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And Then He Hit Me

By David France, January & February 2006

Too ashamed or too scared to speak up, tens of thousands of 50-plus victims of domestic violence suffer in silence

Almost from the start of her second marriage, Hedy Schweitzer felt she had to choose between two painful options. She could endure her husband's violent beatings and hurricanes of criticism, which shook her confidence and left her self-doubting despite the fact that she was a successful health-care professional. Or she could do something she considered far worse: admit she'd made a huge mistake by marrying him in the first place. So from 1993 until a year ago, she tried to cover up the abuse, even from her own grown children. She lied when friends and colleagues saw the cheeks enlarged by blows and the ankles gnarled from being slammed in car doors, or when doctors inquired about her shattered eardrums and broken fingers, now healed at awkward angles. She pretended nothing was amiss. Unfortunately, so did almost everybody else.

All the while, Hedy thought she was probably among the world's oldest victims of domestic violence. "I thought this is something that happens to young and inexperienced girls. Not somebody in their 50s, not a grandmother," she says one morning as sun spills through the stained glass windows of her living room in Milwaukee. She glances at pictures of her children and grandchildren, crowded on a bookshelf. "The overwhelming thing for me, as an older person, was being ashamed, because this shouldn't be happening to me. I should know better."

Hedy may feel that hers was a singular shame but, sadly, it isn't. Contrary to popular belief, domestic abuse doesn't happen only to younger, underprivileged women. It affects all classes and races and every age group. (According to a Justice Department analysis of intimate-partner violence in 2001, the latest year for which statistics are available, 85 percent of the victims are women.) But until recently even experts on domestic violence used to think the problem tapered off by age 50. That opinion became accepted wisdom because few older women show up at shelters or call police.

Now, experts and advocates not only are realizing there are unique factors keeping older victims from seeking help but are increasingly aware of people just like Hedy who are silently enduring violence—some into their 70s and 80s.

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"It's very hard for you to think about," says Jeanne Meurer, a nun who is codirector of Woman's Place, a drop-in center for battered women in St. Louis that serves older victims of abuse, one of the few in the nation. "I couldn't imagine my father abusing my mother, or my grandmother being abused. You can't think of it that way. But boy, there's a lot of it."

Exactly how much of it is hard to determine. Estimates vary widely. In studies conducted in the late 1990s, between 4 percent and 6 percent of older North Americans reported they were in a relationship they considered physically abusive. If the surveys are correct, and the percentages remain constant with overall population growth, that would mean a whopping 3 million to 5 million Americans over 50 (out of 85 million) are currently in abusive relationships. Some surveys suggest from 150,000 to 500,000 victims of elder abuse a year, while one group of researchers, extrapolating from their landmark survey of all types of elder abuse in Boston in 1988, suggests the number could be more than a million.

One depressing fact is indisputable: as the population of 50-plus Americans increases, so will the number of victims of abuse in that vulnerable demographic.

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"It's a hidden epidemic," says Daniel Reingold, president and chief executive officer of the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, New York, who compares the current awareness of late-life domestic violence to the nascent domestic violence and child-abuse movements 25 years ago. "Which is to say, we don't have any agreed-upon definitions, and intervention is sporadic and uneven."

The directors of women's centers and programs for the aging are now scrambling to find ways to reach this population. But traditional responses, like shelters and hot lines, don't seem to be making the critical connection with older victims. Around the country, according to a survey by the [National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life](#),

few shelters promote themselves to older women or are equipped to handle their special needs, from accessible facilities to segregation from the many young children who often turn shelters into daycare centers. Yet even these specialized programs aren't attracting those in need, and advocates are beginning to wonder why. As Michele Waite, manager of senior services for the City of Longmont, Colorado, puts it, "We know it's happening. We just haven't found a meaningful way to reach older women."

The more creative the approach, it would appear, the more successful. "We advertised an elder-domestic-violence support group, but nobody came," says Sharon Youngerman, director of a well-known battered women's program in Orange Park, Florida, called Quigley House, which closed its elder shelter last year, finding that older women preferred the support they got from younger battered women in the main shelter. "But when we relaunched it as a quilt-making group sponsored by Quigley House, then people came." Designed to appeal to older women, the quilt-making group offered a cover for victims otherwise unwilling to come forward. The first group of 12 finished a quilt last summer after two years.

