

How to Identify Abusive Relationships and Break the Cycle

Call facilitator and www.IdeaMarketers.com official relationship expert Nancy Gerber discussed the dynamics of dysfunctional and abusive relationships, why people get stuck in destructive patterns, and how people involved in abusive relationships can develop a safe, effective exit plan.

Participants included the following IdeaMarketers.com experts:

- Psychologist and nationwide consultant in criminal and civil domestic abuse cases Dr. Jeanne King - <http://DrJeanneKing.com/>
- Relationship expert Stephany Alexander - <http://WomanSavers.com>
- Psychologist, author, and columnist Dr. Neill Neill - <http://www.NeillNeill.com/>
- Relationship and Marketing 101 expert Nancy Gerber - www.sstones.com; www.MarketingMambo.com

This is a transcript of the highlights from this panel discussion. An audio recording of the entire panel discussion, sponsored by IdeaMarketers.com, is available at

<http://www.ideamarketers.com/experts/calls/domesticviolence.cfm>

Definitions of Abuse & Dysfunction



Dr. Neill Neill: “If a relationship is working, there’s good communication between the people and a reasonable level of happiness. Each individual can be themselves; they don’t have to put on any pretense. As soon as someone in the relationship *can’t* be who they are, we start to run into dysfunction. Abuse is where somebody does something or acts a certain way to control, manipulate, or get their way over the other person. That’s not treating the other person as a person. That’s treating them more as an object. We can all think of extreme examples.

I was dealing with a woman one time who ran away from her partner after he had kept her in a room for ten months, giving her a bottle of water and a pail while he went off to work. He didn’t want her to do anything while he was away. Finally, she had a chance to escape and did. That’s extreme, but you can

deal with something that is much more subtle. If one party to a marriage has a lot of rules, restrictions, or rigidity, the other person can end up so shut down, so unable to speak up, they effectively are abused – although the other person wasn't *doing* anything."



Stephany Alexander: "Abuse usually takes various forms. It can take the form of sexual, physical, emotional, or verbal abuse. In the beginning, the abuse is not very evident. During the dating stages, many times we don't see the abusive behavior, or you wouldn't get to the second date. What you do see in the beginning is red flags. What is important is that people pay attention to their gut instinct and red flags and research them further. If someone doesn't treat people around him, his siblings, or parents with respect, there's a good possibility that, in the future, he won't treat *you* with respect. That would be an example of a red flag to watch for."



Nancy Gerber: "How would you draw the distinction between dysfunction and abuse? Isn't it so that, if we can spot the dysfunction in time, people can avoid getting into an abusive situation?"

Stephany Alexander: "It's *possible*. Unfortunately, many times it happens like this: you're dating, you start making an emotional connection and investing time. Then, you start rationalizing the abuse. They've got all these great points, and they've got these negative points. The abuse escalates. As women, when we get emotionally involved, it's really, really difficult to get out of it."

Nancy Gerber: "So, sometimes the first several encounters with the person seem pretty normal."

Stephany Alexander: "Yes. But that's when it is most important to pay attention to the red flags, because you don't have time or emotions invested yet. Abuse can come in all forms – maybe someone who is a braggart, a narcissist, a sociopath, or disrespectful. We need to pay attention to our gut instincts."



Dr. Jeanne King: "I think that all abusive relationships are dysfunctional, but I don't think that all dysfunctional relationships are abusive. When I think of domestic abuse, it's familiar, it's home and family. Abuse is basically the ongoing, intentional violation of one person to another. Domestic abuse, the mechanism of it is basically control. It's all about one person's domination and control of another."

Nancy Gerber: “Let’s talk about some subtle examples of abuse and dysfunction. A lot of times, people don’t realize this is going on. They feel uncomfortable or that things aren’t right, but they wouldn’t label it abuse. Dr. King, you made a really great distinction here: ‘All abusive relationships are dysfunctional, but not all dysfunctional relationships are abusive.’ That’s a really important point.”

Dr. Jeanne King: “I see the subtle usually in the interaction and communication patterns. A classic is when ‘no’ means maybe. When the person hearing the ‘no’ hears it as an opportunity, a challenge to convert it to a ‘yes,’ and the person saying ‘no’ says it as almost with permission to convert it to a ‘yes.’ That dynamic right there is something to pay attention to.”

