

ISKCON Statement on Domestic Abuse - Appendices

Adopted by the North American Governing Body Commission

International Society for Krishna Consciousness

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Appendix A: Definition of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is defined as a pattern of emotional, mental, or physical abuse that is used by one person in a relationship/marriage to control an intimate partner. The abuse can happen often or with long gaps between episodes, but it is never a one-time event.

There are several types of abuse:

Physical Abuse

- Hitting
- Biting
- Spitting
- Slapping
- Shoving
- Punching
- Pulling hair
- Burning
- Cutting
- Pinching
- Any type of violent behavior inflicted on the victim
- Denying medical treatment
- Forcing drug/alcohol use

Sexual Abuse

- Rape
- Attacking sexual body parts
- Violence followed by forcing sex
- Sexually demeaning the victim

Emotional Abuse

- Name calling
- Constant criticism
- Put-downs (often used to convince a partner that they are isolated)
 - “You’re so fat now! Who would like you now?”
 - “Your family doesn’t even care about you anymore!”
- Injuring relationship between victim and his/her child

*Note, sometimes the results of emotional abuse can be as harmful if not more harmful than some types of physical abuse

Financial Abuse

- Abuser makes victim financially reliant
- Maintains total control over financial resources
- Withholds victim's access to funds
- Prohibits victim from going to school or working

Psychological Abuse

- Isolate partner by preventing contact with family/friends
- Invoke fear through intimidation
- Threats of physical violence or death to victim, children, family, friends or property
- Abuser threatens to hurt/kill self
- Abuser does not let victim leave home
- Confiscation of documentation (passport, identification, etc.)

Appendix B: Effects on Children

Domestic abuse and child abuse are linked. Sixty-five percent of adults who abuse their partner also physically or sexually abuse their children. The cycle also continues in children, as research shows that boys who witness domestic abuse are twice as likely to abuse their partners and children as adults.

Children who are raised in an environment of domestic abuse grow up to be fearful and anxious. They are always on guard waiting for the next episode to occur. They don't know what triggers the abuse so they never feel safe. They feel worthless and powerless to prevent these violent acts from happening.

Children may appear fine, but they are carrying the weight of keeping the family secret. The children often blame themselves. They are isolated and vulnerable, and starved for attention, affection, and approval. With one parent struggling to survive while the other is consumed with control, the children become physically, emotionally, and psychologically abandoned.

Children may display the following behaviors:

- Guilt
- Shame
- Depression
- Anger
- Bedwetting
- Inability to concentrate

Appendix C: What Does Domestic Abuse Look Like?

The following illustrate what abuse often looks like:

-A couple is married within one month of meeting. The husband insists that the wife leave her job. When she wants to visit her friends or family, he forbids her or says that he has to come too. When her friends try to reach out, he answers the phone and reads her private email and phone messages.

-A wife puts on weight after childbirth. When they are alone and sometimes in public, the husband repeatedly criticizes his wife's appearance. He calls her fat and ugly. He tells her she is unlovable because of her appearance, leaving her feeling unworthy of love, demoralized, and full of self-doubt.

-After financial difficulties, a couple struggles to get along. Both call each other names and blame each other. Sometimes he slaps her. After each quarrel, he begs for forgiveness and promises it will never happen again. In the midst of another fight, he loses control and punches his wife, giving her a black eye; as she falls he breaks her wrist. He apologizes and takes her to the hospital.

-A devotee couple with a 1-year-old child was referred for counseling by their temple leadership due to claims of domestic abuse. Both claimed that the other was emotionally, physically, and financially abusive. After attending couples counseling, the husband was referred for a mental health assessment. He moved in with another devotee family to give the couple some time apart. After some time, the couple decided to remain separated and share custody of their child.

-Two devotees were engaged. The man began to physically abuse his fiancé (hitting and slapping) after she refused to have sex before marriage. She went to a temple leader to get help. He later admitted to the abuse. He was removed from pujari services and told to leave the temple ashram. They decided not to marry. She chose to move to another temple and is doing well. After one year of counseling he was allowed to return to the ashram.

-A young couple with two children moved from India to the US a few years ago. She came in contact with devotees and began to seek initiation. The husband was unfavorable towards her spiritual practice and felt threatened that another man (her potential guru) was more important to her. He became frustrated and resorted to physical violence against her. The police were involved and he was sent to anger management counseling. She was referred to a devotee mentor, and they both attended professional counseling. After a few years of counseling, the couple became more understanding of each other's needs. They are now living peacefully together.

