

## **MODULE 2**

**What is abuse (physical and emotional)?**

## Session II

## What is Abuse?

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### Meeting A

Physical and emotional abuse

### Materials

Flip chart or chalkboard

Goal – members will recognize what behaviors/actions constitute physical and emotional abuse.

Goal – members will recognize the impact of physical/emotional abuse on their lives.

### Discussion Questions

Topic 14, pg. 103

1. How do you define physical abuse?
2. What kinds of interactions between people make it more likely that abuse will occur?
3. What impact has abuse had on your life? On your relationships?
4. Have you had relationships where there was no physical abuse? What was that like for you?
5. What is emotional abuse?
6. What impact, if any, has emotional abuse had on your adult functioning?
7. If there was abuse in your early years, how do you think it affected you as a child?

### Meeting B

### Materials

Flipchart or chalkboard

MH p. 122 Q#3 record responses

MH p. 123 Q# 1 & 2 under additional

MTSTA pp. 122-123; 3 pages of hands

## **TOPIC 14** What Is Physical Abuse?

### **SESSION RATIONALE**

Often women experience more than one type of abuse. Sexual and physical abuse, for example, are almost always accompanied by emotional abuse. Survivors often find it easier to begin their disclosure by talking about physical trauma, which although painful, carries less stigma than sexual abuse and is more immediately identifiable than emotional abuse.

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**GOAL 1:** Each member will be able to define what constitutes physical abuse.

**GOAL 2:** Each member will gain an understanding of the impact that physical abuse has had on her life.

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### **QUESTIONS**

1. What do you think constitutes physical abuse?
2. What dynamics between the abuser and the victim tend to make it more likely that abuse will occur?
3. What role do threats and intimidation play in physical abuse?
4. What impact has physical abuse had on your life? On your relationships?

### **EXERCISE**

Imagine that you could invent a magical recipe for healing the scars of abuse. What would you put in your prescription? Love? Revenge? Forgetfulness?

### **LEADERS' NOTES**

#### **QUESTION 1**

What do you think constitutes physical abuse?

## TRAUMA RECOVERY

**TYPICAL RESPONSES** Being beaten by my mother  
Being hit over and over again  
Getting hit by my partner  
Getting disciplined with an electrical cord  
Being hit with a bat or a belt  
Getting hit until I bled  
My brother being thrown across the room  
Being burned  
Being shaken as a small child  
Being shot or stabbed  
Being choked  
Having my mouth washed out with soap  
Being held down  
Being locked in a closet  
Being starved

Use the following as prompts if members have difficulty answering this question:

Nature of the injury—What was done?

Severity of the injury—How bad was the abuse?

Public versus private—Did anyone other than the abuser and the victim know?

Frequency of the abuse—How often did it occur?

This question often allows members to tell their own stories of physical abuse. Members also will combine stories of childhood abuse with more recent accounts of domestic violence.

### QUESTION 2

What dynamics between the abuser and the victim tend to make it more likely that abuse will occur?

**TYPICAL RESPONSES** The abuser has power over you.  
The abuser is older or bigger.

#### WHAT IS PHYSICAL ABUSE?

The abuser is around a lot and has multiple opportunities to take advantage of you.

You feel very dependent on the abuser.

The abuser has power in the family (even if younger).

The abuser has control over money and resources.

The abuser drinks.

The abuser is more likely to be believed because of his position in the community.

Once again, if members have difficulty answering this question, you can use the following prompts to foster discussion:

Are the abuser and the victim intimates?

Family members?

Known to one another?

Are they hostile to one another?

Do they have equal power?

If members continue to cover the same material as in Question 1, feel free to move on to Question 3.

#### QUESTION 3

What role do threats and intimidation play in physical abuse?

- TYPICAL RESPONSES**
- My abuser constantly put pressure on me or threatened me.
  - My mother always told me I was bad so I came to believe I deserved to be hit.
  - My husband would wear me down with his threats; that is when he beat me most.
  - I was told I was stupid and was punished until I felt worthless.
  - I was afraid someone else would be hurt if I told.
  - Threats made me afraid to tell anyone.

Help members to see that living in constant fear of being hit is a form of violence. Members may report that they actually felt relieved when the beating finally occurred, ending the tension associated with waiting.

Members will also begin to see that physical abuse rarely exists in isolation. It is frequently accompanied by emotional abuse in the form of threats and criticism. An abuser maintains power by keeping the victim in a state of constant fear.

