

Identifying Abuse

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Because of my 30 plus years of experience working with people who have anger and abuse problems, I am often asked what exactly constitutes abuse. It seems that abuse, like many other things, is hard to define. I am reminded of the person who, when asked to define what is obscene, said: "I can't define it but I know it when I see it." Abuse is similar to that, and it sometimes is in the eyes of the person who is the recipient as well as the observer. To be sure there are things that most of us can agree is abuse; like hitting a child with a closed fist or a spouse beating his/her partner, but for many of us it is hard to define what exactly constitutes abuse.

There seems to be four main categories of abuse. First, there is what is called verbal abuse. Yelling or screaming at someone, berating or calling them names and talking over them when they are trying to talk can all be categorized as abusive. However, for many this does not really constitute abuse. Some of us were raised in homes where there were often loud, heated debates in which everyone "blew off steam" and then everyone calmed down and went about their business as if nothing happened. To those individuals, this is not necessarily abuse but instead a normal way of communicating. For others who were raised in families where things were discussed calmly and where being loud was frowned upon, this is not normal behavior and therefore can be experienced as abusive.

The second type of abuse is emotional abuse, which is even harder to define and describe than verbal abuse. Emotional abuse is often defined as an attempt by someone to make another person feel bad about him or herself. This depends on not only the experience of the one being emotionally abused, but also upon the intent of the abuser.

A third type of abuse is sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can be defined as the attempt by one individual to act in a sexual manner toward a person who either does not consent to it or who does not have the ability to consent to it. Examples of sexual abuse include an adult being sexual with a child, or a person making unwanted and inappropriate comments of a sexual nature to someone or behaving in a sexually provocative way toward someone who is not receptive.

The final type of abuse, physical abuse (along with sexual abuse), is the least ambiguous or difficult to define. It involves being physical with someone in a way they do not want. This includes things like hitting, slapping, pushing, shoving or restraining someone.

If you are like me, you are probably now thinking of exceptions to these definitions that may not be considered as abuse sometimes or other situations that should definitely be included in the list. This illustrates the fact that abuse is sometimes hard to define, especially when we move from the more blatant forms of physical and sexual abuse toward emotional and

verbal abuse. I have found however, that there is a way to check a particular behavior to test if it is abusive or not.

What typically defines abusive behavior is the goal of the behavior. Abusive behavior almost always has the goal of exerting power and control over another individual. The purpose of it is to make someone do something that they don't really want to do. Because of this, when we assess if something is abusive, we need to take into consideration the goal of the behavior from the perspective of both the abuser and of the one being abused.

What does this mean for you as volunteers? It means that it is important to get the perspective of the individuals that are involved when you come across a situation where you believe someone is being abused. And, the most important perspective to get is that of the person you think is being abused. The following are some concrete things you can do when you are confronted with a situation you think is abusive.

1. Talk to the individual when they are not in the presence of the one you suspect is abusing them. Ask the client questions such as, "Are you ok?", "How are you handling things?", "Is there anything I can do to help you?" See if their reactions seem as though truly nothing is wrong or instead seem like the person is afraid to tell you.

2. If the situation is one in which some verbal abuse is happening, ascertain whether the person who is being verbally abusive is aware of the impact of their words on the other. Sometimes encouraging the person who is the recipient to share how the words are affecting them can make a big difference because the verbally abusive person does not realize what impact those words have.

3. If you suspect a case of elder abuse, sexual abuse or child abuse, talk to someone knowledgeable in these areas. Do not keep it to yourself. JFS has many staff members trained to not only recognize the signs of abuse, but also trained in how to most effectively address it.

The most important thing to remember is to talk to someone at JFS if you feel uncomfortable with the way one person is treating another. This is often a sign that indeed is something going on that needs to be addressed. By getting the people with the right resources involved you could be helping someone resolve a difficult and painful situation.

