

Washington Jewish Week

Think it doesn't happen here? Think again, says domestic abuse group

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As a child, her mother “used to put me down. ‘I wasn’t talented. I wasn’t smart like my brother,’” a woman from Leisure World, who asked her name not be used, recalled her mother saying.

So when she started dating, it seemed normal to her that her boyfriend abused her verbally. And when her mother started picking on him, she felt obligated to defend the young man, who she later married.

They had three children. The abuse escalated.

“It was verbal, physical, economical,” the woman said in a recent interview. “If he was really ticked off at me, he would put his foot on my back and push me out of bed.”

The Silver Spring woman decided she would leave him after their children went to college. The situation worsened, and she told herself she would leave when all were teenagers, right after they had b’nai mitzvah ceremonies.

But her situation worsened again.

After her husband injured her, dislocating a disc in her back, she took the children and left. “It was really hard. I had no support system,” no family nearby.

That was 25 years ago. She still wonders how different her life might have been if domestic abuse had been discussed openly, if she had known that there were people out there willing to help and provide temporary shelter.

“I learned everything I knew about abuse after I was divorced,” she said. “It wasn’t talked about.”

Enter JCADA, Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, which strives to improve domestic abuse awareness. The Rockville organization provides help to those in abusive situations. It also reaches out to young people to make them aware of the red flags for abuse. And, it lets them know they don’t have to put up with abuse.

A person is abusive if he or she constantly checks a partner’s phone to see who the person calls and texts or if that person questions every place the partner goes and every dollar spent, said JCADA Executive Director Elissa Schwartz, who spoke Oct. 14 to about 30 people at Hadassah’s Greater Washington office in Rockville.

“Abuse is more than just a black eye,” she said. An abusive relationship is one in which one person seeks to maintain power and control over someone else’s behavior. It could be the threat of violence, constant put-downs, total control over the purse strings or the use of sex in a controlling way, she said.

When a partner “says ‘you have to have sex with me tonight or you can’t visit your parents, or see your grandchildren,’” that is abuse, she said.

To people who deny that domestic abuse is a problem in the Jewish community, Schwartz is quick to respond that it really is. It happens in Silver Spring and Potomac, and elsewhere.

JCADA currently has 104 clients, the majority of them between the ages of 40 and 49. Since it opened in 1999, JCADA has served 330 clients, 72 percent of whom were Jewish.

Over 15 years, its statistics show that 90 percent of its clients were verbally and emotionally abused, 53 percent were financially abused, 52 percent were physically abused and 22 percent were sexually abused.

(The numbers do not add up to 100 percent, because some victims were abused in more than one way.)

According to a 2013 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study, domestic abuse occurs with the same frequency throughout the population, regardless of race and ethnicity.

While most people will never experience domestic abuse, they can still play an important role by supporting family members and friends who do. The most important thing to remember is never to tell a person to leave his or her partner, Schwartz said.

Instead, be a “nonjudgmental listener,” she said. Telling people to leave can put them in danger. Also, they may be reluctant to confide again.

“At the end of the day, their safety is the most important thing. Say, ‘I am worried about you. How can I support you?’” Schwartz said. “Let them know you will be there for them.”

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