

III. Family and Relationships

The End of Marriage

By Gwendolyn Marks

Gwendolyn Marks is a free-lance writer focusing on family issues. In this essay, Marks makes the case that the institution of marriage in the U.S. is in great trouble.

What is the most significant social issue of our time? While issues such as racism and discrimination, economic inequality, crime and violence, gay rights, or homelessness may come to mind, the decline of marriage wouldn't appear on most Americans' radar. However, given its current impact on every facet of American life and on how the continual decline of marriage could shape the future of our country in unsettling ways, America's plummeting marriage rate may be the most significant issue of our times.

Marriage has been around for thousands of years. Evidence of written marriage documents dates back to 2500 B.C. in the Sumerian civilization, but marriage no doubt existed long before that. Marriage has been the core relationship between men and women throughout recorded history.

While marriage has changed throughout history, the institution of marriage has endured. At different times, marriages were created to strengthen alliance between families, competing factions, or countries, for economic purposes, for procreation, to ensure family heirs, or to "marry off" financially burdensome daughters to other families.

For centuries women had few marital rights and were essentially considered the property of their husbands. The rights of women evolved slowly until the present day, when women in the U.S. finally have similar marital legal rights to men. Marriage also evolved in most societies from polygamy to monogamy, from arranged or forced marriages to consensual ones, from accepted male promiscuity outside of marriage to disapproval, and from strictly economic arrangements to considerations of love and attraction, first associated with 19th century Victorian England.

In the U.S., the first historical analysis of marriage rates was done for the one-hundred year period between 1867 and 1967. The net change in the national marriage rate during that 100-year period was almost nil: 9.6 per 1,000 population in 1867 to 9.7 per 1,000 in 1967. During the intervening years the rate dipped as low as 7.9 in 1932 and rose to 16.4 in 1946 during the post-war marriage boom, but 90 annual rates out of 100 fell within the interval of 8.5 through 11.4 per 1,000 population.

As you can see, marriage rates were the same on average for the 100 years from 1867 to 1967, a seemingly remarkable measure of stability over that long a period of time. What that stability indicates is that most Americans' attitudes and expectations towards marriage remained constant for 100 years, and probably for considerably longer although there are no earlier records to confirm that. Americans' attitudes towards marriage and the ensuing marriage rate changed very little from

the creation of the United States until after the middle of the twentieth century, which is what makes the significant decline in the marriage rate in the past fifty years all the more remarkable and unsettling.

From 1967 until 2015, the marriage rate declined continuously from 9.7 per 1000 in 1967 to 6.7 per thousand in 2015, a hefty 30% decline. While the marriage rate remained constant for the hundred years prior, it dropped by 30% in the 48 years between 1967 and 2015. That decline represents an absolute sea change in the condition of marriage in the U.S., something heretofore unseen in American history. That a similar decline exists in many Western countries indicates that the institution of marriage is in trouble on a much broader scale.

If a similar decline in the percentage of married adults continues into the future, by the beginning of the next century, new marriages will become rare and the institution of marriage will die out, gone the way of T-Rex and the eight-track tape. Marriage will become a relic of the past, something grandchildren will ask aging grandparents, “What was marriage like in the olden days?”

From the historical perspective, this is indeed a shocking societal phenomenon, something unseen in the history of America and, indeed, in most of the world since recorded history. That the foundation of marriage is crumbling in the U.S. should be something all American are aware of and concerned about. The decline of marriage in the U.S. and its effects on men, women, children, our economy, our values, and our country will have a profound impact on what America’s future will look like.

What would an America without marriage be like? What would the effects be on children? No one knows for sure, and many of us won’t be around to find out. However, in the here and now, we do have at least two options: to let the relational trajectory take its course, wherever it may lead, or to decide as a nation that marriage, despite its flaws, is an institution worth trying to preserve, which may not even be possible. Of course, the question in some people’s minds is, “Is trying to save marriage even worth the effort?” That is a question that all Americans should contemplate before there is no more marriage to consider.

The idea that marriage will ever die out, or become a rare alternative lifestyle for diehard traditionalists, still seems rather preposterous to most people. And they may be right. The greatest fall-off in marriages in the U.S. has occurred among poorer Americans: those least able to sustain a marriage financially. However, in European countries, marriage has also declined markedly across all income classes, where long-term cohabitation – couples living together without marriage - has become the chosen relationship among close to half of young Europeans.

Marriage rates have fallen dramatically in most major European countries over the past decades as financial austerity, changing generational attitudes, and apathy towards the institution have deterred record numbers of young people from marrying. The number of new marriages has fallen to historical lows in France and Spain and has also plummeted in Italy, Ireland, Poland and Portugal. People have also fallen out of love with marriage in countries as varied as Greece, Denmark, Hungary, the Netherlands and Britain.

In France, cohabitation has become so common that the government has provided a legal option to marriage called civil partnership contracts known as PACS, which were introduced in 1999. These contracts provide many of the same legal rights and protections to cohabitators that marriage contracts do. Rather than take any measures to resist the rapid decline of marriage, in

France, the government has essentially accepted and legitimized cohabitation by putting it on a near-par legal basis with marriage.

While financial issues have in part been responsible for the decline in marriage in European countries, the changing attitude towards marriage – that it is no longer viewed by a majority of younger adults as something to aspire to – is greatly responsible for the decline. While studies show that this attitude is not nearly as prevalent among young adults in the U.S., as cohabitation becomes ever more common and accepted, European sentiments may certainly creep across the ocean.

At least three very different things could happen to marriage in the U.S. in next fifty years. First, marriage may continue to decline, replaced primarily by cohabitation as it spreads inexorably across socio-economic groups and renders marriage obsolete. Second, rather than declining, marriage rates may hold or trend slightly upward after they hit some unknown “low point,” which may have already occurred, continuing in the future at a relatively stable rate. That is precisely what occurred with the divorce rate, which reached its highest point in the early 80’s and has since leveled off at a slightly lower rate. The same thing could happen to the marriage rate.

Third, marriage may see a rebirth, resulting in an ever-larger number of marriages annually, accelerating the marriage rate rather dramatically over a period of years. This may be the least likely scenario, one that would require a heretofore missing commitment in the U.S. to help create the best possible conditions for marriage to flourish for those who desire it. Support for marriage would need to move from a largely conservative base to one that encompasses conservatives and liberals, religious and non-religious, in common recognition that marriage, despite its flaws, is still the most beneficial relationship for men, women, and children.

