

## GUEST ESSAY

# 'I Don't Want to Hit My Children. I Don't Want to Hit Anybody.'

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**By Rachel Louise Snyder**

Ms. Snyder is the author of "No Visible Bruises," a book on domestic violence.

When I was a young teenager, I was uncontrollable, rebellious. My father believed in corporal punishment, sanctioned by the evangelical church. My mother, who was Jewish, died of cancer when I was 8, and I believe my father's response to his grief was to double down on his faith: to interpret the Bible literally, to make himself the ultimate authority in our home and to try to create the world he wanted through sheer force. He cobbled together a new family — stepmother, stepsiblings and then two more children from the new marriage. Overwhelmed with change and with my own grief, I defied his every edict.

We were kerosene and matches. Once, he splintered my mother's sorority paddle over me. Another time, he punched me up and down my thighs, leaving me bruised from knee to hip and limping for days. My response was to punch back. To kick, to scream. I pulled a fishing knife on him. I threw a heavy landline phone at him. I swore. I ran away.

Researchers would call my brand of violence "retaliatory," my father's "situational." It was occasional and sporadic; it never contained the potential to turn deadly. Still, neither of us — though especially him as the adult — felt we had anywhere to go for assistance. It never occurred to me to call the police, and the church merely parroted the biblical imperative for children to obey their parents. We had nowhere to turn, no one to help us navigate our blistering rage. How might decades of conflict and estrangement have gone differently if he'd had someone to call, someone whom he could ask for help?

Even today, 40 years later, this country's primary approach to the problem of in-home violence has been to treat its aftermath. We send victims to shelters, to transitional housing, to court. We have created programming that includes, for example, free law clinics and victims' compensation — but they almost always require physical abuse to take place before they're made available. We rely heavily on the criminal justice system, which has often meant abusers get either prison time or nothing. This approach allows the rest of us to push a societal problem aside, to keep it hidden from view: shelters for victims, prisons for perpetrators.

Some years ago, Britain recognized the lack of programming aimed at either preventing domestic abuse or intervening early and created a help line for perpetrators of abuse. Called Respect Phoneline, it began in 2004 with funding from the government. Part of a larger anti-domestic violence organization called Respect, it normally receives around 6,000 calls, texts and web chats a year, but volume skyrocketed in

the early months of the pandemic. From April to June of last year, phone calls went up by 200 percent; web chats went up by 400 percent and website traffic by 500 percent. These interactions are anonymous, unless the adviser on the phone believes a victim or the caller is in imminent danger and has a duty to report to the authorities. Last year, 84 percent of the callers were men and 15 percent were women.

I was curious about the help line, in part because I was doubtful that a half-hour phone chat could make much of a difference. What might such a conversation with my father have sounded like or accomplished? This past year, the people at Respect allowed me to listen in on their calls. (Callers to the help line heard a message at the start of their call that a writer working on an article for The New York Times might be listening, and they were given the opportunity to opt out.) What I heard both surprised me and left me strangely hopeful.

**As a journalist who focuses on domestic violence**, I have spent years interviewing and talking to perpetrators, who tend to present a front that is equal parts machismo and charm. So I was largely unprepared for the sheer vulnerability that I often heard on the Respect calls. Many callers were emotional, often sobbing. One man had tried to commit suicide just days earlier by swallowing dozens of pills.

Another talked about how his wife was ill, how he should be grateful for the things he has, and how for a while these thoughts of gratitude sustained him. But then he'd feel underappreciated or he'd remember some grievance from the past, and he'd be worse off than when he started. Life "shouldn't be this hard," he said, sounding almost bewildered. "I shouldn't be hurting this many people."

A third caller, just 21 years old, was so quiet and childlike on the line that it sounded as if it was an effort for him to speak. He and his former partner had been in a prolonged court battle, and he said he realized that he'd done things to harm others. "I'm struggling to see that this is what my actions are actually doing," he said, "I'm just feeling sad." The adviser on the phone asked him what his biggest concern was right now, and he said he'll never see his son again if his ex doesn't feel safe around him.

