

Helping Victims of Domestic Abuse

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What world problem are you concerned about?

There is currently a high rate of domestic abuse, of which anyone can be a victim, whether man, woman, or child. The effects of abuse are especially concerning, however: being a victim of domestic abuse produces long lasting consequences for the victim, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which affect their mental and emotional well-being, or dissociation, which affects their productivity and ability to function in society.^[1]

What is one statistic or quote showing that this is a major problem? (Be sure to cite your source.)

According to the CDC, 10.6% of study participants were victims of emotional abuse, 28.3% victims of physical abuse, and 20.7% were victims of sexual abuse as children.^[2] According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men will be victims of physical violence by a partner at some point in their life.^[3] Nearly half of all men and women in the US have experienced mental/emotional abuse (48.4% women and 48.8% men)^[4]

While the long term consequences of abuse are negative for everyone, ranging from decreased ability to function in the work place to turning to self-medicating as a means of coping^[1], for children the long-term consequences of abuse are especially poor; children who experience abuse are twice as likely to be in prison, and nine times more likely to become involved in criminal activity. Victims of child abuse also have shorter life spans, with an average life expectancy two decades shorter than those who weren't abused as children.^[5] Additionally, victims of child abuse often go on to become abusers. One third of abuse victims go on to be abusive themselves^[6], while twelve percent of boys abused as children go on to commit sexual offenses; in almost all cases, their victims were also children, creating a cycle of abuse that is difficult to break.^[7]

What is one anecdote about how this problem might possibly play out in real life for somebody?

A person with children has an abusive spouse or partner. They have children together, and for the children, because the victim loves their partner, because the partner controls the family funds and the victim has no resources of their own, they are unable to leave the relationship. Because of abuse, the victim suffers from a number of mental and physical disorders, such as depression, which then cause them to self-medicate. Eventually, the children go out on their own, but take the scars of their childhood with them, and one of the children goes on to become abusive themselves, continuing the cycle of abuse.

Within this world problem, what is one subproblem that bothers you?

There are a number of reasons that an abuse victim might stay with their abuser. These can range from an abuser having some kind of psychological hold on the victim, to the victim not having any available resources outside of what the abuser allows them, to fear that the abuser will harm them or those that the victim cares about if they try to leave, to a victim loving their abuser and staying out of the belief that they can change them.

Whatever the reason may be, abuse victims need help in leaving their abuser; and not just in leaving, but in staying gone. Often enough, after leaving, an abuse victim will go back to their abuser, often for

the same reasons that they struggled to leave in the first place.

What is one quote illustrating that this subproblem is important?

"For someone who has never experienced domestic violence, the question of why a victim stays with an abusive partner can be very difficult to understand. There are many reasons why it might be hard to leave an abusive relationship."^[8]

"The effect is like a "pendulum of pain," said Steven Stosny, counselor and founder of the anger and violence management program CompassionPower, which treats people convicted of abuse in the home.

Abuse victims will "leave out of either fear, anger or resentment," he said. "But then, after the fear, anger or resentment begins to subside, they feel guilt, shame, anxiety, and that takes them back."

After a violent incident, there is often a "honeymoon period" during which the abuser may apologize profusely, give the victim gifts and persuade the victim to stay, experts say. But when that period is over, the abuser may once again become violent.'

'Sometimes the abuser can get his partner to stay with him through manipulation, for instance, telling a woman that he will kill himself if she leaves him, said Mark Crawford, a clinical psychologist based in Roswell, Georgia. Crawford has seen many women stay in relationships because they couldn't bear the guilt of an outcome such as this.

"There are some women who need to be needed so badly they'll put up with anything," Crawford said. "Even if the guy beats the crap out of them, they just feel that responsible for the other person."^[9]

What is one anecdote about how this subproblem might possibly play out in real life for somebody?

A person is in an abusive relationship. They have children with their partner and have been told that if they left, they and/or the children would be harmed. The victim stays with their partner out of fear of what the abuser will be, and because they are either unaware of the resources available to them or do not have faith in those resources to keep them safe when they do leave.

What is a second anecdote about how this subproblem might possibly play out in real life?

A person may be in an abusive relationship where the abuser is very controlling; because of this, the victim doesn't have access to the necessary resources to leave, such as funding, and because the abuser has always been the one to provide these things, the victim doesn't have the skills to acquire employment to get them on their own. This causes the victim to stay because they don't see themselves as having any other options.

What is one possible software system that could help to solve this problem?

A website that connects abuse victims to the resources needed to escape from their abusive relationships; this website would be a resource for victims to contact and offer encouragement/support to one another as well as connecting with counselors, social workers, etc. It would also offer the ability to report abuse anonymously if for some reason a victim was afraid to make the report themselves.

What are the three most important features that this helpful software system should have?

