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Services for abusive adults improving

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Stories of roadside explosive devices taking the lives of Iraqis and Americans were reported almost daily in 2006.

Another type of explosive wreckage, much less frequently covered by the media but every bit as prevalent, took place in U.S. homes in 2006. This device, however, was not a bomb but rather an adult whose physical and/or emotional abuse within the family was potentially as devastating to the spouse/partner and children as a war injury or death.

It doesn't seem that much has been accomplished in preventing the injuries and deaths wrought by IEDs in Baghdad. But, services for abusive adults are improving. More than 1,000 agencies in the U.S. offer counseling to the adult abuser. Researchers are contributing by identifying which types of interventions stop abusive behavior.

One such study is under way at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. The Men's Domestic Abuse Check-Up, a three-year federally funded project, serves adult men who are concerned about their behaviors at home.

Delivered entirely by phone and protecting each person's privacy, this program offers the man an opportunity to take stock of what he's doing and think through his options. It's not treatment but -- as the name implies -- a chance to talk about his experiences and his choices with someone who is respectful and non-judgmental. Talking may start the process of ending the abuse.

The check-up is brief and participants are compensated for assisting in the research.

One of the 101 men who've called, given the pseudonym of "Mike" in this article, is 64 years old and has been married for 25 years. Mike heard about the project through a newspaper ad.

His wife had told him that he was abusing her and his relationship with his daughter was full of conflict. But he really loves his family and wasn't sure how his behavior contributed to their current state. As a child, he had witnessed verbally abusive interactions between his parents on a daily basis.

Mike's wife is by no means alone. Group Health conducted a survey of 3,429 adult female members in 2003 and 2004 and found that 44 percent had been physically abused

or subjected to emotional abuse from domestic partners. For 13 percent of those women, the abuse had lasted for more than 20 years.

When compared with women who had not been abused, those who had were more than four times as likely to be severely depressed and three times as likely to be in poor or only fair health.

As is the case when reading each day of deaths and injuries due to IEDs in Iraq, the statistics concerning domestic violence can be staggering to absorb.

We're hopeful that the Men's Domestic Abuse Check-Up will offer an effective option to the adult male who is being abusive at home and is concerned.

When finishing his several phone interviews, Mike told our staff: "(I) appreciate the non-judgmental manner in which all the interviews were conducted. The questions you asked brought home to me the impact of my behavior on my family far more powerfully than would a lecture."

Roger Roffman is a professor of social work at the University of Washington. Contact the Men's Domestic Abuse Check-Up by calling 1-800-MEN-1089 or www.menscheckup.org.

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