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# Hope in Despair

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# When Violence is in Our Homes

*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence (Gen 6:11 NIV).*



▲ Melissa Ponce-Rodas

Violence destroys families, harming each member in different ways. Today, domestic violence (DV) occurs in families inside and outside of the church at similar rates. In a study of over 1,000 Adventists, Dr. Drumm found that 33 percent of members reported experiencing physical violence, 44 percent experienced emotional abuse and 23 percent experienced sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup> In my own study of over 100 female, Hispanic Adventists, I found that 42 percent of the women identified as survivors and 33 percent reported their abuser was an Adventist. While DV includes threats, as well as physical, spiritual, sexual, emotional, financial and other types of abuse, all are traumatizing. Our Creator did not design us for violence — not to perpetuate it, experience it, or even witness it.

Only recently has science begun to realize how abuse damages our brains and bodies. We used to think that only physical wounds left their marks on our bodies, but even the words we speak change the structure of our brains and the ways it works. Therefore, when there is violence in our homes, all family members are hurt and the family unit is devastated. Survivors of DV are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, like soldiers who go to war. Survivors also are more likely to experience anxiety, panic attacks and depression, and are more likely to drink alcohol, smoke, use drugs and overeat in an attempt to self-medicate. One study found that 90 percent of women with substance abuse problems had experienced physical or sexual violence (womenshealth.gov). Additionally, survivors are also more likely to attempt suicide.

Children who grow up in abusive homes suffer many consequences, depending on their age, gender, the types of abuse they experience and how much abuse they witness. Young children may experience bed-wetting, anxiety, stuttering or sleep problems.

Older kids also may have problems learning in school and may experience a lot of headaches and stomach-aches. Teenagers can display more behavioral problems, truancy, low self-esteem and risky behaviors including drug use, unprotected sex and depression. In their lifetime, children who witness violence growing up are also at greater risk of developing obesity, diabetes and heart disease (womenshealth.gov).

There is not a lot of research on how abuse harms the abuser, but we know they themselves get hurt in the process. Proverbs 3:31 says, *Do not envy a man of violence, and do not choose any of his ways.* Violence is not of God. Some abusers experienced violence growing up, which has already harmed them. Genetic differences were recently found in some people who commit violent crimes (goodtherapy.org). Science doesn't know enough yet about all of the consequences of violence in aggressors, but we know that a God of love did not design us to hurt others or ourselves.

Abuse can be prevented, and those who have been hurt can get better. To raise awareness, teach church leaders and members how to prevent and intervene in cases of abuse, the NAD is hosting the free, live-streamed, 2019 summit on abuse on September 4 (September 5 in Spanish). Register at [enditnow.northamerica.org](http://enditnow.northamerica.org) and encourage others to participate. Together, we can work to end the violence and restore peace in our families and homes as God intended. ■

*Melissa Ponce-Rodas is an assistant professor of Psychology at Andrews University. She and her husband, Segundo, have twin boys, Samuel and Jonathan. Her research and advocacy revolve around the intersections of religion and domestic violence.*

<sup>1</sup> Drumm, René; McBride, Duane; Hopkins, Gary; Thayer, Jerome; Popescu, Marciana; Wrenn, Jan. "Intimate Partner Violence in a Conservative Christian Denomination: Prevalence and Types." *Social Work & Christianity*. Fall 2006, Vol. 33 Issue 3, p233-251.

# Hope in Despair

As a therapist and a Seventh-day Adventist Christian, I believe all the parts of an individual are interconnected and dependent on every other part.

What I mean by this is the number of hours of sleep we get and how and what we eat and drink on a daily basis are connected to how we treat our partner. And each of these are integrally connected to the amount and the quality of time that we spend communing with our Creator. Our ability to exercise and whether or not we feel like exercising is quite likely directly connected to all of the above-mentioned parts of us.

The importance of each one of these things is not new to us, but perhaps the degree that they are connected and even dependent on each other might be a new way to conceptualize how we treat ourselves. Think of the curves of a Slinky. Each curve is its own wave, but each is interdependent on all the other waves. When one wave goes down, the rest follow. When one goes up . . . You get the idea.

How much sleep we get might determine the choices we make regarding food and drink consumption, getting up to get to work on time and whether we have energy enough to motivate ourselves to exercise.

If you feel you're not performing in certain areas to the maximum of your potential, check the areas listed above to see if they are balanced and are being given adequate attention. It is important to remember that when one area is out of balance, it will pull the others out of balance. Take a moment to ask yourself which area is the most out of balance and choose one thing that might help you improve in that area. For example, if it has been a while since you've done physical activity, commit to going for a 10-minute walk two different days next week.

When I discuss this topic with my clients or students, they usually respond with, "I'm too busy. I don't have time." This excuse is an attempt by your brain to

resist change. Change is hard and not always welcomed by our brain, which tends to crave what it knows and resist what it doesn't know. My recommendation is to always choose a small change that is sustainable. Once you have that small change incorporated into your life, increase the frequency or duration by another small step and practice that.

Everyone is busy! It's become a hallmark of our society. If we don't focus on improving our quality of life, we will be spending more of our time with medical interventions. ■

*It is important to note that this article is not intended to take the place of medical advice or to diminish the effects of mental or personality disorders.*

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▲ Brad Hinman