Appendix D: Protection Is a Sastric Imperative

As a Vaishnava spiritual community, we are mandated by our scriptures and tradition to protect others. The Srimad Bhagavatam states that: “In the glorious days, or before the advent of the Age of Kali, the brāhmaṇas, the cows, the women, the children and the old men were properly given protection... the protection of women maintains the chastity of society, by which we can get a good generation for peace, tranquility and progress of life.” [Purport 1.8.5]

We also know that it is the duty of men in Vaishnava culture to protect women, not abuse them. There are multiple sastric references in this regard:

“The child must be taken care of. That is good. Similarly, woman also. And an old man like myself—I am always taken care of ... That is civilization.” [Spoken to Visakha Devi by Srila Prabhupada, *Back to Godhead* article 1999]

“One who strictly follows religious principles must not neglect to provide all facilities for the complete protection of his wife. There may be some suffering because of this, but one must nevertheless endure it. That is the duty of a faithful husband. By His personal example, Lord Ramacandra demonstrated this duty.” [Srimad-Bhagavatam, 5.19.5, Purport]

“In the spiritual platform there is no such distinction—man, woman, or black, white, or big or small. No. Everyone is spirit soul. Panditah sama-darshinah. Vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini shuni caiva shva-pake ca panditah. One who is actually learned is sama-darshinah. He does not make any distinction... There are so many Western women, girls, in our society. They are chanting, dancing, taking to Krishna consciousness. Of course, because superficially, bodily, there is some distinction, we keep women separate from men, that’s all. Otherwise, the rights are the same.” [Srila Prabhupada, Conversation with a reporter, June 18, 1976, Toronto]

“Our Krishna is a great family personality. Krishna is never a mendicant, and our ambition is to enter into Krishna’s family and to associate with Him personally. So to marry and to become an exemplary householder is the ideal life of Krishna consciousness.” [Srila Prabhupada, Letter to James Doody, July 10, 1969]

“Marrying and giving in marriage do not give rise to any rights of a master either to the husband or to the wife. Men and women are joined in wedlock for the purpose of serving each other in the performance of the joint service of Krishna. The wife is not an object of enjoyment of the husband, nor vice versa... They marry for pleasing the Lord, not for pleasing themselves... None of them can force their partners to serve them.” [“Relations between the Sexes,” Harmonist, by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Goswami Maharaja]

Appendix E: Why Women Don't Leave

There are a number of reasons men/women don't leave violent relationships including:

Unsupportive Community

- Friends and family do not urge the victim to leave a violent relationship
- Religious mentors/counselors encourage the victim to save the relationship at all costs

Fear

- Victims believe that the abuser will follow through with threats of violence or murder if they leave, not only to them, but also to their friends, family, children, pets, etc.
- Victim is afraid to lose custody of children
- Abuser threatens to harm self or commit suicide if the victim leaves
- The fear of being alone or isolated is greater to them than the fear of the abuse they receive

Low Self-Esteem

- After enduring abuse, they often lose their sense of self-worth and begin believing that their abuser is right. They believe no one else will care about them
- They believe they cannot be financially successful on their own

Commonly asked questions of domestic abuse survivors include:

- Why didn't you speak up sooner?
- Why didn't you just leave?
- Why didn't you tell anyone?

Shame (among other factors) often makes victims feel like they are trapped, that they are silenced, and that there is no way out. Shame is what keeps many victims from coming forward. If you are dealing with shame, here are some things to remember:

The abuser is the responsible party. Abusive partners (and sometimes family, friends or society) can convince their partners that they are the reason the partner is abusive. This is not true. Each partner has control over their actions. No one should ever harm another.

You should not be abused. You don't deserve to be put down or called names, told who you can or can't be friends with, or to be controlled or hurt. In a healthy relationship each partner should be able to communicate their feelings without resorting to violence or abuse.

Appendix F: Self-Help

Building a support system after experiencing abuse is important. Dealing with a traumatic experience can be overwhelming, and having someone to talk to about it could be helpful. This might include friends and family members, but also remember that professional counseling and therapy can be extremely valuable in the healing process. It's important to remember that you have the right to choose how you want to handle your experience.

After experiencing something traumatic, such as domestic abuse, self-care can be a big part of healing. That can look different for everyone, but some people choose journaling, yoga, chanting, praying, reading, or just getting sufficient rest. The important thing is to relieve stress and take care of yourself physically and mentally.

Appendix G: Deciding Whether to Leave a Relationship

If you're trying to decide whether to stay or leave an abusive relationship you may be feeling confused, uncertain, frightened, and torn. One moment, you may desperately want to get away, and the next, you may want to hang on to the relationship. You might blame yourself for the abuse or feel weak and embarrassed because you've stayed in the relationship in spite of it. Don't be trapped by confusion, guilt, or self-blame. The only thing that matters is your safety.