#### QUESTION 4

What impact has physical abuse had on your life? On your relationships?

- TYPICAL RESPONSES**
- I'm fearful about getting into a relationship. . . . I'm afraid I'll get hurt.
  - I am unable to trust another person.
  - I never believe those who say they care.
  - It's hard for me to express my anger because I'm afraid I'll be beaten for it.
  - When I hear a loud noise my body becomes rigid.
  - I have made a vow to myself never to spank my children.
  - I turn my anger and rage inward.
  - I feel like I need to take care of the other person to keep him happy.
  - I don't know what a good relationship is like.
  - I am afraid I will hit someone.
  - I feel numb.
  - I am determined to come out on top always.
  - I have come to expect to be hit; I don't even try to avoid it anymore.
  - I never thought I was being beaten; I always thought I was giving as good as I got. . . . I think hitting is part of every relationship.
  - I get depressed easily.
  - I don't take good care of myself.
  - I would kill someone who tried to hurt me.

## WHAT IS PHYSICAL ABUSE?

The most apparent impact of physical abuse on survivors is their lack of trust and ongoing sense of fearfulness. You may want to help members see how low self-esteem, paranoia, and their own ragefulness also may be connected to a history of physical abuse.

Members often are able to be quite articulate about how abuse has affected their current functioning. They may feel stuck, however, when they try to think of how to change that impact. Make sure that members have some hope that their scars may eventually heal.

### ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1. Have you had relationships in which there was no physical abuse? What was that like for you?
2. Do you know people who use physical abuse as a sexual turn on? Have you ever thought about that yourself?

### EXERCISE 1

Ask members to develop a recipe for healing the scars of abuse. You can prompt members for this exercise by asking, "What ingredients would you put in the recipe?" As members develop the recipe, write the recipe on the flip chart. Often, members request that leaders make copies of this recipe for distribution during the next group.

- TYPICAL RESPONSES**
- Tell the abuser how much they hurt you
  - Letting out the pain and anger with a good cry
  - Keeping physical distance from the abuser or abusive situation
  - The passage of time
  - Keeping emotional distance
  - Fantasizing about getting revenge
  - Taking care of myself
  - Talking and thinking about myself in a positive manner
  - Getting involved in a caring relationship
  - Acknowledging the abuse

## TRAUMA RECOVERY

Believing my version of the story  
Knowing that I'm important, too  
Spirituality  
Creating my own family the way I want it to be  
Self-assertiveness

Members generally find it easy to participate in this exercise. Even though they may have been unable to heal themselves, most women know what a healing formula might look like.

### **DARLENE'S STORY**

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When the leaders of the group asked us what we thought physical abuse was, I could almost feel myself shrinking. I never will forget the hitting when I was a child, but I wanted to deal with talking about it just like I dealt with it when I was little. I wanted to disappear, to get small, to not make a sound, to not be noticed.

So when the other women began talking about what physical abuse had been like for them I just folded into myself. It was a shock to hear my name; one of the group leaders had called on me. She asked me what the beatings had been like for me. It was strange—for once I didn't think I could just totally shut up, so I talked. My father beat me all the time. Every day someone in the house was beaten by my father. My mother too—he broke her bones and gave her lots of bruises. Sometimes when she thought he was going to go after her, she would meet him at the door of the house after work and immediately tell him how bad we had been that day. Then he would most likely start in on us and leave her alone. He broke my bones, I had bruises all up and down my arms and on my back—I wore long-sleeved clothes all the time, even on the hottest days. I learned to cover my face with my arms right away, as soon as I heard that tone in his voice—I didn't want anyone to see me with bruises on my face.

I learned to stay out of the way. I learned not to cry or make noise when he beat me because that made him madder—if I made noise. I learned silence.

## **TOPIC 17 What Is Emotional Abuse?**

### **SESSION RATIONALE**

Survivors of physical and sexual abuse inevitably also suffer the scars of emotional abuse. However, emotional traumas are so much a part of everyday life that they often go unnoticed. These emotional abuses contribute to a damaged and distorted sense of self in adulthood.

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**GOAL 1:** Women will recognize and accurately label emotional abuse.

**GOAL 2:** Women will begin to appreciate that emotional abuse may have a lifelong impact.

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### **QUESTIONS**

1. What is emotional abuse?
2. What strategies did you use to escape the abuse?
3. What impact do you think this abuse has had on your adult functioning?