- 1) Means of reporting abuse online, anonymously
- 2) Forum for abuse victims to support and encourage each other, as well as connect to counselors, social workers and potential job resources.
- 3) The website should not show up in a person's browser history

For the 1st of these three features, why is this feature important?

For a number of reasons, a victim may not be able to report abuse through other means. Their abuser may restrict phone access, the victim may be ashamed to confide in another person (such as a student being ashamed to tell a teacher or a wife too embarrassed to tell her pastor that they are the victim of abuse), or they may be afraid of the potential consequences that could happen by making a report in person.

What is some sort of hypothetical example about how a person would use the 1st feature?

A child or teenager could be abused by one of their parents, but because of social reasons be embarrassed, afraid or otherwise unwilling to tell a teacher or other other trusted person about it. They could then go online to tell someone anonymously that abuse is happening in their home, and get the assistance from DHS, CPS and law-enforcement that they need.

For the 2nd of these three features, why is this feature important?

Escaping from abusive relationships is not an easy thing to do, and victims need encouragement and support to leave and to stay gone. Many victims are psychologically dependent on their abuser, and so it's important that there be a support structure in place; the people most qualified to do this are the ones who know what it's like to be in an abusive relationship, which would be counselors and other victims.

What is some sort of hypothetical example about how a person would use the 2nd feature?

After leaving their abuser, a victim may want to go back to their abuser; they now feel afraid of being on their own, and don't feel that they can do it, so want to go back to the 'comfort zone' of the abusive relationship. Instead of going back, they can go to the forum and ask for help, seeking out the encouragement and strength that they lack on their own in order to stay away from their abusive relationship.

For the 3rd of these three features, why is this feature important?

If an abuser becomes aware that their victim was considering leaving the relationship or otherwise seeking help, the victim is at a much higher risk than at any other time of the relationship. 75% of domestic homicides happen when the victim is leaving the relationship.^[10]

What is some sort of hypothetical example about how a person would use the 3rd feature?

A victim is considering leaving their abuser; they go to the website, get encouragement from others to leave, and file a report of abuse. The abuser sees the site in the computer's browser history, and makes good on their threat and harms the victim.

Alternatively, the site doesn't register in browser history, and the victim can find needed resources, encouragement, etc, make a report, and not have to worry about getting caught and being hurt by their abuser.

Which of these three features is most important?

The most important would be the website clearing itself from a computer's browser history; as said above, a person is most at risk of homicide when they are leaving the relationship; the purpose of this website is to help people, not place them at greater risk.

Which is least important/optional? Why?

The second feature would be least important; while being able to seek out help and support with the

relative anonymity of the internet would be very helpful for a number of people, it would be more important for people to have the ability to report abuse online; many people don't know who to report abuse to, or are embarrassed to ask for help in person, or are afraid of the consequences of doing so, for example a neighbor who may have suspicions but doesn't want to ruin a relationship if they're unfounded.

How would you ensure that your system is economically viable?

A system like this could largely be developed as an open source project, reducing the cost of software development. Volunteer counselors or grad students could be used to work in the forum, and even if that were not viable, the primary purpose of the forum is to allow victims to communicate with and support each other; similar to alcoholics or narcotics anonymous. As the forum is strictly volunteer, nobody would be getting paid for their time. For the most part, this reduces costs to that of hardware, such as servers. While those can be expensive, they could largely be funded and purchased through donations, government grants, and purchasing them used.

How would the world be a better place if the system was actually implemented?

Domestic violence costs \$37 billion per year in law enforcement, legal costs and mental and physical health treatment;^[1] anything to help reduce that cost would be helpful. Domestic abuse causes a number of issues in adults and children; 80% of those who reported abuse as children had at least one psychological disorder.^[5] 1/3 of abuse victims go on to become abusive themselves.^[6] Not only does decreasing abuse now help with decreasing overall costs, it improves the quality of life of individuals. Helping to decrease abuse helps victims avoid mental and physical health issues, which leads them to living happier, fuller lives, longer lives. Also by decreasing abuse and getting help for victims, they themselves are less likely to go on to become abusive, meaning decreased future costs and less risk for those that their potential victims will be in.

What are your references? (On each line, put a bracketed number such as [4] and then the reference. It is a good idea to leave blank lines between the references.)

[1] <http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/learn/domestic-violence/effects-domestic-violence>

[2] <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/cestudy/prevalence.html>

[3] <http://www.ncadv.org/learn/statistics>

[4] http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf

[5] <https://www.childhelp.org/child-abuse-statistics/>

[6] <http://www.safehorizon.org/page/child-abuse-facts-56.html>

[7] <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/news/20030206/do-sexually-abused-kids-become-abusers>

[8] http://www.theadvocacycenter.org/adv_violencewhy.html

[9] <http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/03/04/rihanna.domestic.violence/>

[10] <http://www.domesticabuseshelter.org/infodomesticviolence.htm>

[11] <http://www.safehorizon.org/page/domestic-violence-statistics--facts-52.html>