Studies and surveys reveal that the majority of young men and women in the U.S. across all social-economic strata still aspire to marriage and family, revealing a troubling disconnect between the marital aspirations of young people and the declining state of marriage. We also know that no matter the future fate of marriage in America, there will always be millions of single men and women who never marry, sometimes by choice, more often by circumstance. Approximately 50% of American adults today are single, which includes divorced men and women and men and women who have lost their spouses. Even factoring in those two groups, a significant percentage of adults today have never married.

It is wise for young adults to accept the fact that given the precipitous decline in marriages, marriage may or may not be in their future and that they can find happiness, fulfillment, and success either way. Young adults who believe in the inevitability of their getting married will have the most difficult time adjusting to the possibility of single life or a relational arrangement other than marriage, feeling a lack of fulfillment that they believe for them, only marriage will bring. A healthier approach for young adults to take is that if they aspire to marriage and it happens, great, but if it doesn’t, it is not the end of the world. For better or worse, theirs is a very different relational world from that of past generations.

Discussion Starters

1. What evidence is provided in the essay that marriage is rapidly declining in the U.S.? How convincing do you find the evidence?

2. Why do you believe that fewer and fewer people are marrying in the U.S.? Do you believe that cohabitation is a viable option to marriage? Why?
3. If you believe that the institution of marriage is worth preserving, what do you think can be done to stop the decline of the marriage rate for men and women who aspire to marry?
4. What is your personal viewpoint of marriage? Is it something that you hope to see in your future?

Gay Men: Fusing the Erotic and Aesthetic

By David Halperin

*David Halperin is a professor at the University of Michigan, the author of *How to be Gay*, and a prominent gay rights activist. In this essay, Halperin presents a very different reality of growing up gay compared to heterosexual and how the formative adolescent years of gay men have a profound and lasting effect on their lives.*

In his inexhaustible study of gay male culture, Neil Bartlett devotes an entire chapter called “Possessions” to gay men’s relationship to their *things*. Like “the excessive sentimentality that was the necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object, gay men’s insistent desire for precious possessions springs, according to Bartlett, from a permanent sense of fundamental frustration at the particular unavailability to us of the objects we most want. “Material wealth and sensual pleasure have a very special function for us,” Bartlett explains; “they compensate for other forms of poverty.” Bartlett carefully left those other forms of poverty unspecified – he clearly had in mind a broad spectrum of social and political deprivations – but he allowed for the possibility that there might be a very specific “hunger that gapes beneath” our quest for possessions.

The true sense of that hunger, Bartlett implied, is a lack of erotic satisfaction of a very general and basic kind. Sexual deprivation is fundamental, and crucial, to the subjective experiences of gay men, not because we are all pathetic, sex-starved rejects who never succeed in finding acceptable partners, but because adult satisfaction cannot quite make up for a previous history of unfulfillment. As George Haggerty says, speaking of the gayness of the pastoral elegy, “A love that is constituted in loss is a love that yields a longing that can never be fulfilled.”

Early on in our lives, whenever we become urgently aware of our desires, gay men discover that most of the human beings that attract us are not the least bit interested in having a sexual relationship with us, that they are not and cannot be attracted to us in return, and that some of them regard the mere fact of our desire for them as abhorrent. To be sure, it is possible to generalize this phenomena to people other than gay men, but at least heterosexuals do not experience their love objects as being *categorically* off limits to them, on account of them belonging to the wrong sex, which is what gay men experience. Even as adults, we do not escape the awareness that, in the eyes of most men, we fail to qualify as candidates for either sex or love. So our desire for men, in many cases, is impossible from the start, *impossible as such*. It is therefore infinite, and necessarily confined in the first instance to *fantasizing* about them. We develop, early on, a habit of communing with imaginary lovers, and it is a habit we never quite abandon.

What may be in and of itself an easy desire to satisfy becomes, when it is denied and frustrated, an impossible dream. The protracted experience of erotic lack which all gay men who grow up in straight society necessarily and painfully undergo turns the ordinary fulfillment of ordinary homosexual desire into an unattainable fantasy, which it often remains even when, later in life, a small-town boy moves to a gay metropolis where the sexual fulfillment of his former erotic daydreams turns out at last to be child’s play. For belated access to sexual objects, no matter how

numerous or glamorous they may be, can do little to close the long-established gap between fantasy and reality in the demand for erotic gratification. (Which is why the myriad opportunities for sexual satisfaction and love that gay liberation offers us have led not to a withering away of the gay porn industry but to its hypertrophic expansion.) Once the very prospect of “getting what you want” has been consigned to the realm of fantasy, erotic gratification ineluctably takes on hyperbolic proportions, exits the realm of the attainable, and becomes indissolubly associated with impossible rapture.

No wonder homosexual desire routinely verges on an obsession with absolute, unearthly perfection, with flawless archetypes or Platonic essences (the perfectly beautiful man: Dorian Gray; the technically flawless image of a beautiful man: Robert Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment;” the perfect operatic diva: the Lisbon Traviata).

Since they devote so much solitary time and effort early on in their lives to studying the perfect attributes of their ideal love objects, determining what combination of features – or what social form – corresponds most exactly to the requirements of their desire, gay men tend, while still quite young, to arrive at a detailed and rigorous mental picture of what it is that they want. And they are not likely to settle for anything less. Also, if most of the men you grew up wanting were bound to reject you anyway through no fault of your own, and if your prohibited desire for them was therefore destined to express itself only in dreams, in hopeless fantasies of sexual fulfillment and romantic bliss, then you had no reason to let the world constrain your daydreams or limit the scope of your fantasies to the narrow field of the possible. And so, when the time eventually comes to leave that dreamscape, you may find it difficult to make compromises with humdrum reality.

The commitment to perfection, and the refusal to settle for anything (or anyone) less, generate the peculiar merging of eroticism and aestheticism that is distinctive to gay culture. For an impossible but perfect object excites a very particular kind of desire. The ecstatic practice of erotic worship, combined with a despair of sexual satisfaction, produces a specific attitude toward objects of longing that is characteristic of gay male culture: an attitude of passionate but detached contemplation, at once critical and idealistic. By mingling the rapt transports of sexual idolatry with a distant, almost clinical appreciation of beauty, gay men achieve a kind of disinterestedness in their relation to erotic objects that brings their experience of sexual desire very close to that of pure aesthetic contemplation.

