

RANGE OF EMOTIONAL REACTIONS OF WOMEN WHO ARE BEATEN

(Intended for Counselors)

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The following is a list of feelings victims typically experience. Not all victims will have each of these feelings and there are many not listed, but these are issues to be aware of and prepared for in the counseling experience.

1. **Loss of Control, Helplessness** – Feeling at the mercy of someone’s mood fluctuations and outbreaks of temper is a very frightening and frustrating way to live one’s life, and can easily lead to a feeling of having no control over one’s life. Abused women said that most of the attacks were unwarranted and totally unexpected. Some were even attacked and beaten while sleeping. Efforts at seeking help have often proved to be dead-ends for many of these women – again leading to feelings of helplessness.

Tremendous fear may result in an emotional paralysis, so that the victim feels passive and experiences all that happens around her as being done to her. It is important to help the victim get back in control of the situation and this can be done in many ways. Helping her to identify her feelings is one way to calm down her chaotic state of mind. Getting her to seek the medical, legal, and social service attention she needs, helps her to take action on her own behalf.

Again, it is of crucial importance that the counselor help her to make the decisions – if she is told what to do, it will only increase her sense of helplessness and lack of control. Further, she may lean too heavily on the counselor for decisions in the future, if decisions are made for her at this time.

2. **Fear** – It is important to reassure the women of the confidentiality of her help-seeking contacts (except for filing a criminal complaint against the assailant). She should be helped to make a realistic assessment of her imminent danger. If she is not living with the assailant, suggestions can be made about changing locks on the doors, locking windows, etc. If she is living with the assailant and is in imminent danger, suggestions should be made as to at least temporary alternative housing; legal measures such as divorce, prosecution, restraining orders may be the route to take, but the client should never feel pressured into this route. Legal processes should be thoroughly explained.
3. **Anger** – All victims will be experiencing anger on some level about their situation. Some victims will be able to express their anger directly on or at the assailant but others will not. It is very important to help the victim express the anger and to get it focused in the proper direction; that is, at the assailant. If this is not done, the victim may well internalize the anger, getting angry with herself instead of the assailant, thus leading to feelings of guilt and self-blame. At other times the victim may ventilate the anger towards police, medical and social service personnel or at the counselor.

4. **Guilt** – As mentioned above, guilt often has its roots in misdirected anger, anger turned inward. Guilt also arises from some all too commonly held belief that if a woman gets beaten she deserves it, therefore it goes that she must be a bad woman, wife, or mother. Another belief is that women are by nature masochistic and thus expect and enjoy physical abuse. It is important to explore these beliefs and misconceptions with the victim; to let her know that her counselor doesn't believe these things are true.
5. **Embarrassment** – A woman may feel embarrassed to admit that she is a battered woman. She may well be ashamed of her scars. She may feel foolish to have made a domestic commitment to a physically abusive man as well as ashamed of herself to have put up with repeated beatings. Considering the embarrassment that a victim of domestic violence might well feel, she may never have discussed her problems or feelings with anyone. In such cases she will really welcome the opportunity to ventilate in a supportive environment.

As counselors we must remember that each person has complex needs that motivate them to make decisions. Most of us have, at some point in our lives misjudged another person's character, or believed in the sincerity of someone's assurances that they would change for the better. The victim must be reminded that there is no reason to be ashamed of making mistakes as long as we learn by them.

6. **Doubts About Sanity** – Some women have fears of insanity, particularly if they have strong feelings of lack of control. Living in constant fear of physical assault can have many emotional ramifications which may lead a victim to isolate herself socially. Once socially isolated, she has no one to confirm her sanity. Her only input is from her assailant and from herself.

COUNSELING SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

1. **Listening and Summarizing** - The most fundamental aspect of good counseling is the ability to listen. Good listening demands intense concentration. Effective listening also demands not only that the interviewer hear and understand what is being said, but that she/he also hear and understand what is being communicated through silence. Frequently the impact behind what was not said suggests clues about sources of difficulty. Again, a client should never feel pressured into discussing anything that she doesn't want to talk about. The counselor should be aware of topics that are emotionally stressful for the woman. After trust and rapport have had time to build up, the counselor may want to gently pursue these areas. Body language (the way a person sits, whether she rocks back and forth, wrings her hands, etc.) should be carefully observed, as it offers important data to the counselor. Discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal communication

should be noted by the counselor and if the atmosphere is appropriate, the discrepancies should be pointed out to the woman.

For example, the woman is discussing how terribly angry she is at her husband, but is smiling as she speaks. This could be purely a nervous reaction or it could be an indication that she has difficulty in expressing her anger or dissatisfaction. This is all too common a problem and we must remember that if anger is not focused at its source, it is often turned inward, which leads to feelings of depression and guilt.

It is important to remember that there is a great difference between hearing and listening. It is often a very helpful technique to summarize the salient aspects of what you have understood from a client's verbal and non-verbal communication. Such a summary should never be put forth as a statement of fact. In other words, it is not appropriate to say, "I can see that you are very angry," but rather to say something like, "It sounds to me like you are feeling very angry." We must never assume that we understood or that a message came through clearly, without first verifying it.

Summarizing can be very important for three reasons:

1. It gives the woman a chance to point out things that she feels were misunderstood or that she needs to clarify.
2. It gives the woman assurance that the counselor really is listening and trying to understand her.
3. By the summary, the woman may well be helped to better clarify and conceptualize what she had previously thought a complex maze of data.

Ascertain whether the client has listened attentively and understood what you have said by asking her to summarize your communication to her.