### **EXERCISE**

Women are asked to think about words or phrases used by abusers that were emotionally abusive. Leaders will ask members to write down a phrase that they would like erased from the English language. Members will discuss their choices and will symbolically destroy the phrases by shredding the paper.

### **LEADERS' NOTES**

#### **QUESTION 1**

What is emotional abuse?

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

- TYPICAL RESPONSES**
- Being neglected by my parents.
  - Never being given any attention by my mother.
  - Having parents who didn't interact or talk with me.
  - Being criticized all the time.
  - Being constantly compared to my siblings and never measuring up.
  - Having mind games played on me.
  - Constantly being given mixed messages by someone.
  - My mother's telling me "You'd be better off dead."
  - My dad's always wanting to control me.
  - My boyfriend's threatening me all the time.
  - Family members always telling me that I'm dumb or crazy.
  - Being given too much responsibility: I was raising my siblings when I was 12 years old.
  - Being called names.
  - Never being allowed to have a childhood.
  - Being made to feel ashamed all the time.
  - Being told I was not wanted.

Make sure that the following areas are included in members' responses:

- |                               |                                  |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Neglect                       | Isolation                        |
| Abandonment                   | Role reversals—parentified child |
| Deprivation                   | Severe criticism                 |
| Dysfunctional parents         | Shaming                          |
| due to alcoholism,            | Manipulation                     |
| depression, or mental illness | Extreme control                  |
|                               | Witnessing the abuse of others   |

Several conditions are necessary but not sufficient for emotional abuse to occur: (1) a woman depends on the abuser for affection or practical support; (2) a woman feels trapped in the relationship; and (3) the abuser wields power, authority, and control. A discussion of the dynamics of emotional abuse can be aided by asking members about specific relationships (e.g., with parents, with adult children, with domestic partners, or with bosses).

TRAUMA RECOVERY

**QUESTION 2**

What strategies did you use to escape the abuse?

**TYPICAL RESPONSES** I was always trying to please.  
I tried to be perfect.  
I withdrew from everyone.  
I started using drugs.  
I tried to get attention from other people.  
I fantasized a lot of the time.  
I ran away from home.  
I got into a lot of fights with my family because I  
was so angry.  
I ignored it.  
I was very good and obedient.  
I started having boyfriends when I was very young  
so I could be out all the time.  
I joined a cult.  
I did not try to escape and now I hate myself for it.  
I went to my neighbor's house all the time.  
I stayed late at school.  
I stuffed the feelings down by eating all the time.

The term *escape* may suggest unhealthy ways of coping with the abuse. If members only mention negative strategies, you can ask members if they know of any more positive ways of handling emotional abuse.

**QUESTION 3**

What impact do you think this abuse has had on your adult functioning?

**TYPICAL RESPONSES** I have very poor self-esteem.  
I feel out of control.  
I'm hopeless.  
I don't trust anyone so it's hard to have a relationship.  
I don't trust myself.

I'm always angry.  
I usually assume the worst.  
I withdraw.  
I know I have a pretty poor attitude about my life.  
I'm depressed.  
I have a weight problem.  
I still try to please everyone.  
I am never satisfied with myself.  
I'm afraid to speak my mind or disagree with anyone.  
I'm more critical than I would like to be.

Prompt members by asking about the impact of emotional abuse on self-esteem, relationships, success, ability to experience pleasure, and day-to-day functioning.

#### ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1. Do you think you were forced to grow up ahead of your time? Describe what that was like.
2. How can you recognize emotional abuse in current relationships? Think about current relationships. Are there some about which you feel uneasy? What is happening in those relationships?
3. How do you respond to criticism as an adult?

#### EXERCISE

Ask members to think of abusive comments directed toward them as children. Anything that made them feel bad, inferior, or threatened can be included. Members should write the phrase on a piece of paper and discuss the comment with the group. Members will shred the piece of paper to symbolically eliminate the phrase from the English language.

**TYPICAL RESPONSES** You should never have been born.  
You're just like your father, the rotten SOB.  
You'll never amount to anything.

If you do that one more time, you can go live out on the streets.

Keep that up and you'll never go to college.

You are ugly and stupid.

You are evil because you're so black.

