

Intimate Partner Violence

Varied causes and the increasing gender equality in perpetrators may surprise you.

The elevator video was shocking: Janay Palmer, out cold, and her boyfriend, NFL running back Ray Rice, dragging her out like yesterday's trash. How is it that, according to the Centers for Disease Control, 24 people per minute—more than 12 million per year—are victims of physical violence by an intimate partner, and what can be done about it? Alabama therapist and counselor Kenny Tannehill has worked for 15 years with male perpetrators of domestic violence, and he says abusive behavior is learned.

"Male abusers tend to be individuals who have absorbed—either through media images or family history—an ideology of inequality. These men often believe that a man is superior to a woman, and that a man's role in the relationship with his wife or significant other is asymmetrical—he is the authority over her. A problem arises, however, if she ever questions his authority, or if he perceives that she is doing so," says Tannehill.

Yet, contrary to what we may think of the stereotypical "abuser," even big, burly men like Ray Rice have feelings. Their violent behavior may not come from a love of conflict, but from a deep-seated fear that they're really not powerful. It is then, in response to their own sense of weakness that they act out. Through mental and physical manipulation of their loved ones, they may attempt to balance out their own lack of emotional equilibrium.

Tannehill says that one prominent characteristic of male abusers is that they witnessed violence as a child. They learn how to handle conflict from their dysfunctional upbringing, which results in more dysfunction when the child becomes a man. Impressions made upon him when he is young become the abuser's default mechanism when faced with a challenge or perceived threat—particularly in his personal relationships—as an adult. If he does not know what a healthy relationship looks like, he may be destined to repeat the bad behaviors that he witnessed growing up. Things aren't always what they seem.

However, there's yet another dimension to this problem of intimate partner violence, or IPV, that is far less apparent and not often discussed. Ray Rice was raised by a single mom, and from what we know of his story, he did not witness domestic violence in his home. It would be a mistake, then, to pretend that there are cookie-cutter causes of aggressive behavior. In the full video of Ray Rice and Janay Palmer, she is seen spitting at and hitting him before the infamous punch. How do we reconcile that with our ideas about victims and abusers? Certainly Rice had the strength advantage, and certainly what he did was wrong. What is not certain, however, is whether Palmer should be excused for her behavior.

Aggression does not come out of nowhere, says Tannehill. There are usually patterns of behavior that lead up to the actual display of violence. Thus, in the case of Ray Rice, Tannehill suspects that even if there was no physical violence between the couple before, there was likely some pattern of abuse prior to the elevator incident. Perhaps the way to reverse the escalating culture of violence is to have a more honest discussion of all of its causes. This consideration is not to excuse Rice's violent act—we can all agree that because of his strength advantage, it was his job to show restraint. Furthermore, his cavalier attitude after the incident speaks volumes about

his guilt, but that story has already been told.

The untold story tracks aggression from women to men, a dynamic that illuminates the complexity of intimate partner violence, and is difficult to discuss in light of the elevator video. A 2009 story in The Huffington Post reports that although “two thirds of domestic violence injuries were suffered by women,” multiple studies have found that women initiate violence against their partners more than men do. In certain cases of intimate partner violence, “a woman’s violence against her man was as predictive of his violence to her as his own history of violence.” *These studies also show that in these cases when a woman refrains from attack, no violence occurs. “It starts with how we socialize our young men and young women” says clinical psychologist Danella Knight. “We typically don’t broach the issue [of violence] until it’s an issue.” We tell our boys to “suck it up” and be “men” without fully defining what that means. We laugh off boys’ bad behavior with pat clichés—“boys will be boys”—then wonder why they do not make better choices. We tell boys not to hit girls, but do we tell girls the same thing? These are not easy questions to answer with the amber glow of the television screen beaming down the horrid, endlessly looping elevator video. But now that Ray Rice’s story has raised the issue of domestic violence, it’s time we have some honest discussions about men and women’s complicity in this troublesome, trending culture of violence.

*www.huffingtonpost.com/glenn-sacks/researcher-says-womens-in_b_222746.html

Signs of destructive domestic violence or intimate partner violence goes both ways:

- calls you names, insults you, or puts you down
- prevents you from going to work or school
- stops you from seeing family members or friends
- tries to control how you spend money, where you go, or what you wear
- acts jealous or possessive, or constantly accuses you of being unfaithful
- gets angry when drinking alcohol or using drugs
- threatens you with violence or a weapon
- hits, kicks, shoves, slaps, chokes, or otherwise hurts you, your children, or your pets
- forces you to have sex or engage in sexual acts against your will
- blames you for his or her violent behavior, or tells you that you deserve it

www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/adult-health/in-depth/domestic-violence-against-men/art-20045149