

## 'Innocuous' violence triggers the real thing

**Behavioral researchers are exploring the more ambiguous forms of domestic violence.**

**By Scott Sleek**

Monitor staff

**S**ince the days when Carole Lombard smacked and punched her leading men, Ralph Kramden threatened to hit Alice 'right in the kisser,' and Andy Capp's wife whacked him over the head with a rolling pin, Americans have grown accustomed to chuckling at lovers exchanging insults, raised fists or slaps in the face. But psychologists say it's time to stop laughing.

Increasingly, researchers find that the minor, mutual slaps, kicks and shoves depicted in television, movies and comic strips is an all-too-common, and all-too-destructive, feature of real-life love and marriage. Although such acts may seem trivial compared to the type of assaults that force so many wives to seek refuge in battered women's shelters, psychologists have come to accept them as abusive—to the psyche if not the body. And they worry that such fighting can escalate into outright battering, in which the man usually has the physical advantage.

But psychologists are shocked to find that many couples regard such actions as innocuous, even normal in any loving relationship.

'[Low-level] violence is an unspoken problem that occurs in many families,' says Dina Vivian, PhD, who is a psychologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and studies marital communication and conflict. 'But most couples don't see it as a big problem.'

Many researchers believe the behavioral sciences and social activists, in advancing society's understanding of battered women over the last 20 years, have looked at only the most severe aspects of partner abuse. They're now trying to understand the causes and implications of the more ambiguous forms of physical assault.

And they believe that practitioners need to improve their ability to identify and address bidirectional abuse with the couples they treat.

'I would say that most couples' therapy is conducted where some form of physical, psychological or emotional abuse exists,' says Michele Bograd, PhD, an Arlington, Mass., marital therapist who treats families touched by domestic violence. 'But I would say therapists don't identify it, because they don't

ask. And when they do identify it, they don't know how to deal with it. It's a kind of a quiet avoidance.'

### **How it starts**

The interest in low-level or non-injurious physical aggression between romantic partners is growing out of psychologists' longstanding work with battered women. K. Daniel O'Leary, PhD, for example, first became interested in the subject in the early '80s, when he was providing services in a battered women's shelter. He wanted to find out how arguments degenerated into physical violence. And in a variety of studies over the last 15 years, he's found that people often become mired in low-level physical aggression as early as the dating stage. Couples often exchange slaps or shoves long before they exchange vows.

'In about two-thirds of the cases seen at our marital clinic, no one is really beaten up,' says O'Leary, a professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. '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 it certainly can lead to marital deterioration and divorce.'

Research has also amassed other similarities about romantic partners who exchange minor physical blows. They tend to:

- Express a strong commitment to the relationship.
- Also engage in psychological abuse, such as insults and verbal threats.
- Dismiss the physical fighting as minor, infrequent or secondary to other problems.

In fact, Vivian and her colleagues have found that less than 10 percent of violent spouses entering marital therapy report the aggression as a presenting problem.

Such couples typically express a high degree of dissatisfaction with the relationship overall. And although the aggression appears to decline with age, a significant number of couples remain aggressive well beyond the first two years of marriage.

And aggressive behavior seems to be particularly prevalent among high school and college students, research shows. Twenty to 50 percent of adolescents experience some form of violent behavior from a dating partner by the time they reach age 15, although they don't always identify it as such, according to many studies. And several researchers have found that most of the college students they survey report violence in their relationships. In fact, women are more likely to acknowledge being the aggressors than are men (see related story on page 30).

Psychologists express particular concern about the interpretations many young people have about violence and romance. Francine Lavoie, PhD, a professor at the Université Laval in Quebec, has surveyed more than 1,000 high school students over the last several years and finds that more than half of them believe romantic jealousy—which they name as one of the biggest causes of violence—is actually a sign of love.

'It's disturbing to see that young people excuse violence by justifying it as a kind of evidence of love,' Lavoie and her colleague Marie-Hélène Gagné wrote in *Canada's Mental Health*, Fall 1993, p. 11-15.

### **Taking action**

Psychologists say they still have much to learn about lower levels of violence. But many are taking what they do know and using it to launch techniques aimed at intervening with and preventing low-level abuse. They're particularly targeting adolescents and young adults, trying to offset violent actions and attitudes before they become habit.

For example, O'Leary and his colleagues have developed a curriculum for high school students that shows promise. The five-session curriculum, incorporated into health classes in New York state schools, aims to reduce students' acceptance of dating violence. Outcome evaluations show that students who participate in the program become significantly less tolerant of physical abuse in romantic arguments than do students who don't receive the curriculum. They develop better knowledge on how to resolve conflicts peacefully, and they're able to reduce dominating and jealous behaviors toward a partner, he says.

The rate of students who report being victims of dating violence has also fallen in the schools that use the program, O'Leary adds.

Lavoie of the Université Laval has also helped design a similar education program that is now used in schools in the province of Quebec and that is also yielding successful results.

And APA, along with other organizations involved in the federally sponsored Partners in Program Planning in Adolescent Health, has developed a brochure titled 'Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens.' The educational brochure emphasizes that teens who are slapped and shoved by a dating partner are indeed enduring abuse, and it encourages them to end such relationships and seek support and protection from teachers, guidance counselors or friends.

For adult couples, researchers like Dina Vivian at Stony Brook believe that screening for domestic violence should be a standard component of every intake for couples, regardless of the presenting problem. They call on marital therapists to use instruments that ask couples not only whether violence occurs in their relationship, but about their use of specific behaviors—ranging from shouting to punching—during romantic clashes. Using such tools as the adapted version of the Conflict Tactics Scale allows therapists to identify violent behaviors that the couple may mistakenly regard as a nonissue.

Bograd and Fernando Mederos, EdD, an independent consultant on domestic violence issues, recommend a protocol for both detecting violent behavior in couples who come to therapy and deciding whether the couple can be treated jointly rather than separately.

Like many psychologists, Bograd and Mederos generally disapprove of conjoint therapy for couples mired in domestic abuse. But they believe in some cases it may be used under certain conditions, such as when the fighting is minor and poses no physical danger to the woman.

Even for mutually violent couples, the therapy should focus first and foremost on ending the man's violence—mainly because he can inflict more physical and psychological harm than the woman, Bograd says.

And even though it may seem counterintuitive given the physical fighting, she says, the therapist should never question the spouses' strong bond with each other. In fact, conjoint work should only proceed when the couple shows evidence of some degree of mutual affection, empathy and commitment, she adds.

*To receive a free copy of APA's brochure, 'Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens,' contact the Public Interest Directorate at the APA address, (202) 336-6046.*

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