

# Evolving the Abusive Mind

## Introduction

*What nature destroys, we are prone to nurture. What we destroy, nature is bound to forgive. In this adaptive balance, we stake our lives on a 'struggle to exist'.*

### A Grave of Love

Twenty-six years ago, I was teaching English in Japan. My decision to go to Japan was pushed by mid-twenties wanderlust. It turned into an early mid-life crisis. Accidentally, I found a cause and my better self.

I adopted a caseload of high school students, salary men, housewives, college instructors, physicians and medical personnel who often had reasons for learning English beyond practical explanations. Many wanted to be more connected to Western culture, some wanted to grow their professional careers, and others wanted a hobby to distract from their day-to-day lives.

Within the first few months I met a student in her early sixties who seemed to have reversed her aging process through her own kindness. She was petite even by cultural standards. The manager of the school used to refer to her as the 'tea doll'. She quickly became a face of enduring innocence and courage in my mind. One morning, she came to session with a contusion on her left cheek, her eyes showing brightly through a trembling bruise. She seemed humiliated by my concerns. At some point, she broke from my lesson and said something that lingered between us:

*-Kekkon wa aimu haka.*

-Marriage is the grave of love.

This is where the lesson shifted. I asked her if I could help. She smiled at my naiveté. She would explain it if I did not repeat it. I promised without knowing whether I could keep it quiet. We slowly translated the events together.

*'He', her husband of 42 years had become angry with her while she knelt in the garden. Her beloved, drunk and feeling ignored, picked up a brick and struck her face, knocking her unconscious. She woke alone in the garden, lying on her side. Uncertain of the damage, she walked inside the house, past her husband who was still drinking at the kitchen table. He glared at her as she made a poultice and tended to her cheek. This was more than ten days ago and she apologized for missing our session last week.*

I share this story for many reasons, but mostly, to invoke the courage to help those who are victim to violence in their relationships. Even if help means only to witness their struggle. I feel certain that my desire to help others was planted earlier inside me. But on that day, the cause to help those who suffer conjugal violence emerged. Since her story, so many years ago, my sense of the problem has matured.

There is no changing the violence without changing the offender.  
There is no cessation to abuse without insight to the origin.  
We must use fierce honesty about violence in our personal lives.

In order to intervene, we embrace a paradox:

Aggression evolved to protect us from harm.  
And, we most often harm those we love.  
To that end, our emotional survival has broken our hearts.

### The Ancient Purpose of Violence

Many years later, sitting with a friend at coffee, I was asked why I was so outspoken against family violence. He wanted to know what I had against 'a good old -fashioned ass kicking'. Knowing my provocative friend, I took his chain jerking in stride. I also took his question seriously for a moment and fumbled for a reply:

*Maybe we are all a bit confused. It's a real grind for us to overcome the urges to compete, capture...conquer. We have all these 'adrenal solutions'. But these solutions are for very old problems. And, these 'heritable skills', are not really meant for intimate relationships, as much as they are meant to control the behavior of others.'*

After he was done rolling his eyes at me, he said, 'I thought you were smarter than that...' and surprisingly felt like punching him in the mouth. I thought 'What kind of asshole question is that?' Turns out it's a pretty tough one to answer. So, I decided to put my adrenaline to good use and dig deeper in myself for some better explanations.

### What Makes Us Violent

*I consider myself a socially driven, agnostic, vegan, feminist...nonviolent by nature...but when I saw him breaking through the window that night...standing over my son's bed, I hit him with the bat... he begged me to stop and then... something in me hit him even harder.*

-Child Advocate and Domestic Violence Survivor

*I couldn't take her lies anymore. I held her down...I just couldn't let her leave me again.*

-Domestic Violence Offender Interview

What makes us violent is born in the thoughts of being a victim. We have mechanisms, psychological and other, that do our dirty work under duress. Rage for example, is a form of violence we access in extreme conditions. It is designed to keep us safe when stakes are high. But what constitutes risk? How do we gauge personal safety with the rights of others? Is violence inextricably tied to our close emotional relationships?

