

The Gilded Cage

Part 2 of a 2-part series about upscale domestic violence

Affluent abuse victims have so much to lose that they may choose to silently endure physical, emotional, financial and sexual abuse. These victims, along with their children who witness the violence, suffer depression, anxiety and uncertainty about their future. Many fear a loss of status in their community if they speak up or leave their abusive marriages, so a large percentage of upscale abuse stays hidden. But more victims are beginning to speak out and are being believed.

Warning Signs in a Relationship

The red flags outing an abusive partner are nearly always evident during the courtship phase. These can include a partner who is prone to cheating or explosive anger. Addiction to pornography and extramarital affairs are often a form of emotional abuse, especially if they are flaunted openly.

Even in the absence of physical violence, an abusive partner may display behaviors that are openly controlling and criticizing. He may act moody and publicly humiliate his partner. Regrettably, women who idealize their Prince Charming are motivated to ignore, overlook or justify the warning signs. The five-star lifestyle, extravagant trips and expensive gifts are attractive.

Women may rationalize that no man is perfect, and everything else is too good to pass up. Unlike women in lower socioeconomic groups, affluent women will steadfastly refuse to admit abuse in the relationship. Once married, wealthy women typically deny the severity and even the existence of abuse. They blame themselves. As in all cases when it is too good to be true, the best advice while dating is *caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware. The other saying that applies here is, “If you marry for money, you will earn every last cent.”

Wishful Thinking

Many victims of domestic violence just want the abuse to stop. They want to have a loving relationship. They want to stay married.

However, as the relationship progresses, the abuser's need for control will escalate along with the violence. Often, women who stay in unhealthy marriages have an internalized script that keeps them in place: "Things will get better." "This time is different." "He will change." "No marriage is perfect."

In our culture, women are socialized to put the needs of others ahead of their own. There is often a significant power imbalance. The victim may rationalize the abuse and vow to work even harder at the marriage. She reasons that she has made her bed and must lie in it.

Because she is educated and goal oriented, she cannot admit that her marriage is a failure. She fears being left on the street. She fears disrupting the lives of her children. She fears ostracism in the community. This self-narrative helps her adapt and survive in her abusive marriage. It is her key to sanity in the present tense, but it keeps her stuck for the future.

Affluent women are charged with running the home, caring for the children and "fixing" problems, while their spouses work hard to provide a comfortable lifestyle.

The wife's "fix" may include avoiding all conflict with their spouse, "playing possum," scheduling date nights, planning a vacation or preparing elaborate meals. Many women are motivated to salvage the relationship and honor their commitment, for better or worse.

Many women I have counseled have expressed that their goal is to protect the family unit at all costs.

An affluent woman is no different. In her beautiful gilded cage, she is incentivized to deny reality and keep the secrets hidden. Her life may have a magical quality that appears perfect to outsiders and may cause the wife to question her reality and feelings. Her self-esteem and self-worth may suffer. In many cases, she will suffer psychological deterioration, including anxiety and depression.

However, there may come a point when the affluent victim's internalized script changes and she can no longer pretend or believe in the fairytale. There is a final straw, like a black eye or broken arm, or a breaking point, such as another public humiliation or infidelity. This is an important moment, because the victim is finally ready to face reality, which brings the potential for positive change. The victim may finally be open to gaining the tools to become empowered, with the first priority defined as the safety and security of the victim and any minor children in the household.

Getting Help

The first step is understanding there is a problem that requires outside assistance. It is a decision not to suffer in silence, but to make a real change.

In most cases, speaking out will bring relief. In my law practice, when meeting with victims of domestic violence, the traditional avenues for referrals are shelters and hotlines, including The Safe Center, as well as obtaining an order of protection in family court.

When appropriate, I encourage victims to speak to trusted family and friends. The best first step is often meeting with a professional mental-health therapist, if they can access one. The goal of individual therapy is awareness, empowerment and personal assertiveness.

In the case of nonviolent abuse, can the marriage be saved? That's a matter to be decided by the husband and the wife. The paramount issue should be safety for the victim. In other words, the first question is, can the woman be saved? She must feel strong and empowered, with the autonomy to make decisions that affect her daily life. She must be able to control her future to a reasonable extent.

Next, is change possible? Is it desired on both sides? In addition to individual therapy, group therapy and support groups for the victim can be very helpful. Thereafter, marital counseling can also be attempted if both parties desire it. The victim must have a safe forum to assert boundaries and request changes to improve the marriage. The counselor must understand the abuse dynamic and not trivialize the problem as a "communication" issue. Otherwise, there is a risk of revictimization and manipulation of the therapy process. The counselor must hold both parties accountable for the improvement of the relationship, while safeguarding the psychological well-being of the victim.