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## After the Abuse

by Heather Boerner



The effects of abuse by an intimate partner can last long after the bruises, cuts, and bones heal. This fact was further confirmed by a recent landmark study issued by the World Health Organization (WHO). Based on interviews with 24,000 women in 10 countries, the WHO found that women who have been abused are twice as likely as other women to suffer ill health — and the effects seem to persist long after the violence has stopped.

### WHO Says ...

Relationship abuse is the most common form of violence perpetrated against women worldwide. And while there has been research on relationship abuse for years, the WHO report is one of the broadest and most comprehensive to date to confirm that relationship violence has a cumulative effect.

Based on interviews with women in Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Peru, Namibia, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, and the United Republic of Tanzania, the WHO found:

- Up to 61 percent of all women in these countries had been sexually abused by an intimate partner.
- Up to three in every four reported that their partner insulted or made them feel bad about themselves, humiliated them in front of others, intimidated or scared them on purpose, or threatened them directly in the past 12 months.
- In most of these locations, nearly one in three women who'd had sex before age 15 said it was forced. (In some cases, this was due to early marriage.)
- Women who had been abused were more likely to have experienced severe distress and more likely to have considered suicide.
- Before the study, between a third and half of the women interviewed had never told anyone of the abuse.

The also report points to anecdotal connections between relationship abuse and health — namely that women who had experienced abuse were more likely to be in ill health; were more likely to be depressed, anxious, or suicidal; and were more likely to have a hard time living their daily lives. They also reported more pain, memory loss, trouble walking, and dizziness in the month before being interviewed — whether or not the

abuse was recent.

Other studies in other parts of the world have been more specific about the effects of abuse on women's health. A U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) fact sheet on intimate partner violence cites studies that link relationship abuse to injuries — bruises, knife wounds, and broken bones — as well as other, seemingly unrelated illnesses. Severe abuse can lead to headaches, back pain, gynecological disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, and central nervous system disorders. Emotionally, women who had been abused displayed symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder — emotional detachment, drug abuse, smoking, alcohol abuse, and eating disorders.

Pregnant women who have been abused face serious health problems as well. A study published in the December 2005 issue of *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* found that pregnant women who have been abused are at greater risk of pregnancy complications, premature birth, low-birth-weight babies, and infant death. Specifically, women who reported verbal abuse had a greater risk of having a low-birth-weight baby, and women who said they were being physically abused had a greater risk of infant death. Researchers also surmised that women who refused to talk to them at all were experiencing the most serious abuse. Those women had higher rates of placental abruption — a serious complication during pregnancy — and premature birth, and their infants were admitted to the neonatal care unit more often.

### **Women Speak Out**

Pepper Schwartz, a sexual health expert at the University of Washington in Seattle, said common effects of sexual or physical violence make it hard for women to be intimate or trust current or past partners.

"Generally, the studies I've read show that women experience a lack of desire, they won't perform certain sexual acts because they associate them with abuse, they have an inability to complete sex, or have an orgasm," she said. "They demonstrate all the signs that are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder."

For Barbara, 69, her five-year marriage to an abusive man during her 20s has affected the rest of her life. Not only does she still have physical signs of the abuse — a capped tooth from when her ex-husband attacked her — but mental and sexual health effects as well.

"I think my depression has a lot to do with that [abuse]," she said. "I've been on antidepressants off and on since the divorce" nearly 50 years before.

Sara, 45, was molested from age three to 10 by her brother and was raped by her friend's boyfriend at 16. She feared she was pregnant after the acquaintance rape, and contracted pubic lice from her attacker. Today, she said doctors have connected her abuse history to her anxiety and panic attacks, as well as to her fibromyalgia, a chronic pain condition marked by joint and muscle pain, exhaustion, stiffness, and sleeping problems.

"It makes sense to me that if you grow up in a sexually abusive environment, you are in chronic stress. If you get raped, you're subject to acute stress," says Sara, who is now married. "For me personally, I do think growing up in a soup of stress and secrecy and fear and pain and anger can't be a good thing. Even when I was little, I was prone to headaches and termed 'oversensitive.' If something upset me, I had a tendency to manifest it physiologically."

### **Until the Violence Stops**

Still, there are movements underway to address relationship abuse. Worldwide, V-Day is

a nonprofit movement to raise money and awareness to stop violence against women. Money raised from special Valentine's Day productions of Eve Ensler's play, *The Vagina Monologues*, goes toward programs to help women who have experienced intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence. This year, Ensler estimates that 2,500 productions of her play will be presented in communities around the world.

Ensler, a member of Planned Parenthood Federation of America's Board of Advocates, says the WHO report has the potential to move women's health and relationship abuse "to the center of the discussion."

"Statistics still have the power to move people — one woman's experience doesn't seem to be enough," said Ensler. "So what I'm glad about this report is that it brings the message forward that ending violence against women is in the top three priorities worldwide."

*Heather Boerner is a freelance health writer based in San Francisco.*

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