At least since Kant, it has been conventionally assumed that physical beauty and artistic beauty awaken very different kinds of response in normal (heterosexual) human subjects. The alleged difference between our responses to beautiful bodies and beautiful works of art is supposed to ground a fundamental distinction between interested and disinterested attraction, between instrumental, selfish, egoistic excited interestedness and non-instrumental, selfless, altruistic, contemplative disinterestedness. Aestheticism, moreover, is usually thought to express a quest for perfection, or a commitment to perfect beauty, that is largely irrelevant to the cruder, baser workings of sexual excitation. Gay male culture, by contrast, is notorious for its habit of fusing erotics and aesthetics.

Discussion Starters

1. What permanent effects, according to Halperin, does the fact that most men (i.e. heterosexual) a gay man is attracted to in his early years are “*categorically* off limits” have on him? How does this create a very different mindset among gay men compared to heterosexuals?
2. Why, according to Halperin, do gay men fuse the erotic and the aesthetic while heterosexuals, in general, do not? Is this an important distinction?
3. What, if anything, did you learn from the essay about the gay perspective? Do you feel that as a gay man, Halperin is relating the universal gay experience?

More College ‘Hookups,’ but More Virgins, Too

By Sharon Jayson

Sharon Jayson writes articles about relationships and behavior for USA TODAY. In this essay, Jayson analyzes the seeming paradox of more college students “hooking up” for sex and more students simultaneously remaining virgins, and some probable causes.

It wasn’t until the second semester of her senior year at Fordham University in New York that Kathleen Adams had a college boyfriend. “You just don’t date at colleges,” says Adams, 23, now a Fordham graduate student in urban studies.

But there’s no shortage of casual sex on campus, she says—in part because Fordham, like many colleges, has significantly more women than men. Adams says that means guys have the upper hand when it comes to intimacy. “It’s kind of like a competition,” she says. “The guys have their choice of whoever they want. So they think, ‘Why would I date?’ “

The relationship game among college-age adults today is a muddle of seemingly contradictory trends. Recent studies indicate that traditional dating on campuses has taken a back seat to no-strings relationships in which bonds between young men and women are increasingly brief and sexual. A new website to arrange these encounters that began at the University of Chicago last month now is expanding to other campuses.

But even as casual sex—often called “hookups” or “friends with benefits”—is a dominant part of campus life, a new report by the National Center for Health Statistics indicates the percentages of men and women 18-24 who say they are virgins also are increasing. It all reflects an emerging paradigm that is altering the nature of sex and relationships among young adults: fewer men than women on campuses; a more openly sexual society that often takes cues from media, and a declining desire to make relationship commitments early in life.

Adams’ experience is the reality for many of today’s college students, says Mark Regnerus, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas-Austin. His research suggests that the higher proportion of women on campuses has contributed to the ascent of the hookup culture. Overall, women made up more than 56% of the college population in 2009, according to the recent Census data on enrollments; more women are found on many campuses that serve both sexes.

“The women wind up competing with each other for access to the men, and often, that means relationships become sexual quicker,” says Regnerus, co-author of *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying*. It is based on an analysis of four national studies representing a total of 25,000 young people ages 18-23 and more than 200 additional interviews. “Men don’t have to work as hard as they used to, to woo a woman,” he says. “I’ve talked to various interviewees who had never been on a date, which doesn’t really make sense, given they’re pretty attractive. It’s just that less seems to be required to be in the company of a woman.”

Justin Garcia, a State University of New York doctoral fellow at Binghamton (N.Y.) University who conducts research on hookups, says this general lack of dating means many young adults don’t even know how to get a relationship started. “For the majority of students, they’re not going

to dinner and a movie unless they've hooked up with someone. Some physical interaction comes before the dating," he says. Often, "dates happen after a relationship, rather than before."

Many young people are eschewing relationships as too much hassle, especially when they plan to study abroad, leave town for internships or go to graduate school, says sociologist Teresa Downing-Matibag of Iowa State University. "They want to have their freedom and are not always interested in these committed relationships. At the same time, they'll tell you they will not be in a relationship without sex being an important part of it," she says.

The down economy has forced many students to work because their parents aren't as capable of funding their education; that means they're juggling school and work and are less likely to have time to devote to a relationship, she adds. "With the people that I know, there is a fair share of hooking up just to have sex, and the intention is to only do it once and possibly never see that person again," says Rachel Curtis, 22, an Iowa State grad student. "I know a few girls who would like to hook up every weekend, but sometimes the opportunity doesn't present itself. They call that an 'unlucky night.'"

The cryptic nature of what a hookup involves appeals to many young people: They deliberately want to be vague so they can exaggerate or hide their actions from their friends, analysts say. "Hookup" leaves it to the imagination. The ambiguity is intentional," says Michael Bruce of San Francisco, co-editor of *College Sex: Philosophy for Everyone: Philosophers with Benefits*. "Hooking up is very vague. It can be anything from kissing on the dance floor to you go back and have sex in the room and sleep over," says Leah Reis-Dennis, 19, a Harvard University sophomore from Eugene, Ore.

"It's called hanging out, but it's really hooking up," adds Kirsten Ellermann, 20, a junior at Iowa State University who has been in a relationship for more than a year. "You know what it means when a guy says he wants to come over and hang out. He's not taking you to dinner." "In a big way, hookups have kind of taken the place of—not exactly eclipsed—relationships, but hooking up is kind of an easier way for college students to act on their sexual desire without making a big commitment," says Reis-Dennis, a history and literature major.

Even so, "it's not like everyone is having casual sex all the time," says sociologist Paula England of Stanford University, whose ongoing research since 2005 has surveyed more than 17,000 students from 20 colleges and universities. "Some people are hooking up a bunch of times with the same person but are not calling it a relationship. Others are never doing anything you would call a hookup." Her latest data finds that by senior year, 72% of both sexes reported having at least one hookup, with the average of 9.7 for men and 7.1 for women. Just under one-quarter (24%) of seniors say they are virgins, she says.

The percentage of those who claim virginity appears to be increasing, according to a National Center for Health Statistics study released this month of 2006-08 data. Among 18- and 19-year-olds, about one-quarter of men and women said they hadn't had sexual contact with another person, up from 17% of women and 22% of men in 2002. Among those ages 20-24, 12% of women and 13% of men said they were virgins, up from 8% for both sexes in 2002. "Friends my age have not said they have chosen to be virgins," says Ashley Thompson, 23, who will receive her master's degree in public health from Ohio State University-Columbus in June.