I spent some time interviewing individuals while in graduate school with a simple question. ‘What would it take to harm another human being?’ Usually respondents answered with higher causes in mind (a mortal threat to a loved one, a child, or self). Their answers were usually supported by: ‘Anyone would... when push comes to shove’

I followed up with another question: ‘Have you ever harmed anyone before and why?’ Answers ranged from drinking too much, being lied to, broken hearts, being disrespected and a variety show of annoyances. Apparently, the story we tell ourselves about violence is noble. But, rage has a broader utility than we are ready to admit. As research has informed us for the past twenty years, violence is especially prevalent within families and other intimate relationships. Ironically, the closer we are to someone, the more likely we are to do harm or be harmed by them.

So let’s double back for a moment. Humans evolved over a long harsh period of time. ‘We’ are living breathing proof that our ancestors figured out how to survive. That is to say, they adapted to harsh environments, reproduced and raised their children to adulthood. This was, as Steven Pinker (2002) points out, ‘...not easy when death at the hands of another was far more common than old age.’ Our natural fear of a violent demise obviously gets some credit for our adaption to exist. In the crawl of time, what made us violent made us human, and now, seems to limit our humanity.

### The Making of an Offender

How do we continually produce people who solve emotional problems with coercion, intimidation and violence? Adapting to harsh environment seems to be at the center of this question. Not only the deprivation that nurtures the aggression in childhood, but the extension of those behaviors into neurology, personality, intimacy, and permissive beliefs. These walking wounded rest their *self-worth* on abusive control over others.

Like many in my field, I sat for thousands of hours with those who have been abusive and listened to the rational distortions that justify violence. Over time, I could not escape the message that offenders, in some unconscious way, *expect* and *need* conflict in their lives. It seemed aggressiveness was their native language; a relevant and trusted currency. And, somehow, trying to sell empathy brought confusion and disgust to their face more often than softening their style of communicating. To reach beyond shame and into their accountability required a brief exploration of their emotional make-up. If at first I was looking for their remorse, it was mostly for the court, for their families and even for me to feel better. But, I found that as long as they remained loyal to their *own* aggression, change was superficial and relational safety was a temporary condition.

One recurring issue for men is that they don’t recall early memories easily. For these men, being a kid wasn’t the same as being innocent, cared for... or even safe.

*Being a kid wasn’t allowed in our house. I don’t have a lot of memory before age ten but I know my dad left when I was 8. I don’t blame him, my mom was crazy and that house was.. haunted. I mean, we had ghosts in that place.*

He described screaming at night; the smoldering conflict in the day. This trauma laid a foundation shaped by emotional blackmail, physical outbursts and severe threats of violence. His mom was schizophrenic by diagnosis while dad drank and philandered his way through narcissistic episodes and manic depression. He said there were good moments; cease-fires and strange romanticisms between his parents. But, none that lived on as lucid stable memories.

*There were cops and childcare workers who came and went, but we always fooled them. We all hated the System. It was the only thing we agreed about.*

In my group, he always came early and sat in the corner of the room. I asked him why and he said he liked to be able to see the door and watch the clock. I laughed; he didn't see the humor. One session, when pressed by an older member of the group, he confessed that he 'knew' what he did was 'wrong', but he didn't see how it was 'anybody's business'. Then he said something very poignant. 'I don't care if the court or any of you thinks what I did was wrong...All I care about is whether she takes me back.' Most men in the room physically nodded at this. In a vulnerable moment, they all identified with an emotional truth. For many, the legal consequences, though annoying and expensive, weren't as scary as the loss of the relationship. They were superficially there to stay out of jail, but literally there for another chance with their families.

In those days, we would have dismissed this reason as denial of the problem or, just another part of the cycle of violence. We *the system*, wanted them to change for our reasons. Namely because:

- Violence is wrong.
- Everyone deserves to be safe.
- Aggression is not the answer.

And change was not something we did for others, but for ourselves. After all, we couldn't hang our therapeutic hat on change for another's sake. Especially, when that meant being on good behavior just to 'win back the girl'.

In *their* truth however, we were missing an opportunity. Most of these men weren't moral buffoons. Nor were they sociopaths (as much as the research and treatment models insisted was the case at the time). Their issues were primarily 'poor attachment'. We labeled them with lack of empathy. In truth, they couldn't manage deep feelings. So, they used hyper-masculine defenses and misogynistic beliefs to avoid close attachments. Playing it safe, if and when they lost the relationship, they wouldn't have to suffer. These men were physically tough but *emotional wimps*. So when feelings were threatened, they leaned toward their strength, physicality. This was damaging to those they cared about and they knew it. Yet, they couldn't commit to feeling it. That was our job, and sadly, most of us failed to reach them at a level of reliable behavior change.