"So you're looking for a program for your behavior?" she asked.

"Yes," he whispered.

The fear of not seeing their children again motivates a lot of the callers. Juan Carlos Areán, a program director for children and youth at the U.S.-based nonprofit Futures Without Violence, refers to that fear as an entry point. "If they feel bad about their children, great. We'll enter from there," he said. Other entry points include formal systems like child welfare and law enforcement, and informal systems like clergy, friends or family. "Everyone can be part of batterer intervention," he said — the more that abusers hear the same message from many different people, the better.

The primary focus of Futures Without Violence is helping victims of abuse and improving the ways communities respond to violence, but Mr. Areán also hopes to start a help line similar to Respect in the United States. He told me it's not surprising that the callers I hear are so emotional, isolated and alone. Many talked about how they had no one to confide in. "People who use violence are the most miserable people in the world," he said. "I've never met a man who uses violence who's happy."

Respect doesn't track how many of the callers actually graduate from the perpetrator programs to which many are referred, and anonymity prevents Respect from doing any long-term tracking of post-call behavior. Still, over the course of many calls, I heard perpetrators who may have started out minimizing

their behavior come around to the idea that they needed to examine their choices more critically. Ippo Panteloudakis, the head of services for Respect, said that for the calls to be successful — to manage risk and de-escalate a potentially dangerous situation — advisers are trained to move beyond anger toward the vulnerabilities of the caller. “The things that people can disclose over the phone when they have all the power to put the phone down, when they don’t need to face someone over their own embarrassment. You can hear it in their voice,” Mr. Panteloudakis said, “They could hang up. But they never do. They never hang up.”

**Listening at dawn in my darkened bedroom,** I hear a caller whose anguish careens straight into my stomach. A man is desperate to figure out what to do with his teenage son. Both of them have used physical violence. He needs help. He just needs to stop. The adviser, a woman named Sharon (her last name is being withheld at Respect’s request, as a safety measure), says it’s encouraging that he’s reaching out in the midst of a crisis, and throughout the call she asks him questions: Are there other children in the home? Have there been other instances of physical violence? How do you normally deal with violence? He says he doesn’t know how to deal with his own emotions in a heated moment. “At the end of the day, I don’t want to hit my children,” he says. “I don’t want to hit anybody.”

Sharon asks him to describe the inciting incident that got him to call. His son had gotten in trouble at school. When he came home, they fought. The father backed away as the son came toward him. “I hit him and he went crazy. He tried to attack me himself. He started kicking me, grabbed hold of me,” the dad says. Since then, the two “haven’t spoken much, but I just don’t want to reach this point again.”

This man could have been my own father decades ago; he sounded frustrated, but also lost, authentic in his desperate search for help. What happened between my father and me was terrifying, but also confusing, because we loved each other. After I lost my mother, I held on to my father with a keening desperation, the intensity of which I can only recognize now, as an adult. And this made the violence all the more heartbreaking.

Sharon asks the man whether he’s ever been violent with anyone else. His wife, he says, several years back. “OK, so this is not exclusive to your son, but perhaps is a pattern of behavior of how you respond to difficult scenarios?”

“Yeah, I recognize it,” he says.

“Let’s use the example of a workplace,” Sharon says. “In a workplace, your way of dealing with that is to walk away and withdraw. But in the home environment you’re not doing that. Why do you suppose it’s different at home?”

He considers this. “I think I feel trapped at home,” he says. “And I feel I have to resolve things straight away.”

Sharon reminds him that he is able to exercise a level of control in his workplace, where things don’t escalate and he’s not “responding with force.” She suggests that this means violence is a choice for him. “There’s consequences in the workplace if you responded the way you do at home. The police might be involved.”

“I think that’s probably true,” he says. “I feel like I’m losing control of the situation.”