If you are being abused, remember:

- You are not to blame for being battered or mistreated
- You deserve to be treated with respect
- You deserve a safe and happy life
- Your children deserve a safe and happy life
- You are not alone. There are people waiting to help

As you face the decision to either end the abusive relationship or try to save it, keep the following things in mind:

If you're hoping your abusive partner will change... Research demonstrates that the abuse will probably happen again. Abusers have deep emotional and psychological problems. While change is not impossible, it isn't quick or easy. Change can only happen once your abuser takes full responsibility for his/her behavior, seeks professional treatment, and stops blaming you, his/her unhappy childhood, stress, work, drinking, drug use, or temper. Be aware that it is extremely rare for abusers (primarily men) to seek professional help unless it is court mandated or a spouse threatens to leave.

If you believe you can help your abuser... It's only natural that you want to help your partner. You may think you're the only one who understands him/her or that it's your responsibility to fix his/her problems. But the truth is that by staying and

accepting repeated abuse, you may be reinforcing and enabling the abusive behavior. Instead of helping your abuser, you may be perpetuating the problem. Tolerating abuse does not align with our devotional principles of tolerance and compassion. By allowing a spouse/partner to abuse you, you are enabling them to continue committing Vaishnava *aparadha* via their mistreatment of you. Abuse is harmful to the spiritual and material well-being of both the victim and the abuser.

If your partner has promised to stop the abuse... When facing consequences, abusers often plead for another chance, beg for forgiveness, and promise to change. They may even mean what they say in the moment, but their true goal is often to stay in control and keep you from leaving. Most of the time, they return to their abusive behavior once they've been forgiven and they're no longer worried that you'll leave.

If your partner is in counseling or a program for batterers... Even if your partner is in counseling, there is no guarantee that he/she will change. Many abusers who go through counseling continue to be violent, abusive, and controlling. If your partner has stopped minimizing the problem or making excuses, that's a good sign. You still need to make your decision based on who he/she is now, not the person you hope he/she will become.

If you're worried about what will happen if you leave... You may be afraid of what your abusive partner will do, where you'll go, or how you'll support yourself or your children, but don't let fear of the unknown keep you in a dangerous, unhealthy situation. Seek out professional help and advice to make the best decision for yourself and your family.

Appendix H: Signs that Your Abuser is NOT Changing

If your abuser:

- Minimizes the abuse or denies how serious it really was
- Continues to blame others for his/her behavior
- Claims that you're the one who is abusive
- Pressures you to go to couples counseling
- Tells you that you owe him/her another chance
- Has to be pushed to stay in treatment
- Says that they can't change unless you stay and support him/her
- Tries to get sympathy from you, your children, or your family and friends
- Expects something from you in exchange for getting help
- Pressures you to make decisions about the relationship

Appendix I: Additional Advice for ISKCON Community Leaders

1. Require premarital counseling prior to performing a wedding ceremony. Professionally trained, counselors are often able to discern and prevent destructive relationships and generational patterns before they fully develop. This may also prevent a tragic marital situation if patterns have already developed in courtship.
2. Interact with local law enforcement and domestic abuse shelters. Learn from them, and partner with them in addressing abuse in your community.
3. Educate your congregation about domestic abuse. Our tendency in temple communities is to focus on teaching scriptural truths and instructions for marriage, while not fully addressing the real challenges that many in the congregation are already living.
4. Speak out against abuse, which includes the misapplication of scripture to guilt, manipulate, and ultimately control others. These topics can be brought up in public forums, such as Sunday Feast classes. By vocalizing these misconceptions, we dispel the validation abusers may seek by misuse of our philosophy. At the least, it brings the congregation's attention to an important issue. Education can be the greatest tool for prevention.
5. Be present with those who come forward as victims of domestic abuse. Listen. Believe that abuse could happen. Then, be patient. It may take time and significant planning for a victim to make a change.
6. Place boundaries on how you intervene. Refer couples to a professional counselor whenever possible. They will likely manage sessions individually until it is assessed that it's safe enough to engage in joint counseling. Shared counseling should never be done with a couple until the abuse has ceased completely, because of the risk of violence resulting from disclosures during sessions. There are some situations in which this time never comes.

Temple leaders should not get sidetracked by deeply-held hopes for restoring relationships. In cases of domestic and family violence, the first obligation of the temple leader must be to get victims to safety – not save the marriage. While we rightly embrace the sacredness and importance of marriage, when there is abuse and control asserted in the relationship, we must recognize that this ideal is already shattered.

Following expert professional (rather than pastoral) intervention, the couple might be able to look at whether the marriage can be re-established. Alternatively, the victim might recognize that the relationship is simply not safe enough to be repaired. This decision must always be made by the victim, and temple communities must avoid pressuring them over this decision.

Appendix J: Additional Resources

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV): ncadv.org

DomesticViolence.org

DomesticViolenceRoundtable.org

Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute: CHOP.edu

Department of Justice: justice.gov

Family.FindLaw.com

Helpguide.org/Abuse (Recognizing and getting out of an abusive relationship)

LoveIsRespect.org

SaferResource.org

Vaisnavafamilyresources.org

"Love Without Hurt" by Dr. Steven Stosny

Vaishnaviministry.org