying core beliefs is effective.
- Look at the information in the two boxes. Are any facts particularly surprising? Discuss why abuse happens in Christian homes. What factors enable abusive behavior?

4. Reading of Scripture text (16 minutes)

- "Abuse, the Bible and the Christian Story" highlights biblical texts which teach mutual respect between husbands and wives. What does your congregation teach marriage partners? How do you understand passages such as Ephesians 5:21-33 and Galatians 5:22-26?
- The pamphlet uses texts which emphasize God's concern for those who are suffering and God's desire that we be safe and whole. Additional ones include Luke 4:18-19, 7:22-23 and 13:10-17. In light of these stories, how do you understand Jesus' instruction to "turn the other cheek" and "take up the cross"?
- The pamphlet also stresses that abuse breaks a marriage covenant. How is this true? What elements are needed to keep a marriage strong and intact? Note how Malachi 2:13-16 especially addresses husbands who are unfaithful and violent.
- The last paragraph mentions spiritual resources such as prayer and worship that include both lament and hope. Divide the group into pairs and ask each to write a prayer or litany for victims of abuse, based on the following Scriptures: Psalm 5, 7, 13, 40, 43, 55, 57, 70,

*The suggested time frames are for a 45-minute session. With more discussion and storytelling, you will need to adjust upward, and possibly extend to a second session.

Isaiah 40:1-5, 27-31, Isaiah 43:1-7, Isaiah 61:1-4, Luke 4:18-19. Share these with your pastor(s) for use in future worship services.

5. Steps toward healing (12 minutes)

- Provide information and brochures from local resources such as women's shelters, hotlines, counselors and legal aid groups.
- Bring *Home shouldn't be a place that hurts* brochures and *Abuse: Response and Prevention* booklets for people to take with them. (Both are available free from Mennonite Central Committee offices.)
- Encourage your church library to purchase the books listed. If possible, bring them to class for people to borrow.
- Brainstorm ways the congregation can support those needing to take the steps listed on pages 8-9: How can the congregation show God's love to those suffering abuse? What are some ways to hold accountable those who've been abusive, and encourage their efforts toward change? How can the congregation work at preventing abuse?
- Highlight point 3 about finding a counselor skilled in understanding abuse. Stress that marriage counseling is not appropriate when abuse is present. Victims cannot be honest for fear of retaliation and may be in serious danger if they disclose the abuse. Instead, both parties should receive *individual* and *specialized* counseling designed to provide safety for the victim and accountability for the perpetrator.
- Discuss point 6 about not rushing forgiveness. (Also refer to page 10 in the *Abuse: Response and Prevention* booklet.)
 - o What are some dangers if forgiveness is given too soon? (For example, quick forgiveness can minimize the damage caused by the abuse and stop the process toward change. Also, if others insist on forgiveness, it can further victimize and alienate the victim.)
 - o How do you understand forgiveness? How is it different from reconciliation?
 - o What are some important steps toward forgiveness? Toward reconciliation?
- Pray together for all those touched by violence at home: victims, children, those who are abusive, extended family members, neighbors, and friends.

6. Closing (1 minute)

Close with one of the prayers written by the group or read Romans 8:35, 37-39 as a re-affirmation of God's love for all.



This study guide is written by Linda Gehman Peachey, Director for Women's Advocacy in the Peace and Justice Ministries section of Mennonite Central Committee US. It is one of a series of free downloadable study guides for the Close to Home pamphlets, which can be ordered from the Mennonite Publishing Network of the Mennonite Church (see www.mpn.net/closetohome) or the Mennonite Brethren Kindred Productions (www.kindredproductions.com/closetohome).