Nancy Gerber: “How would that show up in an everyday interaction?”

Dr. Jeanne King: “Stephanie brought up something really important that is relevant to answer that question. Your internal information is so compelling. You *know* it internally when you’re experiencing it. You *feel* it. You realize that your communication is met with a challenge. You experience the word ‘no’ as a word of hesitation. You’re not bringing yourself forward; you’re holding out.”

Nancy Gerber: “You might be saying no, but you don’t actually *mean* no.”

Dr. Jeanne King: “Right, simply because you know the consequences. If you don’t placate your partner, there will be some kind of consequence. You’re saying ‘no’ because ‘no’ is what you really want, but you don’t feel that sense of ‘okayness’ about it.”

Nancy Gerber: “Something pops up for me as I’m listening to you. I saw this once illustrated in a television show: even as a strong woman, you can say ‘No, I don’t like doing this’ and instead of the man saying ‘Okay,’ the man will say ‘Come on, why not?’ he tries to cajole and convince. He can be nice about it, but he’s being a bully.”

Dr. Jeanne King: “Correct. There’s a certain amount of that is cultural, embedded in our social system. There is another aspect of it that’s combative and has the element of no empathy and of personal violation. It’s a clear distinction, and you know that distinction internally. You’re not entitled within the context of your relationship to be who you are.”

Red Flags and Early Indicators

Nancy Gerber: “Let’s talk about the red flags and indicators. Stephany is from the perspective of: ‘Let’s look for the red flags before we even start dating.’ Let’s

look at the initial stages of the relationship. Then, let's talk about what happens when a marriage has been going along for awhile and this kind of thing happens."

Stephany Alexander: "This is my expertise. There are many different screening techniques that people can use and are not using. Technology is the greatest gift ever, but it is a double-edged sword. The goal in life is for people to surround themselves – both on a personal level and on a business level – with trusting, kind people.

Out there right now, there are a lot of dangerous people. When you meet a stranger, you have no idea who you're dealing with. There are people saying they're doctors, lawyers, going to cyber cafés and creating fictitious everything. They're buying their degrees online. Pedophiles are lurking around, targeting single mothers for access to their children.

The very first thing that you can do is pay attention to writing styles. Are they educated? If somebody says they're a doctor, ask a few medical questions. Do they punctuate? Do they type in all upper caps? There are so many clues in the beginning. Get a *real* first and last name.

Once you have a real first and last name, the sky's the limit. You can get a criminal background check for under \$50 on the net. This will tell you if you're dealing with a felon, how many times a person has been married, where they live, if they have professional licenses, etc. You can get everything but their blood type. Secondly, do a character check. See if a man has a bad relationship history. He could be a deadbeat dad, spreading STDs knowingly, or conning unsuspecting women out of money. It happens all the time. If you're a mother or parent, do a sexual predator search. Google a person's name, E-mail address, telephone number, any information you have. You can even Google a person's dating screen name and see how many other dating sites they're on."

Nancy Gerber: "There are a lot of things to do there. How do you respond to someone who says, 'It's so much work'? How do you respond to people who bristle at the suggestion that they have to do that kind of homework?"

Stephany Alexander: "It *is* work, and that's just the world we live in nowadays. If you just proceed forward, it's naïve, it's dangerous, and you can risk everything that you've ever worked for. You can risk your business, your emotions, your finances, and even your health. Proceeding forward without doing a little bit of homework is just foolish nowadays. If you don't want to do your homework, then you're taking huge risks, and the goal is to increase the odds in your favor by researching a person. Treat it like a research paper. This is

a serious thing. This is potentially a person you may be spending the rest of your life with.”

Dr. Neill Neill: “A question comes up that I want to ask Stephany, and that is the question of stalking, which is a big red flag for me. How does a woman who’s starting to get involved in a relationship distinguish between enthusiasm – sending flowers, E-mails, and cards – and stalking?”