Thompson, of Perrysburg, Ohio, is engaged, but "a lot of my peers, as women, have got a lot of

other things going on. I think the fact that young women are able to focus on other life goals such as school or career could change the way they form relationships, which inherently would impact their sexual activity.”

Some studies find virgins in even higher numbers. Responses collected from 1,500 Duke University freshmen and seniors at the Durham, N.C., campus in 2007 found that about 53% of women and 40% of the men said they were virgins, says Wendy Brynildsen, a Duke doctoral student who will share that data in a paper at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in August. “Many people think I’m crazy” for not having sex, says Jon Haron, 21, of Highlands Ranch, Colo., a part-time college student studying aviation technology and air-traffic control. He also works part-time as a flight instructor. “My core group of guy friends—my close friends—we’ve all made the decision to not have (sexual intercourse) until we’re married,” Haron says. But several friends, he adds, think it’s OK to engage in other sexual activity.

Although the government data offers no explanations for the growing percentage of virgins, there has been plenty of speculation, ranging from more open discussion about the health risks associated with casual sex to the busy lives of young people. Some cite the rise of the abstinence movement, while others point to easy access to Internet porn and an overtly sexualized culture that has made young people somewhat blasé about sex.

“We’re seeing that the choice to remain abstinent is increasingly resonant,” says Valerie Huber, executive director of the non-profit National Abstinence Education Association, which will launch a campaign next year to “rebrand the cultural message” and tell young people that “sexual activity as a rite of passage” is no longer an expectation for teens and young adults.

While sexual experimentation is a part of life for many young people, Reis-Dennis, a history and literature major, says there also are many who don’t want to have a “throwaway sexual experience.” “Personally, a lot of my friends at school have had sex,” she says. “As many, if not more, haven’t.”

Haron says his circle of friends, which includes about 15 guys, some with girlfriends, all have looked at porn and are trying to stay away from it. “Porn is easy,” he says. “I think that’s why a lot of guys are drawn to that. It’s so easy to get and they’re not going to be rejected, so why try with a girl?”

Researchers are well aware how the Internet has made porn and sex websites so accessible and appealing; Downing-Matibag says her students have shown her websites for virtual sex. “They can go to those websites and have sexual relationships watching a webcam. They can still be a virgin and have 100 different partners online through chat rooms or webcams,” she says. “Young people have avatars (on-screen characters representing themselves online) and enter these virtual worlds that involve sexual encounters.”

But some of those who work to educate young people about sex say the new data about more virgins could signal change. “The hookup culture seems to be predominating, but there might be the beginning of a pushback and relationships playing a much stronger role,” says James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth, a Washington-based non-profit.

Still, most young people are having some kind of sexual contact. “Humans are biological beings,” Garcia says. “We have a sex drive. To not recognize that in talking to young adults is foolish.”

Discussion Starters

1. What might be the reasons for the contradictory sexual behavior presented in the essay: more sexual “hook-ups” but more college-age virgins?
2. What effects do you think that the casual/no strings approach to sex has on those who experience it? What is your personal viewpoint on “hooking up?”
3. The essay presents a rather discouraging picture for women on campus: not enough guys, more competition, more need to gratify men sexually. Does this picture conform to your college experience? Does the essay reflect the sexual/relationship situation for most college students?

Fathering in America: What's a Dad Supposed to Do?

By Marie Hartwell-Walker

Marie Hartwell-Walker is a psychologist, professor at the University of Massachusetts, and writer for the Huffington Post. In this essay, Hartwell-Walker contends that no matter the kind of family situation children are in, fathers are a critical part of the equation, and reveals how all fathers can contribute to the happiness and well-being of their children.

Americans seem more confused than ever about the role of fathers in children's lives. On the one hand, more and more fathers are absent for all or significant periods of time. According to the 2006 Census, 23 percent of children under the age of 18 don't live with their biological father and the number is climbing. On the other hand, search "fatherhood" on the web and you'll find dozens of websites dedicated to teaching, encouraging, and supporting men in becoming more nurturing and involved fathers.

Meanwhile, many TV sitcoms and animated shows continue to portray dads as dolts or, at best, well-meaning but misguided large children whose wives have to mother them as well as their offspring. If an alien in another universe happens to tune in to *The Simpsons*, *Everyone Loves Raymond*, *Family Guy*, etc., he (it?) will come away with a rather skewed idea of how men function in American families.

I'll leave it to the sociologists to explain the many and complicated variables of race, class, gender issues, social policy, employment issues, and governmental interventions that are at the root of the diverging trends and the pejorative TV scripts. It's enough to note that there is a major rethinking of fathers' roles and responsibilities going on within the context of lots of rethinking in America.

We may be reconsidering how family should be defined. We may be confused about gender roles. We may be struggling with knowing how to parent well in a complicated time. But in the midst of all this confusion, there is a growing consensus that what kids need, at least, is clear. Kids need their fathers as well as their mothers.

Regardless of whether the father lives with his children, active participation in raising those children is good for everyone. The kids become healthier adults. The fathers come to a fuller and more complex maturity. The mothers have a reliable co-parent to share the responsibilities and challenges as well as the accomplishments of parenting. How does this idea of "involved father" translate to daily life? Current research points to the following practical guidelines for responsible fatherhood.

What's a Father to Do?

Embrace your responsibility. Once you are a father, you are a father for life. The knowledge of fatherhood changes a man. It can be a source of pride and maturity or a source of shame and regret. Even if you have good reasons for not being actively involved, acknowledging your paternity is a minimal gift you can provide to your child. With it come many legal, psychological, and financial benefits. If you want to be in your child's life, it also protects your rights to have time with your child should you and the child's mother have a falling out.

Be there. In study after study, kids consistently say they would like to have more time with their dads. Regardless of whether a dad shares a home with the children and their mother, the kids need dad time. Working together on a chore or simply hanging out can be as meaningful as attending events or having adventures. Kids want to know their fathers. Just as important, they want their fathers to know them.

Be there throughout their childhoods. There is no time in a child's life that doesn't count. Research has shown that even infants know and respond to their fathers differently than they do to their mothers. The bond you make with a baby sets the foundation for a lifetime. As the kids get older, they'll need you in different ways but they will always need you. Insistent toddler, curious preschooler, growing child, prickly adolescent: Each age and stage will have its challenges and rewards. Kids whose parents let them know that they are worth their parents' time and attention are kids who grow up healthy and strong. Boys and girls who grow up with attention and approval from their dads as well as their moms tend to be more successful in life.