"There's a lot more shame and embarrassment" among older victims, Youngerman explains. "We're talking about people raised in a generation when the wife took care of the family; she was basically raised to do what her husband said. He was the breadwinner, and if she didn't like it, she had to basically buck up and be quiet. So talking about it is admitting that they failed—that they displeased the husband."

"The elderly population is totally secretive about this," says Ann Nevin, a counselor in private practice in Colorado who treats older victims. "A lot of it has to do with the cultural and social mores established for the people who grew up in the '20s and '30s: you married for life and you stuck things out."

According to the [National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse](#), an association of advocates,

researchers, and professionals, the problem of domestic violence in later life divides into three main types. The first scenario involves a new relationship. No matter how mature they are, no matter how well they think they know their new partner, intimates can be in for a terrible surprise. It's an all-too-common problem, say experts. "We see many second, or even third, marriages where she had a perfectly wonderful first marriage but ends up with a real loser," says Pat Holland, coordinator of the Older Abused Women's Program at the Milwaukee Women's Center, which last year opened two rooms specifically for older clients in its shelter. "A lot of times she's so embarrassed she doesn't want anybody to know."

Domestic abuse affects all classes and races and every age group.

A second category, encompassing a seemingly growing number of victims, is known as "late-onset domestic violence," in which a long, ordinary marriage unexpectedly leads to a coda of brutality and fear. There may have been a strained relationship or emotional abuse earlier that got worse when a partner aged. When abuse begins, it is likely to be triggered by retirement, the changing role of family members, sexual changes, or disability. For example, one spouse's failing health—the onset of incontinence, for example—can trigger verbal or physical violence by his or her partner.

Brain impairments common in old age, like those brought on by stroke, alcoholism, or Alzheimer's disease, can also herald aggressive behavior in otherwise placid marriages. A percentage of Alzheimer's patients turn suspicious, irritable, or even physically violent toward their loved ones. In one study nearly 60 percent of people caring for a spouse with dementia report the patient has turned to some form of aggressive behavior.

Jacquelyn Treiber, 75, a horse breeder in Farmville, North Carolina, says a series of small strokes and early Alzheimer's were the likely cause for her husband's aggression toward her, which included threatening to order her into shock treatment and trying to have her committed for psychiatric observation. Because her husband was a retired family practice physician, authorities easily accepted his groundless allegations and dismissed her many objections. He called the police a dozen times, never failing to greet them in his hospital scrubs as he filed assault charges against her.

"It was like he had PMS. Every 10 or 12 days he would go into a rage," she recalls. "I could be sitting here watching television and some name would come up—the name of somebody he didn't like—and he would pick up the phone and call 911 and claim I pushed him, and he would put me in jail overnight! I'm not kidding." His own diagnoses didn't come until years later, after he was declared incompetent and confined to a nursing home. He died last May. "I'll tell you what, it was a long, tough journey," Jacquelyn says.

A third category—perhaps the most heart-rending cases of all—involves violence that begins in early marriage and continues for decades without ever triggering notice. Advocates call this phenomenon "domestic violence grown old" and a study published in the *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect* notes it is by far the most common sort. These women were missed by the battered women's movement, which began establishing shelters and safe houses in the late 1970s and today operates more than 2,500 programs and facilities across the country. Now, in later life, battered women are no more likely to reach out for help than in their youth.

"Older battered women have the same fears today that they had as younger women 30 years ago: I have an obligation to my partner; who is going to take care of me?" says Jill Morris, who directs the public policy office at the [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#). "I've heard anecdotes from women who say, 'I'm 70, he's 78, we're both going to die soon. Why don't I just stick it out?' It's awful to hear."

Why did I marry him in the first place? I don't have a real good answer for that," says Audrey Miller, now 80 and happily ensconced at an assisted living community in St. Paul. "After a while I didn't love him, that's for sure."

Audrey's talking about Jim Miller, a handsome factory worker from St. Paul whom she married in 1962. Pictures of the newlyweds posing in front of their first home suggest they were happy. But the first attack came only a few months later. "I think it was something I had said or done, or didn't do, that he didn't like, and he hauled off and hit me in the face," she recalls. "I landed on the bed, and he came and got on top of me and started to beat me. I just pounded away, too, but he had more strength than I did. And it didn't end up good for me."