It is useful for members to see that many of the abusive comments were either irrational criticisms or things over which they could not possibly have had any control.

### FELICIA'S STORY

For me emotional abuse meant losing my childhood. I had to act like an adult even when I was a child.

I was the oldest in the family. I always had to do a lot for my mom. There were so many chores around the house. And then there were the younger kids. Mom was busy so I did most of the feeding and diapering and washing all of their dirty clothes. Lots of the time I had to miss school or stay up late to get everything done. Mom always said what a great little helper I was. I didn't feel like a helper, I felt like a mom. I can't remember a time when I wasn't taking care of somebody. My mom put so much pressure on me to be grown-up.

I never got taken care of when I was little; I always had to be the one taking care of others. Even when the family did something fun like go to the carnival, I had to be in charge; I had to be sure no one got lost. It wasn't any fun feeling responsible for everything.

When I left home, I started taking up with guys who I thought would watch out for me, but it never worked out. I always ended up with someone to take care of, someone who needed help more than I did. I got fed up with it and decided to stay away from people. Now I won't ask for help from anybody. I feel like I always have to be on my own. It makes my recovery really hard. You can't see the scars from the emotional abuse, but I feel them all the time.

## Relationships



Stress and trauma can disrupt the way you relate to other people. For example, early life trauma may hinder your capacity to form connection with others. Since child abuse typically occurs within the context of a care-giving relationship, the child's concept of relationships and their meaning may become seriously impaired; an abused child is unlikely to see relationships as safe or life-enhancing. Children who have experienced the loss of a caretaker may have difficulty forming connections because of their fear of abandonment. People who are assaulted, either a children or adults, often experience difficulty with physical intimacy. When trauma occurs in adulthood, people may find their relationship become strained or broken. For instance, those who remain physically

impaired after a trauma may be overcome with depression, see themselves as unattractive or compromised, and withdraw from others.

It is important to keep in mind that healthy connections with others can help you replenish your internal resources when they have been depleted by traumatic stress; provide a sense of being needed; give purpose to your life; and allow you to experience the warmth, caring and playfulness that can exist between human beings. It is also important to remember that you can remain responsibly independent and effectively interdependent at the same time you can meet your needs through your own efforts and also channel your efforts, talents and abilities into collaboration with other people to achieve beneficial, fulfilling results.

You will be creating two collages. The first will help you examine what may be hindering your ability to connect with others. The second will help you to explore important factors in connecting with others and what you need to begin that process.

*Estimated Completion Time* 90 - 120 minutes

### *Art Materials*

- one sheet of 18" x 24" white or colored paper cut into two 12" x 18" pieces
- hand images in the APPENDIX
- magazine pictures and words
- scissors
- glue

## PART 1: MISSED CONNECTIONS

### *Getting Started*

1. Think about the various important relationships in your life. You might wish to review ART EXPERIENCE #5, Support Net.

2. List your relationships that have changed in terms of connectedness (mutual or one-way) and make brief notes regarding the circumstances.

### *Artmaking Guidelines*

1. Choose one of the hand images in the APPENDIX to represent yourself and one or more hand images to represent others.

2. Cut out the hand images.

3. Look through magazines to find images and/or words that communicate factors that prevent you from connecting with people.

4. Cut out the magazine images and words.

5. Choose suitable color(s) for the background of your collage.

6. Arrange the hands and images on the background in a way that best communicates what you want the picture to symbolize about your connections with others.

7. Glue the hands, images, and words to the background page.

Relationship

## Written Reflections

1. Describe the significance of each image you chose.
2. Comment on the significance of the background color(s).
3. Note what is symbolic about the arrangement of the hands and images on the paper.
4. Consider which images represent the more difficult barriers.

## Relationships

## PART 2: WITHIN YOUR GRASP

### *Getting Started*

1. Describe why you want to be connected to others.
2. List possible benefits of being connected to people following your traumatic experience.
3. Describe types of people that attract you.
4. List ways you connect with people. For instance, do you find that you connect with people who have similar interests, age, or work?

Relationship

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3. Explain the meaning of the background color.

4. Choose the image on the collage that shows what your most important need is at this time to allow you to begin to connect with others. Write about this need.

5. Choose the image on your collage that shows the most important benefit you can receive from connections at this time.

6. Determine one thing you could do to improve or develop a connection with another person that does not decrease your independence and that can increase effective interdependence.

Relationship:

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