Respond to the needs of the kids, not your relationship with their mother. Regardless of whether you are getting along with your girlfriend or wife (present or ex), your relationship with the kids is exactly that: your relationship with the kids. The kids need predictability. They need care. They need a loving relationship with you. They need whatever financial support you can provide. None of these things should depend on whether you've had a disagreement or fight with their mom. None of these things should ever be withheld as a way to get even with her.

Be in a respectful and appreciative relationship with their mother. Being a good dad is certainly possible both inside and outside of marriage. Regardless of whether you and their mom can work out how to be a committed couple, you can support each other as parents. Kids grow best when their parents treat each other with respect and appreciation. The kids then don't feel torn between the two people they love.

Do your financial share. Kids need to be fed, clothed, housed, and cared for. Children whose parents provide for them live better lives, feel valued, and have better relationships with both their parents. They need the role model of a responsible male acting responsibly. Just as they need you to be present in their lives, regardless of whether you live with their mom, they also need you to live up to financial obligations to the very best of your ability.

Balance discipline with fun. Some dads make the mistake of being only the disciplinarian. The kids grow up afraid of their dads and unable to see the man behind the rules. An equal and opposite mistake is being so focused on fun that you become one of the kids, leaving their mother always to be the heavy. Kids need to have fathers who know both how to set reasonable, firm limits and how to relax and have a good time. Give yourself and the kids the stability that comes with clear limits and the good memories that come with play.

Be a role model of adult manhood. Both boys and girls need you as a role model for what it means to be adult and male. Make no mistake: The kids are observing you every minute. They are taking in how you treat others, how you manage stress and frustrations, how you fulfill your obligations, and whether you carry yourself with dignity. Consciously or not, the boys will become like you. The girls will look for a man very much like you. Give them an idea of manhood (and relationships) you can be proud of.

Beyond these considerations, there is little agreement about how an “ideal father” should behave. It doesn’t seem to matter (in terms of the mental health of children) whether fathers work out of the home or stay home with the kids. It doesn’t seem to matter what job a dad has or how much money a dad makes, as long as he is doing his best. It doesn’t seem to matter what his interests and skills are, as long as he shares them with his children. It doesn’t seem to matter whether a father is very physically affectionate or loves more quietly as long as the kids know that he most certainly cares about them. What matters is for fathers to be committed to their children and involved with them over time. When fathers take that responsibility seriously, their children are more likely to do well and the fathers have few regrets.

Discussion Starters

1. The essay is based on the assumption that fathers are very important in a child’s life. Do you agree with the assumption? Why?
2. Discuss the eight recommendations that Hartwell-Walker makes for successful fathering. Do you agree with each recommendation? Are some more important than others?
3. Discuss the role that a father (or lack of a father) has played in your life. How do you view fatherhood in your own future (or how do women view the importance of raising children with a father in their future)?

Looking for Someone: Sex, Love, and Loneliness on the Internet

By Nick Paumgarten

Nick Paumgarten is a staff writer for The New Yorker. In this essay, Paumgarten explores the world of online dating, its place in the “love-connection” landscape, and the range of experiences of those who seek love on the Internet.

The process of selecting and securing a partner, whether for conceiving and rearing children, or for enhancing one’s socioeconomic standing, or for attempting motel-room acrobatics, or merely for finding companionship in a cold and lonely universe, is as consequential as it can be inefficient or irresolute. Lives hang in the balance, and yet we have typically relied for our choices on happenstance—offhand referrals, late nights at the office, or the dream of meeting cute.

Online dating sites, whatever their more mercenary motives, draw on the premise that there has got to be a better way. They approach the primeval mystery of human attraction with a systematic and almost Promethean hand. They rely on algorithms, those often proprietary mathematical equations and processes which make it possible to perform computational feats beyond the reach of the naked brain. Some add an extra layer of projection and interpretation; they adhere to a certain theory of compatibility, rooted in psychology or brain chemistry or genetic coding, or they define themselves by other, more readily obvious indicators of similitude, such as race, religion, sexual predilection, sense of humor, or musical taste. There are those which basically allow you to browse through profiles as you would boxes of cereal on a shelf in the store. Others choose for you; they bring five boxes of cereal to your door, ask you to select one, and then return to the warehouse with the four others. Or else they leave you with all five.

The obvious advantage of online dating is that it provides a wider pool of possibility and choice. In some respects, for the masses of grownups seeking mates, either for a night or for life, dating is an attempt to approximate the collegiate condition—that surfeit both of supply and demand, of information and authentication. A college campus is a habitat of abundance and access, with a fluid and fairly ruthless vetting apparatus. A city also has abundance and access, especially for the young, but as people pair off, and as they corral themselves, through profession, geography, and taste, into cliques and castes, the range of available mates shrinks. We run out of friends of friends and friends of friends of friends. You can get to thinking that the single ones are single for a reason.

If your herd is larger, your top choice is likely to be better, in theory, anyway. This can cause problems. When there is something better out there, you can’t help trying to find it. You fall prey to the tyranny of choice—the idea that people, when faced with too many options, find it harder to make a selection. If you are trying to choose a boyfriend out of a herd of thousands, you may choose none of them. Or you see someone until someone better comes along. The term for this is “trading up.” It can lead you to think that your opportunities are virtually infinite, and therefore to question what you have. It can turn people into products.

For some, of course, there is no end game; Internet dating can be sport, an end in itself. One guy told me he regarded it as “target practice”—a way to sharpen his skills. If you’re looking only to

get laid, the industry's algorithmic-matching pretense is of little account; you merely want to be cut loose in the corral. The Internet can arrange this for you.

But if you really are eager, to say nothing of desperate, for a long-term partner you may have to contend with something else—the tyranny of unwitting compromise. Often the people who go on the sites that promise you a match are so primed to find one that they jump at the first or the second or the third who comes along. The people who are looking may not be the people you are looking for. “It’s a selection problem when you round up a bunch of people who want to settle down,” Chris Coyne, one of the founders of a site called OK Cupid, told me. Some people are too picky, and others aren’t picky enough. Some hitters swing at every first pitch, and others always strike out looking. Many sites, either because of their methods or because of their reputations, tend to attract one or the other.

“Internet dating” is a bit of a misnomer. You don’t date online, you meet people online. It’s a search mechanism. The question is, is it a better one than, say, taking up hot yoga, attending a lot of book parties, or hitting happy hour at Tony Roma’s?