That's an understatement. Over the next 41 years, although no one knew it, Jim's attacks increased in frequency and cruelty—making Audrey a classic example of domestic violence grown old. Once he caught her fingers in his car window and let her loose only when her screams drew a crowd. Somehow she found herself keeping it all a secret—from her mother, whose disappointment she dreaded, and even from his children from a previous marriage. (They had no children of their own.) She camouflaged her bruises. But her psychological wounds were painfully visible. Jim made her believe she was dumb and fat, though she slimmed down to a fashion model's stature, and rendered her totally dependent on him. He refused to let her see friends or family members alone. He had the telephone removed from the house to perfect her sense of isolation. He wouldn't even let her go to the grocery store without him until he was too ill to accompany her. He made her account for every minute she spent away from him.

After the first few years he refused to allow her in their bedroom, so she curled up on the sofa every night for all these decades. "I mean, he was a mean one," she says. "He was mean."

She prayed that time would temper Jim's moods, though it never did. Retirement, when it came, seemed to make him angrier. Even when he sank into a feeble old age, he would strike at her with his cane, regularly renewing an ugly bruise on her left shoulder. "I guess when I was older and he was ill, I thought it would stop," she admits, rubbing her shoulder. "He would take his cane and hold it up and say, 'I'm going to kill you.' That's one of his favorites: 'I'm going to kill you.' "

Audrey might not have said anything until her doctor, during a regular checkup just a few years ago, asked her if she was experiencing trouble at home—alerted, possibly, by her sad demeanor. "I thought, 'Well, nobody had ever asked before.' So I told him, 'Yes, he has been bothering me for a long time.'"

Doctors and hospital employees are perhaps in the best position to screen for domestic abuse, but given the curtain of secrecy surrounding the issue, it can be a detective's job to get to the truth, says Carmel Dyer, M.D., a geriatrician who is an associate professor at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and specializes in issues of elder abuse. "It's hard to pick up, I must say, because the offender looks very, very concerned about their wife or husband. It's very hard to sort out."

For Audrey, finally unloading the secret brought a kind of liberation she hadn't felt in years. Through the doctor, she was introduced to the local St. Paul Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. Bernice Sisson, the program's legal advocate for older battered women, secretly drove her to weekly meetings.

But Audrey still didn't leave her husband. "I'm kinda loyal, I guess you'd say. It was bad. But I endured it."

By early 2003, Jim Miller was very ill with heart trouble, high blood pressure, and diabetes, and although he became totally reliant on Audrey, his physical abuse never ebbed. On August 17 of that year, he put his arm around Audrey's shoulder. "I heard him say, 'I love you,' which didn't mean two cents to me,"

Audrey says. It was only the second or third time he had ever said those words. And not much later he died. "I was immediately relieved," she recalls. "Forty-one years, to be free from that? I said, 'He's dead!'" Right away she began putting his things in the garbage, working well into the night. "You can see how much I liked him," she says now.

"We were all relieved," admits Sisson. "We really worried that he might do what he kept promising to do."

Today, Audrey is once again sleeping on a bed. Her one-bedroom apartment is spare and neat—her one indulgence is a vast collection of videotapes, mostly of the action-flick variety. "I always worried about being lonely," she says, "but I'm not! I like my apartment. I like to be here by myself. I like to be alone."

Although it occurs less often, men also fall prey to domestic violence. But while an estimated 15 percent of all the victims of intimate-partner violence are men, the number of reported woman-on-man incidents is negligible. The reason may be that no matter how bad the abuse, men in their prime are typically able to withstand the assaults of women. A more likely explanation is that men simply are unwilling to report that they've been assaulted by a woman.

But as they grow older, men can become vulnerable. Sometimes, but not frequently, their abused spouses might simply be turning the tables. An unscientific sampling suggests that another likely scenario involves same-sex or late-life relationships turned abusive. In an example of the former, a man in his 80s took shelter at the Domestic Older Victims Empowerment and Safety Program in Phoenix several years ago after a severe beating landed him in the hospital, says Alice Ghareib, the agency's director. His assailant was another man, whom he called an "acquaintance" but who program staffers felt was likely an intimate partner.

It can be extremely difficult for older gay people to be candid about their relationship to their abuser. "This is the generation that was institutionalized, discriminated against, battered by society" for being homosexual, says Loree Cook-Daniels, founder of the [American Society of Adult Abuse Professionals and Survivors](#).

