

Domestic Abuse: Rule of Thumb
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by Nancy R. Koerner

There was once a little boy who asked his father, “If dogs chase cats, and cats chase birds, and birds chase worms, what do worms chase?” The father started to reply, but then thought he might be hard-pressed to explain a world in which the worm obviously gets the short end of the stick. But such a scenario plays out everyday in a more sinister sense – the boss shouts at the husband, who goes home and yells at the wife, who then hits the kid who, in turn, kicks the dog. If the most contagious emotion is enthusiasm, then perhaps the most insidious is anger, especially when combined with intense frustration. Throw in some financial difficulties, job security issues, sexual tension, resentment, and a pinch of bad mood, and you have a recipe for potential disaster.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, abuse by an intimate partner occurs every 9 seconds – that’s approximately 3 million women per year. Other sources claim that the figure is closer to 4 million. Even more astonishing is the fact that 17% of all pregnant women are abused. Strangely enough, the victims are not usually weak, subdued, subservient women, but rather strong, independent, talented, and powerful women. Why? Because they pose a threat to the man who feels inadequate and must constantly prove his masculinity and superiority.

From 1976 to 1989, I lived in the little Central American country of Belize, located just below the thumb of Mexico, about 250 miles south of Cancun on the Caribbean Sea . The national language is English and, like the U.S., the system of government is based on British law. Although things have changed drastically over the last twenty years, Belize once had a very different outlook on women’s rights. At that time, there were no shelters, no agencies, no police protection, and no options. Moreover, the government still upheld the “rule of thumb” – not a mindless euphemism, but an archaic British Law stating that “a man has the right to beat his wife, once a week, with a rod no thicker than his thumb.” Some people believe it’s just an urban legend, or an extreme of feminist-revisionist history, but to someone like me, it’s the same as telling a Holocaust survivor that the atrocities at Auschwitz never happened. This law is indeed real. I know because I was subjected to the “rule of thumb” in the most graphically violent sense.

As a survivor, I fully understand why victims refuse to leave their abusive environments: children, money, house, property, vehicles, social pressure, shame, and always, fear of retribution. Regardless, here is my own personal “rule of thumb” – if you are on intimate terms with domestic violence, get out. Things will not change; things will not get better. Thirty-two percent of the women who experience abuse will see a repeat performance. Get out. This is the United States, and unlike other countries, we have options. There are benevolent shelters, professional agencies, counseling programs, treatment centers, legal advocacy groups, compassionate women’s organizations, and physical protection. Get out sooner, rather than later. Get out before the stakes get any

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higher. Get out, or you may never live to be anyone's mother, anyone's daughter, anyone's friend, or anyone's inspiration. Get out, and you will find help and hope and people who care about you. There is shelter from the storm.

Nancy Koerner's newly published book, *Belize Survivor: Darker Side of Paradise*, is available at www.belizesurvivor.com. Residing in Naples, Ms. Koerner is available for book-signings and speaking engagements. For more information, call 239-229-6700 or email inquiries@belizesurvivor.com.