Match.com, one of the first Internet dating sites, went live in 1995. It is now the biggest dating site in the world and is itself the biggest aggregator of other dating sites; under the name Match, it owns thirty in all, and accounts for about a quarter of the revenues of its parent company, I.A.C., Barry Diller’s collection of media properties. In 2010, fee-based dating Web sites grossed over a billion dollars.

According to a recent study commissioned by Match.com, online is now the third most common way for people to meet. (The most common are “through work/school” and “through friends/family.”) One in six new marriages is the result of meetings on Internet dating sites. (Nobody’s counting one-night stands.) For many people in their twenties, accustomed to conducting much of their social life online, it is no less natural a way to hook up than the church social or the night-club-bathroom line.

There are thousands of dating sites; the big ones, such as Match.com and eHarmony (among the fee-based services) and PlentyOfFish and OK Cupid (among the free ones), hog most of the traffic. Pay sites make money through monthly subscriptions; you can’t send or receive a message without one. Free sites rely on advertising. Mark Brooks, the editor of the trade magazine *Online Personals Watch*, said, “Starting a site is like starting a restaurant. It’s a sexy business, looks like fun, yet it’s hard to make money.” There is, as yet, a disconnect between success and profit. “The way these companies make money is not directly correlated to the utility that users get from the product,” Harj Taggar, a partner at the Silicon Valley seed fund Y Combinator, told me. “What they really should be doing is making money if they match you with people you like.”

Some sites proceed from a simple gimmick. ScientificMatch attempts to pair people according to their DNA, and claims that this approach leads to a higher rate of female orgasms. A site called Ashley Madison notoriously connects cheating spouses. Howaboutwe.com asks only that you complete a sentence that begins “How about we . . .” with a suggestion for a first date, be it a Martini at the Carlyle or a canoe trip on the Gowanus Canal. The cutting edge is in mobile and location-based technology, such as Grindr, a smartphone app for gay men that tells subscribers when there are other willing subscribers in their vicinity. Many Internet dating companies, including Grindr, are trying to devise ways to make this kind of thing work for straight people, which means making

it work for straight women, who may not need an app to know that they are surrounded by willing straight men.

For the purposes of this essay, I didn't do any online dating of my own. Instead, I went out for coffee or drinks with various women who, according to their friends, had had extraordinary or, at least, numerous adventures dating online. To the extent that a date can sometimes feel like an interview, these interviews often felt a little like dates. We sized each other up. We doled out tidbits of immoderate disclosure.

I talked to men, too, of course, but there is something simultaneously reductive and disingenuous in most men's assessments of their requirements and conquests. Some research has suggested that it is men, more than women, who yearn for marriage, but this may be merely a case of stated preference. Men want someone who will take care of them, make them look good, and have sex with them—not necessarily in that order. It may be that this is all that women really want, too, but they are better at disguising or obscuring it. They deal in calculus, while men, for the most part, traffic in simple sums.

A common observation, about both the Internet dating world and the world at large, is that there is an apparent surplus of available women, especially in their thirties, and a shortage of recommendable men. The explanation for this asymmetry, which isn't exactly news, is that men can and usually do pursue younger women, and that often the men who are single are exactly the ones who prefer them. For women surveying a landscape of banished husbands or perpetual boys, the biological rationale offers little solace. Neither does the Internet.

Everyone these days seems to have an online-dating story or a friend with online-dating stories. Pervasiveness has helped to chip away at the stigma; people no longer think of online dating as a last resort for desperadoes and creeps. The success story is a standard of the genre. But anyone who has spent a lot of time dating online, and not just dabbling, has his or her share of horror stories, too.

Earlier this year, a Los Angeles filmmaker named Carole Markin sued Match.com in California state court after she was allegedly raped by a man she met on the site; he turned out to be a convicted sex offender. Markin's suit asked not for money but for an injunction against Match.com to prevent it from signing up any new members until it institutes a system for background checks. (A few days later, the company announced that it would start checking subscribers against the national registry of sex offenders.) To some extent, such incidents, as terrible as they are, merely reflect the frequency of such transactional hazards in the wider world. Bars don't do background checks, either.

Most bad dates aren't that kind of bad. They are just awkward, or excruciating. One woman, a forty-six-year-old divorced mother of two, likened them to airplane crashes: the trouble usually occurs during takeoff and landing—the minute you meet and the minute you leave. You can often tell right away if this person who's been so charming in his e-mails is a creep or a bore. If not, it becomes clear at the end of the evening, when he sticks his tongue down your throat. Or doesn't. One woman who has dated fifty-eight men since her divorce, a few years ago, told me that she maintains a chart, both to keep the men straight and to try to discern patterns—as though there might be a unified-field theory of why men are dogs.

I had a talk-about-dating date with a freelance researcher named Julia Kamin, who, over twelve years as a dater on various sites, has boiled down all the competing compatibility criteria to the

question of, as she put it, “Are we laughing at the same shit?” This epiphany inspired her to build a site—makeeachotherlaugh.com—on which you rate cartoons and videos, and the algorithms match you up. As she has gone around telling people about her idea, she says, “women get instantly excited. Men are, like, ‘Um, O.K., maybe.’” It might be that women want to be amused while men want to be considered amusing. “I really should have two sites,” Kamin said. “Hemakesmelaugh.com and shelaughsatmyjokes.com.” (She bought both URLs.)

It’s senseless, at least in the absence of divine agency, to declare that any two people were made for each other, yet we say it all the time, to sustain our belief that it’s sensible for them to pair up. The conceit can turn the search for someone into a search for *that* someone, which is fated to end in futility or compromise, whether conducted on the Internet or in a ballroom. And yet people find each other, every which way, and often achieve something that they call happiness.

Look around a Starbucks and imagine that all the couples you see are Internet daters complying with the meet-first-for-coffee rule of thumb: here’s another bland, neutral establishment webbed with unspoken expectation and disillusionment. One evening, I found myself in such a place with a thirty-eight-year-old elementary-school teacher who had spent more than ten years plying Match.com and Nerve.com, as well as the analogue markets, in search of someone with whom to spend the rest of her life. She’d met dozens of men. Her mother felt that she was being too picky.

In December, she started corresponding online with a man a couple of years older than she. After a week and a half, they met for drinks, which turned into dinner and more. He was clever, handsome, and capable. In their e-mails, they’d agreed that they’d reached a time and place in their lives to be less cautious and cool, in matters of the heart, so when, two days later, he sent a photograph of a caipirinha, the national cocktail of Brazil, where he’d gone for a few weeks on business, she found herself suggesting that she join him there. He made the arrangements. Her mother approved. She flew down to Rio the next week, and he came to the airport with a driver to meet her.

