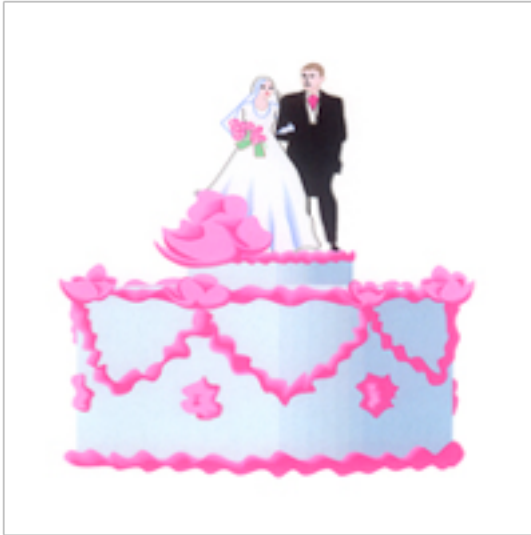


# A LINE ON LIFE

5/3/98

## Innocent Violence Can Grow <sup>1</sup>

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.



Rather than feeding each other the first pieces of the wedding cake, in some cases, the bride and groom shove the cake into each other's face. This is only the beginning of "innocent" violence in marriage. This violence is often depicted in television, movies and comic strips. Usually, we laugh at couples exchanging minor slaps, kicks and shoves. With this, we may consider mild violence as innocent and acceptable in marriage.

This low level or non-injurious aggression between marital partners seems harmless, especially when compared to the battering that many wives receive. However, it is not a laughing matter. In the 1980s, psychologist K. Daniel O'Leary (University of New York, Stony Brook) was providing services at a battered women's shelter. He wanted to find out how arguments degenerated into severe physical violence.

Over a period of 15 years, O'Leary conducted many studies. He found that low level physical aggression starts among couples as early as the dating stage. They exchange shoving and slapping long before they exchange vows.

*"In about two-thirds of the cases seen in our marital clinic, no one is really beaten up. It's just pushing, slapping or shoving in anger. But I worry that it could eventually lead to more severe abuse in the marriage. And certainly it can lead to marital deterioration and divorce."*

Certain trends have been found among these couples.

- They express a strong commitment to the relationship.
- Beside the mild physical violence, they also engage in psychological abuse like insults and verbal threats.
- They disregard the physical fighting, seeing it as secondary to other problems.

This last finding is supported by another psychologist at the same university, Dina Vivian. She found that less than 10% of couples entering marital therapy mention aggression as a presenting problem. These couples typically express a high degree of overall dissatisfaction with the marriage.

The tendency toward violence against partners has its roots in behavior in high school and college. By the time they are 15, 20-50% of adolescents experience some form of violent behavior from a dating partner. In surveys, over half of college students report violent behaviors in their relationships. However, they often don't identify the behavior as violent.

Psychologists are very concerned about some of the ideas that adolescents have about violence and romance. In Quebec, psychologist Francine Lavoie surveyed over 1,000 high school students over several years. Over half of them believed that **romantic jealousy** – one of the biggest causes of violence – is actually a sign of love. *"It is disturbing to see that young people excuse violence by justifying it as a kind of evidence of love."* (It is more likely to be a sign of dependence, insecurity and low self-esteem on the part of the jealous person.)

---

## **Where there is "zero tolerance " for violence in a relationship, spousal abuse is less likely to occur.**

---

Psychologists still have much to learn about low-level violence. However, with what is known, programs have targeted adolescents and young adults. They want to curb violent actions and attitudes before they become habitual. O'Leary and his associates have developed a five-session curriculum as part of health classes in high schools. In this program, students learn how to resolve conflicts peacefully. They're more able to reduce dominating and jealous behaviors in a partner. The students are less tolerant of physical abuse in romantic arguments, and fewer students report being victims of dating violence.

Along with other organizations, the American Psychological Association (APA) has developed a brochure called *Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens*.<sup>2</sup> The brochure indicates that teens – who are shoved or slapped by a dating partner – are being physically abused. It encourages ending such a relationship and seeking help from teachers, guidance counselors or friends.

From many studies, slightly more women *acknowledge* starting fights with a date by slapping, shoving or pushing. However, in both dating and marriage, women are still the major victims of violence. Men inflict more physical harm on their partners than vice versa. Even though violence may be started by either partner, Vivian has noted this one-sided impact.

*"In the past 15 years, I've examined 600 couples and I've had only one man ever tell me he was scared of his wife – scared of her anger."*

However, most psychologists who study domestic violence say the focus should be more on *prevention* than blame. There is a need to reduce aggressive behavior in general. We need to understand how gendered aspects of power – and related issues of fear, threats and control – affect both women *and* men.

---

1 Adapted from Scott Sleek's, "'Innocuous' violence triggers the real thing," and "Sorting out the reasons couples turn violent," *The APA Monitor*, April, 1998, pages 1, 30-31.

2 A free copy of the brochure, *Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens*, can be obtained by contacting the Public Interest Directorate of the APA. They can be reached either by phone (**202-336-6046**) or by e-mail (**[publicinterest@apa.org](mailto:publicinterest@apa.org)**).