Stephany Alexander: “Women run into that *all* the time, and get a little bit confused between being flattered by attention, and then it turns into stalking and getting out of control. Pay attention to your physical reactions. Is he calling me ten times a day or once? Every situation is different. If it doesn’t feel right anymore, then you need to back off. You can block them, and sites like Match.com allow you to have a conversation without giving out your number. These are great screening techniques. I’ve been stalked. I’ve had to file a restraining order. I’ve had death threats. You name it; I’ve been through it.”

Nancy Gerber: “The theme I want to emphasize to the listeners is trusting your own gut feeling. If something doesn’t feel right to you, then something doesn’t feel right to you. My mother always used to say, ‘Err on the side of caution.’ When in doubt, throw it out. Another indicator for me is when someone wants to know everything you’re doing, where you are, what you were doing today, and they get annoyed when you don’t call them back. At first, it’s flattering. That can rapidly turn into control.”

Dr. Jeanne King: “The Intimate Partner Abuse Screen <http://www.preventabusiverelationships.com> helps you to spot intimate partner violence in moments in response to 34 questions. It brings to light the symptoms that are evident both internally and externally. The core issue is control. Possessiveness is characteristic. The tendency to externalize blame, to want to isolate the partner from all other sources of support, the use of battering to maintain a dynamic of unequal power. Is this safe and comfortable and right, or is this potentially dangerous?”

Nancy Gerber: “If the person wants to spend all of their time with you, has a problem when you want to go out with your friends or see your family, or if you stay late at work – they basically want to put you in a little bubble and make sure they are the only source of relationship and interaction that you have. At the beginning, that can be flattering to someone. You have to be really careful about that.”

Dr. Neill Neill: “There’s one more thing that is evident in the beginning that is a big red flag. In the initial interaction, people have to be themselves. If you get

any indication that the other party is putting on a show, I would run. Take the example of the phone calls: Is this person likely in the long run to call every day? So this is a special show. You can tell if a person is faking it or not being himself. If the person doesn't seem to have a life, then there is something not real about it. That's a warning sign in a relationship."

Nancy Gerber: "We need to trust our gut. We all know when someone is trying too hard. We all know when someone is putting on a persona."

Stephany Alexander: "Well, you have to be careful with that. Say someone is on a date and he's really nervous, and he *is* trying hard. He wants to impress the girl. There's a difference between that and being a narcissist or braggart. Women are frequently attracted to narcissists because they're charming. They know how to woo a woman, they know how to market themselves, and they know what to say to a woman to get her hooked. It's so important for a woman to validate what this person is saying by doing research.

Another thing that is not necessarily abusive, but it's very common out there right now, is married men and women who are cheating. MSNBC did a survey recently, and 2 out of every 5 'single and available' men on dating sites were married. They're leading people on and getting them emotionally hooked, which in a sense is abuse, because it can lead to a tremendous amount of pain for the person who falls for them. Once you get a person's telephone number, you call consistently between the hours of 8 and 10 P.M. If they can't answer during that period of time, that may be a red flag that you're dealing with somebody who is already committed, because that is when people are spending time with their family and partners."

Red Flags in Established Relationships

Dr. Neill Neill: "Some of the early things are put-downs, something that makes the partner feel inferior or incompetent, or an insistence that this is the right way. It degrades the other person. The other person, if they're feeling degraded and put down, that's the warning. Something's not right here. The person gets uncomfortable and withdraws, and there are 101 subjects that can't be discussed, like money. He gets uncomfortable. Somehow, that gets projected onto the partner. It's her responsibility to not make him feel uncomfortable, but he won't take responsibility for getting some help."

Nancy Gerber: "That's another great indicator, when the person keeps pointing the blame outward. When someone is not taking any responsibility for problems that are occurring and not owning what's going on. The other thing that I wonder: What are some of the other circumstances that can shift a relationship

and cause dysfunction and abuse to begin? Money and financial pressure is one, and we're going through some tough economic times right now, so that may very well be a big factor."

Dr. Neill Neill: "The in-laws. So it starts out okay, but the man's dad doesn't like his daughter-in-law because she's a *person* – she's not obedient like his wife is. So he's egging the son on. He's torn between the two, but the dad has been around a lot longer than she has, so he starts doing things to control even though he might not have had any intention of doing that. It becomes a continuing cycle."