Months later, she savored the memory of that moment when he greeted her with a passionate hug, and the week and who knows what else lay before them. A swirl of anticipation, uncertainty, and desire converged into an instant of bliss. For that feeling alone—to say nothing of the chance to go to Brazil—she would do it all over again, even though, during the next ten days, with nothing but sex to stave off their corrosive exchanges over past and future frustrations, they came to despise each other. When they returned to New York, they split up, and went back online.

Discussion Starters

1. What, if anything, did you learn about online dating sites that you didn’t know? Do you view online dating any differently as a result?
2. What are the positives and negatives of online dating? Does it appear to be a viable way of meeting a future partner?
3. What is your personal experience, or the experience of people you know, with online dating? Might you try it someday if you haven’t?

Domestic Violence and Abuse

By Jeanne Segal

Jeanne Segal is a sociologist, psychologist, author, and co-creator of Helpguide.org. In this essay, Segal explains what constitutes domestic violence, presents signs that indicate a person may be in an abusive relationship, reveals ways in which abusers attempt to control their victims, and provides advice on how to help a person who may be abused.

Domestic violence and abuse can happen to anyone, yet the problem is often overlooked, excused, or denied. This is especially true when the abuse is psychological rather than physical. Noticing and acknowledging the signs of an abusive relationship is the first step to ending it. No one should live in fear of the person they love. If you recognize yourself or someone you know in the following warning signs and descriptions of abuse, reach out. There is help available.

Domestic abuse, also known as spousal abuse, occurs when one person in an intimate relationship or marriage tries to dominate and control the other person. Domestic abuse that includes physical violence is called domestic violence.

Domestic violence and abuse are used for one purpose and one purpose only: to gain and maintain total control over you. An abuser doesn't "play fair." Abusers use fear, guilt, shame, and intimidation to wear you down and keep you under his or her thumb. Your abuser may also threaten you, hurt you, or hurt those around you.

Domestic violence and abuse does not discriminate. It happens among heterosexual couples and in same-sex partnerships. It occurs within all age ranges, ethnic backgrounds, and economic levels. And while women are more commonly victimized, men are also abused—especially verbally and emotionally, although sometimes even physically as well. The bottom line is that abusive behavior is never acceptable, whether it's coming from a man, a woman, a teenager, or an older adult. You deserve to feel valued, respected, and safe.

Domestic abuse often escalates from threats and verbal abuse to violence. And while physical injury may be the most obvious danger, the emotional and psychological consequences of domestic abuse are also severe. Emotionally abusive relationships can destroy your self-worth, lead to anxiety and depression, and make you feel helpless and alone. No one should have to endure this kind of pain—and your first step to breaking free is recognizing that your situation is abusive. Once you acknowledge the reality of the abusive situation, then you can get the help you need.

There are many signs of an abusive relationship. The most telling sign is fear of your partner. If you feel like you have to walk on eggshells around your partner—constantly watching what you say and do in order to avoid a blow-up—chances are your relationship is unhealthy and abusive. Other signs that you may be in an abusive relationship include a partner who belittles you or tries to control you, and your personal feelings of self-loathing, helplessness, and desperation.

Do you feel afraid of your partner much of the time, avoid certain topics out of fear of angering him, feel that you can't do anything right for him, believe that you deserve to be hurt or mistreated, or feel emotionally numb or helpless? Does your partner humiliate or yell at you, criticize and put

you down regularly, treat you so badly that you're embarrassed for your friends or family to see, ignore or put down your opinions or accomplishments, blame you for his abusive behavior, or see you as property or a sex object? Does he have a bad or unpredictable temper, has hurt you or threatened to hurt or kill you, threatened to take your children away or harm them, threatened to commit suicide if you leave, forced you to have sex, or destroyed your belongings? Is he excessively jealous and possessive, does he control where you go and what you do, keep you from seeing your family or friends, limit your access to money, a car, or a phone, or constantly check up on you? Any of these signs can indicate an abusive and unhealthy relationship.

When people talk about domestic violence, they are often referring to the physical abuse of a spouse or intimate partner. Physical abuse is the use of physical force against someone in a way that injures or endangers that person. Physical assault or battering is a crime, whether it occurs inside or outside of the family. The police have the power and authority to protect you from physical attack.

Any situation in which you are forced to participate in unwanted, unsafe, or degrading sexual activity is sexual abuse. Forced sex, even by a spouse or intimate partner with whom you also have consensual sex, is an act of aggression and violence. Furthermore, people whose partners abuse them physically *and* sexually are at a higher risk of being seriously injured or killed.

It is still abuse if the incidents of physical abuse seem minor when compared to those you have read about, seen on television or heard other women talk about. There isn't a "better" or "worse" form of physical abuse; you can be severely injured as a result of being pushed, for example. It is still abuse if the incidents of physical abuse have only occurred one or two times in the relationship. Studies indicate that if your spouse/partner has injured you once, it is likely he will continue to physically assault you. It is still abuse if the physical assaults stopped when you became passive and gave up your right to express yourself as you desire, to move about freely and see others, and to make decisions. It is not a victory if you have to give up your rights as a person and a partner in exchange for not being assaulted!

When people think of domestic abuse, they often picture battered women who have been physically assaulted. But not all abusive relationships involve violence. Just because you're not battered and bruised doesn't mean you're not being abused. Many men and women suffer from emotional abuse, which is no less destructive. Unfortunately, emotional abuse is often minimized or overlooked—even by the person being abused.

The aim of emotional abuse is to chip away at your feelings of self-worth and independence. If you're the victim of emotional abuse, you may feel that there is no way out of the relationship or that without your abusive partner you have nothing. Emotional abuse includes *verbal abuse* such as yelling, name-calling, blaming, and shaming. Isolation, intimidation, and controlling behavior also fall under emotional abuse. Additionally, abusers who use emotional or psychological abuse often throw in threats of physical violence or other repercussions if you don't do what they want. You may think that physical abuse is far worse than emotional abuse, since physical violence can send you to the hospital and leave you with scars. But the scars of emotional abuse are very real, and they run deep. In fact, emotional abuse can be just as damaging as physical abuse—sometimes even more so.

