



## **Do you Know What Questions to Ask? Leslie Vernick**

John and Carol were in counseling for over a year. Their presenting problem was identified as communication issues and difficulties agreeing on how to discipline their teenage son. John was a deacon in their church and managed security for a large corporation. Carol was a homemaker. They were married seventeen years, their son had just turned fifteen, and they had two younger daughters.

During their bimonthly counseling sessions, Carol would often defer to John for the answer to the counselor's questions. She seemed very anxious to get help as they were concerned that their teenage son was developing an angry and rebellious spirit. John was critical of his son's recent behaviors and told the counselor, "Carol is too lenient with him. We need to come together to show him who's in charge around here."

When an individual or couple seeks help from a pastor, therapist, or biblical counselor, domestic abuse is rarely the presenting problem disclosed. We can see an individual or couple for a long time and not have the slightest idea of what is really going on behind the closed doors of their home. We know only what they tell us and what we see. If we don't know what to look for or ask them, or they don't feel free to tell us, then we can miss a large part of the diagnostic picture.

I became aware of Carol and John's story through a mutual friend who called me asking for advice. She attended church with Carol and John, and that morning Carol disclosed to her that last night their son threatened to kill his father. My friend felt scared. What should she do? How could she help?

Carol told her friend that during an argument with John, her son grabbed one of his father's guns, and threatened to kill his dad. Carol knew then that she could no longer keep secret what was going on at home. Last night while Carol was talking on the phone, John became enraged, forced her to hang up and became violent. One of John's house rules was that Carol was not allowed to talk on the phone when he was home. He reasoned she had plenty of opportunities to talk while he was at work.

After Carol hung up from her sister's phone call, she tried to explain to John why her sister needed to talk, but in his rage he began slapping and punching Carol. That was

when their son grabbed the gun and threatened his dad. Last night's incident was not the first time John hit Carol. It was only the most recent in a long history of violence at home.

I advised Carol's friend to have Carol call her counselor and fill him in on their crisis. He was in shock. He had no idea the scope of abuse hidden in their home. How would he? She never told, he never asked.

In order to assess for the possibility of domestic abuse, it is important that we ask questions that will give a person the opportunity to disclose what is happening. Our counselee may not be willing to talk because of fear, or shame, or because she/he isn't ready to face it. But when we gently ask some strategic questions and respectfully listen, we are giving a person permission to "tell their story", as well as indicating that we take abuse seriously and see their personal safety as important.

Three preliminary questions we should ask every client are:

- (1) Have you ever been threatened or physically hurt in this relationship?
- (2) Have you ever been an unwilling participant in a sexual act?
- (3) Do you ever feel fearful around your partner?

If you receive an affirmative response to one or more of these preliminary questions, it's important to obtain a more detailed assessment.

Not all domestic abuse looks the same and can range from mild to severe. However, when any kind of abuse is suspected or indicated, it is helpful to ask more specific questions around four areas.

- (1) **Frequency:** Ask, "How often do you feel afraid of your partner?" Or, "How often have you been threatened or physically hurt?" Or, "How often have you been an unwilling participant in a sexual act?"

If you take a careful history of abusive incidents, you will often find that they increase in frequency over time. Lenore Walker, an expert in working with abused women suggests asking four strategic questions to look for patterns of increasing frequency and intensity.

- When was the first time it (abuse) happened?
- When was the last time it happened?
- What is a typical type of incident?
- What is the worst thing that happened?

It's important to note even if abuse is reported as infrequent (once a year, or even once every five years), it is still sin. Abuse is never acceptable, excusable,

or justifiable, and is always destructive to the marriage and the person being abused.

(2) **Intensity:** When you are listening to the answers around frequency, it's important to ask specific questions about what happened. Respectfully inquiring about the first time, the last time, a typical time, and the worst time, helps you evaluate whether the abusive behavior is growing not only in frequency but intensity. Have abusive words escalated to push? Has a push become a shove, a slap become a beating?

(3) **Danger:** What is the level of danger to the victim and/or children in the home? Abusive behavior may be very infrequent, but can still be extremely dangerous to the safety and well-being of the victim. It only takes one bullet to kill someone.

If less severe types of violence have been indicated, but after questioning you see that the abusive behavior is increasing in frequency and intensity, understand that it is also increasing in danger.

Are there guns easily accessible? Is there a previous history of violence (road rage, throwing things, and assault toward others outside the family), cruelty toward pets, animals, or other people? Is there drug or alcohol use (abuse)? Substance abuse always increases the levels of danger and abusive incidents. Has there been a history of emotional and/or mental instability or suicidal or homicidal threats?

If you suspect your client is in imminent danger, please consult with experts in abuse to help the victim develop a safety plan. The national Domestic Violence number is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

(4) **Power and Control:** Is one partner trying to exercise power and control over another through the use of physical aggression, verbal threats or put downs, economic control, twisting of scripture, and/or isolation?

After speaking with Carol about specific incidents of abuse, her counselor realized that John believed he was entitled to use his anger to gain power and control over Carol and their children. John consistently twisted scriptures to justify his domineering control over Carol's time and their joint finances. John's belief that he had the right to tell Carol she was not allowed to talk on the phone, as well as many other areas where Carol had no freedom to make her own choice, indicated a gross imbalance of power and control in their marriage.

Domestic violence is not new. It appeared shortly after sin entered the world when Cain murdered his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:7). Yet many pastors, and Christian and biblical counselors have never received any specific training in recognizing familial abuse, nor have they known what kind of questions to ask.

Now you know, but if you fail to ask, you may never know what's really going on behind closed doors.