A late-life relationship with a younger person can also lead to the victimization of an older man. At the Hebrew Home's Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Center for Elder Abuse Prevention, officials recall a case of an older man who took a much younger foreign bride, only to find her manipulating his medications. He was admitted to the hospital numerous times before finding his way into their shelter. "It appears she was just in it for the immigration status," says Daniel Reingold, the Hebrew Home's president. The Weinberg Center is helping arrange a divorce and a restraining order.

But for some men, as with women, it is possible to have lived through an abusive relationship for years without anybody's catching on.

"I should have known better after the first time," says Charles—not his real name—a 71-year-old man who lives near Greenville, North Carolina, and who asked to remain anonymous because nobody in his small town knows his history. Even his three children—ages 50, 45, and 30—are unaware of most of his travails, he says. A year or more after their wedding in 1955, in the middle of an argument of the sort that marked their marriage, his wife hurled a cup of steaming coffee at him, causing blisters on his hand that required medical attention. It went downhill from there. "She gave me four or five black eyes during the course of my marriage, and she shut my leg up in the car one time," fracturing his bone, he says. "I kept thinking it would become better, but it never did."

Charles says he put up with his wife's hostilities for the children's sake. "She was as good a mother as ever walked on the face of the earth," he says. "She loved them to death. I was the only thing that bothered her." By the time the children were out of the house, relations reached a new low. Charles developed a theory that his wife was trying to drive him from the house for financial reasons. He hung on tenaciously, but in their home she exercised complete control. Except for attending to his immediate needs, he stayed in his room. Even there he was not safe from her aggressions. The last time she assaulted him it was at his door, which he opened to see her brandishing a knife.

Charles called the police that night, touching off a series of events that ended with his wife's leaving home two years ago after nearly 49 years of marriage, taking with her much of their savings and a brand-new car. He says he has no regrets about the choices he made. "If you don't think I'm crazy already you will when you hear this," says Charles, "because if I had to live my life over and go through the same thing for 49 years, if I had to choose between a good mother or a good wife, I would choose a good mother all over again. Without children and a family, there is nothing."

Just as there is no consensus on exactly how widespread the problem is, or how to locate its victims, there is limited agreement on the causes of elder domestic violence and how to prevent it from happening.

Craig Mayfield, 57, a facilitator who runs court-mandated abusers' groups in Milwaukee, says older batterers can be more resistant to the counseling program than younger ones. "For the older men, who have been accustomed to the social messages that required women to stay at home, be housewives, never questioning the man's authority, that may still be the way they see things," he says. But their motive is no different from that of younger perpetrators. "Men batter women because they can," says Mayfield. "What they think they're doing is controlling their women. That's what we focus on—breaking their need to control things."

Mayfield should know. Twenty years ago he was arrested for abusing his wife. A judge ordered him into a similar treatment group as a condition of his probation. "I began to really see, and to understand," he says. "Up to that point, I was blaming circumstances. Blaming anything. She didn't do this, she did do that, or she made me mad. I could blame alcohol. But that's not why I did it. I did it because I could get away with it."

How do they get away with it? Mostly by convincing their spouse that a violent marriage is better than nothing, says Melissa Anderson, a psychotherapist at the Institute on Aging in San Francisco. "Even though the marriage is a violent and sadistic relationship, in other aspects it is familiar and long-term. And comforting."

Hedy Schweitzer, who today is a medical-surgical nurse at a major hospital in Milwaukee, cannot even remember the first time her husband Jerry hit her. What she does recall is how much she loved him and how deeply he seemed to love her back. They could sit in a parked car on a Lake Michigan beach and talk into the night. "He was incredibly sweet and caring. He really captivated me," she says. She met him just a few months after her first marriage ended in divorce after 23 years, leaving her with significant feelings of failure.

But it became clear that he suffered wild mood swings and, she soon found out, repeated slides into heroin addiction. He started by berating her, calling her dumb or fat or ugly. The battery began in the second or third year, almost imperceptibly: a slap that sent her glasses across the room, an elbow in her ribs. Soon it led to bruises on her arms and puffy lips, which she explained as accidents to family and

friends. But it wasn't long before their tidy home became a full-out war zone.

Her children by her previous marriage could not comprehend her refusal to leave him. "Over the course of 11 years she just keeps taking beatings. I'm not being mean, but you lose respect," says Gabrielle, 25, Hedy's oldest daughter, who lived with her father growing up. "I would never let anybody lay a hand on me."