Dr. Jeanne King: "Pregnancy is the number one thing I see. The thinking here is that most domestic abuse is fundamentally about control. When there's a new pregnancy, there is a shift of attention from the perpetrator to this new fetus. That perpetrator will experience that as a 'leaving' of the relationship. When the perpetrator feels he's losing his grip, violence will escalate."

Nancy Gerber: "Another thing that pops up for me is substance abuse. Someone could be a social drinker and start to drink more, or start hanging out with new people who introduce them to drugs they never thought of trying."

Dr. Neill Neill: "Many people escalate their drinking around stressful situations, but don't become addicted. They gradually ease off. What happens in an abusive relationship is that when they are intoxicated or even just drinking a little bit, they don't have the restraints. They don't hold back. They can get extremely abusive. It's a fairly high percentage of physical violence that involves alcohol or drugs. Also, many of them use the fact that they were drinking as the excuse. If it gets into verbal violence, is a fairly short hop to physical violence. I think many women who are verbally abused do not accept the fact that they are in physical danger. If he turns violent and he is intoxicated, four policemen might not be enough to stop him. Nevertheless, they wait until they are hurt, and then they start dealing with the fact that they really shouldn't be there."

Stephany Alexander: "WomanSavers.com is the number one most popular abused woman forum on the Internet. It gets hundreds of thousands of postings. I have read everything, and women are not even clear on the definition of abuse sometimes – especially the older generation. Some of them accept the fact that they're being talked down to because they're so used to it and their self-esteem is so low. Most stay for 3 reasons: 1) They are co-dependent or have low self-esteem, 2) finances, and 3) children."

Nancy Gerber: "For the benefit of those who don't really understand what codependency means, let's define what that means."

Dr. Neill Neill: “Codependency is a form of symbiosis; there’s a connection just like a mother and infant child. If the mother lost the child, the loss would be much deeper than the loss of a partner. A part of herself has died. If a relationship becomes codependent, there’s a merging of identities. If they pull apart, it’s as if part of them has died. So they go back, and they forget about all the bad things. It seems to be made worse with the use of drugs and alcohol. It’s hard to break. To do it, the person has to get back as sense of self.”

Nancy Gerber: “When you have no identity of your own, that is an indicator of codependence.”

Dr. Neill Neill: “It’s an addiction. He has become addicted to alcohol; she has become addicted to his care and lost herself in the process. It’s a merging of identities.”

Dr. Jeanne King: “I see a major distinction between substance abuse and partner abuse. I’m hearing some overlap. I do believe that they coexist, but they’re very distinct in my mind. They must be treated differently. When we attempt to treat intimate partner violence by looking at the substance abuse, we miss the boat.”

Why Do People Gravitate Toward Abusive Relationships?

Dr. Jeanne King: “People aren’t clear on what the dynamic is, so they get into a relationship before they’ve really identified what the problem is. They’re part of the problem. This identification is extremely important. When you understand that environment, you know what you’re looking at”

Nancy Gerber: “It’s like a person who wants to lose weight, but doesn’t understand which foods are high-caloric and which foods aren’t.”

Dr. Jeanne King: “The second thing is assuming responsibility for the other person’s behavior. The moment a person surrenders responsibility to another person, this window opens. When they recognize the distinction between how it was before and how it is after, they’re less likely to reengage in another relationship of that kind.”

Stephany Alexander: “People do it because they haven’t worked on themselves. They haven’t taken responsibility for their own action and part in a relationship. People always ask me: ‘When should I date again? Am I ready to date yet?’ I like to compare you working on yourself to baking a cake. You need to have love in all forms around you – a pet, a parent, a sibling, hobbies, school, or work. Once you have a fulfilled life without somebody else, you have a perfectly baked cake that you’ve worked hard to create. Once you have that, then you are ready to

date. If you meet somebody wonderful, then they're the icing on your perfectly baked cake. We've got millions of people out there who are unfit even to date."

Nancy Gerber: "Years ago, I was listening to a Marianne Williamson tape about relationships, and she said something that stuck with me for all these years. People are so busy focusing on the kind of person they want to attract that they forget about developing themselves into the kind of person that that person would be attracted to."