An abuser's goal is to control you, and he or she will frequently use money to do so. Economic or financial abuse includes rigidly controlling your finances, withholding money or credit cards, making you account for every penny you spend, withholding basic necessities (food, clothes,

medication, shelter), restricting you to an allowance, preventing you from working or choosing your own career, sabotaging your job (making you miss work, calling constantly), or stealing from you or taking your money.

Despite what many people believe, domestic violence and abuse is not due to the abuser's loss of control over his or her behavior. In fact, abusive behavior and violence is a deliberate choice made by the abuser in order to control you. Abusers use a variety of tactics to manipulate you and exert their power:

- Dominance – Abusive individuals need to feel in charge of the relationship. They will make decisions for you and the family, tell you what to do, and expect you to obey without question. Your abuser may treat you like a servant, child, or even as his or her possession.
- Humiliation – An abuser will do everything he or she can to make you feel bad about yourself or defective in some way. After all, if you believe you're worthless and that no one else will want you, you're less likely to leave. Insults, name-calling, shaming, and public put-downs are all weapons of abuse designed to erode your self-esteem and make you feel powerless.
- Isolation – In order to increase your dependence on him or her, an abusive partner will cut you off from the outside world. He or she may keep you from seeing family or friends, or even prevent you from going to work or school. You may have to ask permission to do anything, go anywhere, or see anyone.
- Threats – Abusers commonly use threats to keep their partners from leaving or to scare them into dropping charges. Your abuser may threaten to hurt or kill you, your children, other family members, or even pets. He or she may also threaten to commit suicide, file false charges against you, or report you to child services.
- Intimidation – Your abuser may use a variety of intimidation tactics designed to scare you into submission. Such tactics include making threatening looks or gestures, smashing things in front of you, destroying property, hurting your pets, or putting weapons on display. The clear message is that if you don't obey, there will be violent consequences.
- Denial and blame – Abusers are very good at making excuses for the inexcusable. They will blame their abusive and violent behavior on a bad childhood, a bad day, and even on the victims of their abuse. Your abusive partner may minimize the abuse or deny that it occurred. He or she will commonly shift the responsibility on to you: Somehow, his or her violent and abusive behavior is your fault.

Abusers *are* able to control their behavior—they do it all the time:

- Abusers pick and choose whom to abuse. They don't insult, threaten, or assault everyone in their life who gives them grief. Usually, they save their abuse for the people closest to them, the ones they claim to love.
- Abusers carefully choose when and where to abuse. They control themselves until no one else is around to see their abusive behavior. They may act like everything is fine in public, but lash out instantly as soon as you're alone.

- Abusers are able to stop their abusive behavior when it benefits them. Most abusers are not out of control. In fact, they're able to immediately stop their abusive behavior when it's to their advantage to do so (for example, when the police show up or their boss calls).
- Violent abusers usually direct their blows where they won't show. Rather than acting out in a mindless rage, many physically violent abusers carefully aim their kicks and punches where the bruises and marks won't show.

Domestic abuse falls into a common pattern, or cycle of violence. Your abusive partner lashes out with aggressive, belittling, or violent behavior. The abuse is a power play designed to show you “who is boss.” After abusing you, your partner feels guilt, but not over what he's done. He's more worried about the possibility of being caught and facing consequences for his abusive behavior. Next, your abuser rationalizes what he or she has done. The person may come up with a string of excuses or blame you for the abusive behavior—anything to avoid taking responsibility. Then the abuser does everything he can to regain control and keep the victim in the relationship. He may act as if nothing has happened, or he may turn on the charm. This peaceful honeymoon phase may give the victim hope that the abuser has really changed this time. Finally, your abuser begins to fantasize about abusing you again. He spends a lot of time thinking about what you've done wrong and how he'll make you pay. Then he makes a plan for turning the fantasy of abuse into reality. Your abuser sets you up and puts his plan in motion, creating a situation where he can justify abusing you.

Your abuser's apologies and loving gestures in between the episodes of abuse can make it difficult to leave. He may make you believe that you are the only person who can help him, that things will be different this time, and that he truly loves you. However, the dangers of staying are very real.

It's impossible to know with certainty what goes on behind closed doors, but there are some telltale signs and symptoms of emotional abuse and domestic violence. If you witness any warning signs of abuse in a friend, family member, or co-worker, take them very seriously.

People who are being abused may seem afraid or anxious to please their partner, go along with everything their partner says and does, check in often with their partner to report where they are and what they're doing, receive frequent, harassing phone calls from their partner, or talk about their partner's temper, jealousy, or possessiveness. People who are being physically abused may have frequent injuries, with the excuse of “accidents,” frequently miss work, school, or social occasions without explanation, or dress in clothing designed to hide bruises or scars (e.g. wearing long sleeves in the summer or sunglasses indoors)

People who are being isolated by their abuser may be restricted from seeing family and friends, rarely go out in public without their partner, or have limited access to money, credit cards, or the car. People who are being abused may have very low self-esteem, even if they used to be confident, display major personality changes (e.g. an outgoing person becomes withdrawn), or be depressed, anxious, or suicidal.

If you suspect that someone you know is being abused, speak up! If you're hesitating—telling yourself that it's none of your business, you might be wrong, or the person might not want to talk about it—keep in mind that expressing your concern will let the person know that you care and may even save his or her life.

You can ask your friend or family member if something is wrong, express concern, listen and validate, offer help, and support her decision. Don't wait for her to come to you, judge or blame, pressure her in any way, give advice, or place conditions on your support ("If you don't leave him, I can't help you."). Talk to the person in private and let her know that you're concerned. Point out the things you've noticed that make you worried. Tell the person that you're there whenever she feels ready to talk. Reassure the person that you'll keep whatever is said between the two of you to yourself, and let her know that you'll help in any way you can.

Remember, abusers are very good at controlling and manipulating their victims. People who have been emotionally abused or battered are depressed, drained, scared, ashamed, and confused. They need help to get out, yet they've often been isolated from their family and friends. By picking up on the warning signs and offering support, you can help them escape an abusive situation and begin healing.

Discussion Starters

1. What, if anything, did you learn about physical or mental abuse from the essay? What did you learn about abusers?
2. How can a person distinguish between a mentally abusive relationship and a relatively "normal" relationship, which may have its share of arguments and harsh words?
3. Based on the signs of abuse in the essay, have you ever been (or are) in an abusive relationship? Do you know of others who might be in one? How does a person extricate herself from an abusive relationship? (The essay doesn't cover how to leave such a relationship.)