Sharon hears this word — control — and pushes him a little. “So you might have this feeling of being trapped and you can’t escape, but really that’s just on the surface,” she tells him. “What’s fueling that attitude and this behavior is the belief that you have of being the person calling the shots. There’s an expectation of your family members listening to you and that you probably know better.” A pause. “Does that resonate?”

“It does, a little bit, yeah,” he says. “I’m the adult and I know that.”

“I want to reshape your thinking that you feel you don’t have an alternative, when in actual fact you have a choice,” she says. She asks him to reflect on what happens in his body when he’s angry.

“I get a real tension across my chest and shoulders,” he says. “I clench my jaw.”

Sharon outlines an exercise that can help him identify these physical triggers in himself and encourages him to write them down. “You have a choice to continue in the argument and it’s going to escalate, or you can say, ‘I know what’s happening here, and I need to stop.’ This means you leave the property, go for a long walk for at least 45 minutes, to a place like a park where you can sit down and think about what’s happened.”

“Think about ultimately what you want to do here,” she says. “Do you want conflict, or are you trying to create kindness and compassion in the home? Then you can decide to return home with a plan of action. The plan might be that this is not a time for us to discuss it, so let’s leave it. Or you might be returning and apologizing. Or you might try to sit down and talk about it differently.”

The man says his wife will accuse him of walking away. This a common refrain among the callers.

“Let me stop you there,” Sharon says. “You need to inform your partner and son that this is a strategy you’re going to use, so from now on, if conflict is arising, you’re going to practice this ‘time out’ and this is what it looks like, so they are forewarned about strategies you’ll be using.”

He says his wife will still accuse him of abandoning her, but Sharon pushes back. “If you say to your wife: ‘I want to help, but in the moment I’m struggling and I don’t want a situation that gets abusive, and I want your support, but in the meantime if I feel a moment of anger, I want you to know what I’m doing with this strategy.’ Maybe what she sees in the moment is that you don’t want to help her, but this is a different message, and you want to have that discussion with your family beforehand.”

Later, I talked to Sharon about her time on the help line. She said she often gets calls from men who have returned home to find that their partner and children have fled to a shelter. The men may have been served with a restraining order. It’s a side of the story we rarely see: What happens in the empty house when a victim has fled with the children and the abuser arrives home? This scenario is perhaps where the help line is crucial as a crisis intervention. For perpetrators of violence, coming home to an empty house can ignite a stress response, the fight-or-flight mode, and abusers often go into fight mode. It’s a fragile, critical moment that can mean life or death for a victim. Risk of homicide for victims of domestic violence increases more than fivefold in the first year after they’ve left a highly controlling abuser, according to Jacquelyn Campbell, one of the most renowned domestic violence researchers in the United States. The point is to disrupt a moment of escalation.

Sharon will try to reframe this moment as a “time out” for callers. “We say: ‘Let’s look at the positives. This gives you some time to say OK, slow it down.’” It’s a chance to take time to think, she’ll tell them. “If you don’t use this opportunity to explore what’s next and what you can do better, the consequences will be more severe. You will lose more.” Sharon said it’s important to get them to name their behavior, and often she’ll ask them to consider whether such behavior is unacceptable. She gives them concrete tasks to fulfill during their “time out,” like calling their doctor to explore medication or doing exercises from the Respect website. For many, perpetrator intervention programs will come next. She tries not to end a call without a list of concrete steps that someone should take to begin the process of change.

**The United States’ response to violence** has been fundamentally shaped by the myth that a violent person will not reach out for help. It’s part of the reason we rely so heavily on the criminal justice system and court-mandated interventions; it’s why we put so much of the impetus for change on victims, who are asked to disrupt their lives and the lives of their children to move into shelters, which are, at best, a temporary fix.

But Covid is challenging that myth. In the early months of the pandemic, when courts were closed, many programs either shut down or went online. A number of programs found that probation and parole officers were unable to adequately supervise attendance and yet, participants still showed up. Groups across the country reported high rates of attendance. Men and women joined from their bedrooms, from laundry rooms, from their cars. “For me, that is breaking a fundamental paradigm in this country that men will not ask for help voluntarily, or that men will not go to these groups voluntarily,” Mr. Areán told me. “Many of these men are desperate for support.”

