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# Domestic Abusers Can Reform, Studies Show

Many Abusive Men Who Complete Treatment Can Change Their Behavior, Experts Say



Former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice entered a news conference with his wife, Janay, back right, on May 23.

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By

[Elizabeth Bernstein](#)

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The [video of Ray Rice](#) assaulting the woman who is now his wife has raised a big question about domestic violence: Can someone who has abused his partner go on to a healthy relationship?

It isn't easy. Treating a domestic batterer can be as difficult as treating an alcohol or substance abuser, experts say. Some offenders need treatment multiple times before it

works. Others are never successful at reforming their behavior, whether their partner stays or they start a new relationship.

While both men and women commit acts of intimate-partner violence, as experts call it, approximately 85% of victims are female. Decades of studies show that about 60% to 70% of abusive men who complete a comprehensive batterer treatment program can reform, says Jeffrey L. Edleson, professor and dean of the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, and an expert on domestic abuse.

One of the most thorough and well-designed studies on the topic was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and conducted by Edward Gondolf, now a professor emeritus at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. It was summarized in 2004 in the journal *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. The study spent four years following 618 men who entered batterer-intervention programs in one of four cities, as well as their female partners starting when the men entered the program.

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The study found that at the 30-month follow-up, more than 80% of the men had not re-assaulted their partner in the previous year, and at the 48-month follow-up, 90% of the men had not assaulted their partner in the past year. The treatment programs were small education-therapy groups, meeting at least once a week for between four months and a year. "Men who completed the program were much less likely to abuse their partners," Dr. Gondolf says.

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The study also showed that at both of these follow-up points, two-thirds of the women (some the original partners of the men, some new) said that their quality of life had improved, and 85% of the women said they felt very safe.

Men who complete batterer-intervention programs are just a minority of those who enroll—and they typically enroll only after they've been mandated by a court to do so. Still, Dr. Edleson says tens of thousands of men have been arrested for intimate-partner abuse and have learned to become nonviolent.

Experts say intimate-partner violence is, like other forms of domestic violence, primarily a learned behavior. But someone who grew up witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse or who has a history of criminal behavior is much more likely to be abusive than someone who didn't.

There are different types of intimate-partner abusers, experts say. A subtype often referred to in the field as the Intimate Partner Terrorist is the "worst of the worst," says David B. Wexler, executive director of the Relationship Training Institute in San Diego, a nonprofit organization that designs and runs domestic violence treatment programs.

The man is obsessed with power and control, terrorizes his partner, erodes her self-esteem, wields financial control and is jealous and possessive. This type of abuser is almost impossible to change, Dr. Wexler says.

The vast majority of abusers are men who perpetrate what is known as Situational Couple Violence. They aren't out to dominate their partner. But they have very poor relationship skills and very quick triggers.

A round of typical anger-management training isn't enough to help these men. They need to commit to a comprehensive batterer intervention program, often going at least once a week for four months to a year.

Experts say the best of these programs pair education with psychotherapy in a small group setting. The men learn communication skills. And they learn how to think differently about the situation they are in, how to change sexist ideas and how to tolerate conflict in a relationship without seeing it as an insult to their manhood.

"To sit in a room and see men talking in ways that broaden a definition of what men can do, that is a key part of the change process," Dr. Wexler says.

Men who successfully reform "are at a stage where they can accept that they have a problem and are motivated to make change," says Dr. Edleson, of the University of California, Berkeley.

A major factor in most of these men's motivation is their desire to save their relationship, says Barbara Gilin, a licensed clinical social worker and associate clinical professor for social work education at Widener University in Chester, Pa., who has worked with intimate-partner violence victims and their abusers for 35 years.

"The longer the women can hold out not living with the partner, the more motivated the partner is to change, she says. "They are so afraid they will lose their woman."

Dr. Wexler says that about half of men who go through the treatment program do so while continuing their romantic relationship, while half separate or split with their partner. Some of the men who split with their partner eventually restart the relationship successfully or form a new relationship.

The odds of successful change go up for these men when five other factors are present, Ms. Gilin says:

- They feel bad or guilty about harming their partner. About 25% of men never feel guilty, Ms. Gilin says. "And there is a whole middle ground where there is some guilt and then it takes some time in the group to really start to understand that they are responsible," she says.
- They take full responsibility for their actions and don't blame their partner.
- They are motivated to change their values and be a different, better person.
- They are willing to examine the effect abuse in their childhood had on them.
- They understand that intimidating and bullying behaviors need to be stopped, along with physical violence.

"What I and other people look for in that first moment is the degree of real remorse and how much he takes responsibility for 100% of what he did," Ms. Gilin says. "And the main factor that determines whether a man is going to change is whether he sticks to the program."

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