

CHECKING ABUSE BY CHECKUP



Nicole Brodeur

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Over the phone, the men sound hesitant. On the edge of connecting themselves with a label they dare not say out loud: batterer.

The voice on the other end won't say the word, either. The Men's Domestic Abuse Checkup isn't about names or judgments, accusations or arrests.

Rather, counselors in the University of Washington study want callers to better understand their thoughts and actions with their partners, and how their drug or alcohol use may influence that behavior.

"It's a checkup," said Joan Zegree, clinical co-director. "We're helping men take a look at their lives in a way that makes them feel nonjudged."

Well-meaning folks say and do many things in the name of this, Domestic Violence Awareness Month. But the Checkup chooses to simply listen and to help men determine whether they should be the focus of all this good intent.

"Once a caller hears himself taking stock of his behavior, it will help tip the scales so he will become less ambivalent and open to change," said Roger Roffman, the study's chief investigator.

The domestic-abuse study (www.menscheckup.org) was launched in July and runs another 14 months. So far, 50 men have called and 13 have enrolled in the study. Calls to 800-MEN-1089 are free, and anonymity is honored.

The Checkup is for any man who feels he is of two minds: a nice guy, but also an abuser.

"Most men who are domestic-violence perpetrators are also wonderful individuals," Zegree said. "Our culture has tried to make this a black-or-white affair, but they are often the same person."

Roffman cited a recent Group Health Cooperative survey of 3,400 women released earlier this year that found that 44 percent had been victims of "intimate-partner violence."

But much of it goes unreported, as partners agonize over what might happen.

The Checkup hopes to change that by offering callers a chance to talk — and learn — about their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors regarding domestic abuse.

A week later, the study staff sends a summary of the caller's answers and then calls again to review options.

"A man may go through this conversation and say they are not interested in changing," Roffman said the other day. "On the other hand, this man might say 'This conversation is helping me become increasingly aware, and I want to change.'"

For now, the study is focused on men. But if it is effective, Roffman and his staff may begin research on abusive women, abusive male and female adolescents and abusive individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Zegree has worked with male batterers for almost 30 years and is eager to play a part in early intervention.

"The people that I get, much of the damage has been done," she said. "Maybe getting it earlier will make an impact."

"We welcome a conversation with you," Zegree said to anyone considering a call to Checkup. "Because we know you're not a bad person."

Nicole Brodeur's column appears Wednesday and Sunday. Reach her at 206-464-2334 or nbrodeur@seattletimes.com. She's had a few bruises of her own.