In their new book “The Violence Project,” Jillian Peterson, a psychologist, and James Densley, a sociologist, write that 86 percent of mass shooters under the age of 21 will signal their plans, will reach out to *someone* beforehand — a friend, a teacher, a family member. “But we must not lose sight of the fact that in the vast majority of cases, any threat is really just a cry for help, evidence of an underlying personal crisis,” they write.

One of the reasons we have failed to adequately address violence in this country is the fear that what scant resources exist for victims will be rerouted to perpetrators. This is a legitimate fear, given how domestic violence gets minimized in the first place across systems of law enforcement, the courts and the media. Shelters run on shoestrings. But equally true is how much domestic violence fuels other crises: homelessness, mass incarceration, addiction, soaring health care costs and legal fees, bankruptcy and mass shootings, among others. To fail to address violence at its origin feels like an endorsement of our own futility. The more germane question for me is: How much longer can we afford to ignore this?

The Respect help line is not a panacea. We still have more work to do to determine which methods of stopping violence work best. But the point is that to figure out what works, we must begin to try.

We could follow the example of Alcoholics Anonymous and have sponsors for abusers who enroll in perpetrator intervention classes rather than simply graduating them and sending them back into the community and culture that formed them without any support. (A group in Atlanta called Men Stopping Violence has been experimenting with having a friend or family member take on this role.)

We could follow the example of Respect in Britain and have a more uniform certification process for abuser intervention programs rather than the state hodgepodge that we currently have. (For example, one of Respect’s requirements during the accreditation process for perpetrator intervention programs is

that victims must receive support as well.) We could fund more psychologists in schools to actually reach the recommended ratio of 500:1, rather than the national average of 1,500:1. We can reach out to community leaders, to health care workers, to employers, to involve them in anti-violence practices and pedagogies.

The idea of an anti-violence hotline, at least, seems to be gaining traction. In addition to Britain, both Sweden and Australia have started perpetrator hotlines, and Nova Scotia opened one in 2020. A help line called 10 to 10, which refers to its operative hours, was quietly started this past March in Massachusetts.

“We have to stop asking survivors to do more,” JAC Patrissi, a co-founder of 10 to 10 said. “People are worried that an intervention like this is therapy, or collusion, and often those worries are based in this presumption that accountability means carceral control.” The goal, she said, is “a community response that says we’ll walk with you in your change but you have to be accountable.” Ms. Patrissi says the help line is anonymous and responsive to groups traditionally left out of programming, like queer youth, kids who may be confused about consent and people who don’t want to call the police but want things to change.

Mr. Areán hopes that what we’ve learned about perpetrators seeking help during Covid will spur interest in a nationwide hotline here. It’s important, he told me, to move away from the paradigm that abusers will not seek help, because otherwise “our approaches will be punitive. And we need to get men help from noncoercive systems,” like medical and faith systems.

Indeed, there is a growing movement in the United States to move away from the referral of perpetrators only through criminal justice. David Adams, a co-founder and a co-director of the violence-intervention program Emerge in Massachusetts, said his group has worked to reach out to perpetrators rather than waiting for the courts to refer them. Roughly 30 percent of the participants are now self-referred. He says the group strives to be a community resource and to “create community accountability, not just accountability to courts.”

My father and I were lucky. We eventually found our way back to each other. Even in those years of darkness, when he hit and I hit back, we never stopped loving each other.

Love is what makes domestic violence so complicated to deal with, and sometimes so deadly. But love can compel change. In this, domestic abuse is different from all other crime. My father and I spent the rest of our lives building a relationship. When he died unexpectedly just before the start of the pandemic, I grieved for his sudden and complete absence. But I also grieved for the loss of all those years.

*For support for victims of domestic violence, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233 (SAFE) or go to [thehotline.org](https://thehotline.org).*

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