Stephany Alexander: "It's so old-school to think that you need a partner to have a fulfilled life. You don't need somebody to complete you. That is a huge myth."

Nancy Gerber: "If a person is not working on themselves, and they're not seeking to grow and develop, then they're not taking responsibility for their own part in being involved in a dysfunctional or abusive relationship."

Dr. Neill Neill: "An abusive relationship is traumatic. I had a woman come into my office one time who said, 'I've been married four times, and each of my husbands turned out to be an alcohol. Do you think there's a pattern there?' So what we did was we focused on clearing the traumatic pattern. That really shifted things for her."

Breaking the Cycle

Nancy Gerber: "Say someone recognizes that they've got a pattern going on or that they're in an abusive relationship. What are some steps that people can take to start breaking this cycle?"

Dr. Neill Neill: "I'm making an assumption that they want the relationship to work. Start figuring out who you are. Develop some new hobbies. Do things that are *yours* and not *his*. Get a sense of self. That's a starting point. You might have to try a bunch of things. Be open about what you're feeling with your friends. Be yourself. The worst that can happen is that it ends. But you're dying, anyway."

Stephany Alexander: "I specialize in women's abuse. Here's how women listening can get help. I started WomanSavers.com in 2002, and I noticed a pattern. Many times, women in abusive situations do not have the time or the funds to seek professional help. They also don't have friends or family to talk to. They may be embarrassed about their situation and do nothing. Women can go onto the WomanSavers.com forum. Women can go anonymously onto the website to get free professional or non-professional advice. You can go to a

medical physician to get medical advice. You can talk to thousands of women, day or night, who have been in the same situation as you.”

Nancy Gerber: “If a woman realizes that she needs to leave and she starts to plan that leaving, this is the most dangerous time in a relationship.”

Dr. Neill Neill: “She needs to get her ducks in order if she’s going to leave. It may mean talking to a lawyer. Have an exit plan. The way not to do it is, ‘I think I’m going to leave you.’ That escalates it very quickly. Do it in secrecy. Have a place to go that he doesn’t know about, whether it’s a temporary shelter or a relative who lives in a different state.”

Stephany Alexander: “Make copies of all important documents and save some money on the side.”

Dr. Neill Neill: “You have that period afterwards of the potential stalking. It’s not over until it’s over.”

Dr. Jeanne King: “Two magic words: quickly and quietly. Violence will escalate when she leaves. That’s one of the things that keeps her in it.”

Nancy Gerber: “What we’re hoping to do with this call is to help you avoid being in that kind of situation. This call is preventive. Our hope is that this phone call will empower you to take care of yourself so that you never get to that point.”

Panelist Resources

Dr. Jeanne King: “Identification is number one. The Intimate Partner Abuse Screen helps them to see what intimate partner violence is. It’s anonymous, accurate, and immediate. Go to www.preventabusiverelationships.com. The other thing that we have is a family intervention program that is typically inspired either by a close friend or family member that suspects that this person is in a dangerous relationship. Often times, while the victim is the first to know, they’re the last to get it. We have a program designed to help that person awaken to their circumstances and deal with them. Go to “Contact Us” on the website and inquire about the Family Intervention Program.”

Dr. Neill Neill: “There’s some really good information for identifying on a website called <http://www.dviworld.org>. There’s some quick, easy-to-read information. The other things I have are local. In our community, we have Haven Homes. It’s a bunch of volunteers. There’s a hotline, and if a woman calls and is

in trouble, she's goes to one of these homes. There's no way of anybody knowing exactly where she is. There isn't a fixed location. That's what the way we've been handling here."

Nancy Gerber: "Look for your community resources. Every state in the U.S. will have resources to help people who are involved in domestic violence and abusive situations. Every community probably has a hotline of some sort, even if you just call the local operator. There are resources immediately available. This may be part of what your exit plan needs to be, doing that kind of research. There is help available online and offline."

Stephany Alexander: "<http://WomanSavers.com> is a like a dictionary of information. There are articles about abuse, quizzes you can take, professional help, non-professional help. The resources are limitless."

Listen to an audio of this call and find articles by participating experts at <http://www.ideamarketers.com/experts/calls/domesticviolence.cfm>