One particularly severe beating occurred around Thanksgiving 2001, during which Jerry snapped one of Hedy's fingers by picking up an end table and throwing it at her. The attack scared her more than any before it, and she finally sought out help from the Milwaukee Women's Center. She began attending weekly support-group meetings for older assault victims. "She was very badly off," remembers Pat Holland, Hedy's support-group facilitator.

Leaving her husband, though, was not something Hedy could even imagine at the time. "Facing loneliness in later life is so much more serious, it affects you so much more deeply, than when you're young," Hedy says. "I couldn't imagine starting over again. Thinking about facing the world alone was, I guess, more frightening to me than to live with somebody who was abusive."

That all changed in November 2004, when the situation reached its nadir. In an early morning assault, Jerry brutally pummeled Hedy's face, burning her cheek with the cigarette he was holding. The force of his blows almost knocked her off the stoop in front of their home. She fled for school, where she was taking nursing courses. As she recalls it, the professor and fellow students were aghast at her injuries, but it wasn't until she looked at herself in the mirror that she saw the gravity of what had happened to her. Her mouth was blackened and so swollen she couldn't tell that drool had been running down her chin. "Finally it made sense," she says.


That morning she saw her 21-year-old son, Andy, who was staying at her house with his young family. "That was the last straw," he remembers. He called the police and had his stepfather arrested. Although Jerry reached a settlement on the battery charges, a series of parole violations landed him in jail through last September. Hedy has filed separation papers and was granted a four-year restraining order.

"I'm so proud of my mom," says Andy. "I think she's still really lonely; that's not good. But she doesn't have that negativity around her 24 hours a day. Yeah, she might come home to an empty house, but it's her empty house. Nobody there is getting high and going on a rampage."

Slowly, Hedy is piecing her life back together again—as a 55-year-old single woman. "It's been really hard," she admits. "I kept feeling old, and when you feel old you feel less powerful. It's important to know you can change things, and the older we get, the less we feel we can change. It's been a long uphill battle for me. I'm still battling it. But it can be done, and that's a real good feeling."

David France's latest book is [Our Fathers](#), (Broadway, 2004), a chronicle of the sexual-abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. A filmed adaptation of the book, which aired on the Showtime network, is being released in January 2006 on DVD.



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Where to Turn

By Christina Ianzito, January & February 2006

Domestic violence among older people is underreported in part because the sufferers don't know where to seek help. The following resources can steer victims or their concerned loved ones toward the appropriate local services or perhaps lend a sympathetic ear.

Hot Lines

[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)

This toll-free number, run by the Texas Council on Family Violence, offers crisis intervention and refers victims—or friends or family of victims—to adult protective-services organizations across the country. The line, which gets approximately 16,000 calls a month, is anonymous, confidential, and accessible 24 hours a day—with translators available for more than 140 languages (800-799-SAFE, or 800-799-7233; TTY 800-787-3224).

[Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men](#)

Based in Harmony, Maine, this free service was started five years ago by Jan Brown, who had seen some male friends suffer domestic abuse. She now gets an estimated 400 calls a month, many from men who, Brown says, sometimes "just want somebody to talk to and believe them." She'll then refer them to help nearby, first checking to make sure the assistance is sympathetic to male victims (888-7-HELPLINE, or 888-743-5754).

Organizations

[American Society of Adult Abuse Professionals and Survivors](#) (ASAAPS)

This Wisconsin-based group is concerned with protecting both the elderly and the disabled, with sensitivity toward sufferers of both genders. It offers an online monthly column called *It Takes a Village*, a practical discussion of how concerned people can help neighbors and friends (414-540-6456).

[National Center on Elder Abuse](#) (NCEA)

The federally funded NCEA in Washington, D.C., has access to a vast store of information on elder abuse. Call for a free brochure, "Fifteen Questions & Answers on Elder Abuse" (202-898-2586).

[National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life](#) (NCALL)

A project of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the NCALL's Domestic Abuse in Later Life Resource Directory lists support groups, adult protective-services offices, and shelters by state. For a copy, contact 608-255-0539 or [download it](#).

[National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) (NCADV)

The NCADV website has a section called Getting Help for those in an abusive relationship; it offers a safety plan, advice about online privacy (some abusers will try to track their spouse's/partner's activities), how to hire an attorney, and more (303-839-1852).