### Childhood: A Harsh Evolution

For most victims of chronic child abuse, love is unsustainable, untrustworthy and often pure fiction. Yet, they still hope for it like any other human being. Except, rather than believing love is possible, someone needs to prove it to them beyond the shadow of doubt. That can put some pressure on a significant other. The offender's cynicism is mostly a disguise in later life to conceal their harsh past from others.

Throughout life, sex, drugs and high velocity risks may become reliable medicine. These powerful 'punches' to the pleasure center are a surrogate for sustainable or reliable love. Many victims of childhood violence are caught (co-dependent) in the push-pull of attraction and attachment. Significant others of aggressive partners describe it as deep intimacy in one moment and a million miles away in the next. But for some, attachment is a dangerous leap. Relationships are intense. That's why certain feelings become flash points of anger. We think of DV offenders as being monsters in disguise. Quite the contrary, they are mostly normal people disguising family secrets and childhood wounds. Their problem is, they have not yet been able to overcome their own maladaptive strategies programmed during childhood.

### Physical and Emotional Pain

When working with offenders one of the most conspicuous traits is tolerance for physical pain and intolerance for emotional pain. As a rule, they react most strongly to perceived disrespect. This feels duplicitous for most who counsel with them. They want something from others they are completely unwilling to give. They tend to stick their nose in a fight and flinch at deeper feelings like trust and love. Often, the level of physical violence these men exerted on others reflected their described level of emotional pain at the time of their incident. We used to call it impulse and ego, but it is more clearly defined as an 'attachment disorder'. When I would work with men around their escalation patterns, one thing shocked me. They would report being at their edge of tolerance for long periods of time before reacting with physical aggression. In their mind, they had been composing themselves for hours and sometimes days. Yet, their explosion seemed sudden and without warning to their significant other. Thresholds for emotional pain seemed long but shallow (just below the surface). A child with rough emotional history floods to rage easily and the practice of this throughout life makes their adult violence seem intractable.

*He would find himself attaching fiercely to others opinions, becoming helpless to his father's moods and his mother's emotional betrayal. He would choose his mother early in life, because she could be tender during her euphoric moments. However, dad's hyper-masculine style and shaped his early rites of passage. Pleasing his father would be the landscape of adolescence. In particular, his father's pride took up the space of love and respect. His calloused palms bleeding from yard work, mistrust of his mother's moods, and standing up for himself meant fighting anyone who disagreed with him. Finally, his father left. Losing his chance to earn his father's respect, he blamed himself.*

If I was going to help him or any other men who had built regret into attachment, the cause of intolerable feelings had to be identified. And before he could completely own his offensive behaviors, he needed to understand his own perceived victimization.

### The Grail of Accountability

Accountability for the suffering one has caused awakens the larger question of one's sense of justice in life. And, simply asking one to rehearse a statement of accountability has little or no effect other than to say the client knew they acted with violence and have discovered that being caught is bad for them. But, they've known that since they got caught stealing or lying and were punished for impulsivity throughout their lives. The offender knows right and wrong. He may even know that two wrongs don't make it right. But, above all, he knows that being the offender is better than being the victim. This is especially true with female offenders. They often adopt the masculine forms of violence, committing themselves to becoming offenders due to childhood fears of being a victim. This makes accountability conversations feel like busting through a wall of denial. The issue for most offenders is they will deny (or minimize) 'what' they did and confess 'why' they did it. If you want accountability, 'why' is not just a story, it's their inner victim trying to understand their outer offender.

### The Three Horsemen: Rage, Shame and Denial

If we want to understand the abusive mind, we have to address their internal landscape. Rage is a quick effective solution to conflict or emotional pain. Shame is a response to the impacts of rage on those we care about. Denial is one of many defenses or 'distortions' that keep the offender from self-destructive emotions. Here's the kicker, rage is the quickest way out of feeling shame. Understanding the internal apocalypse of violence in the mind can help us intervene on the neurological short-cuts wired in by primal threats.

Denial is a difficult in a therapeutic sense. Psychologically, denial is labeled the 'worst' of all cognitive distortions (minimizing, catastrophizing, personalizing, etc). We have put it at the top of the most wanted list because it shows the least accountability. However, this is a concept we need to rethink.

In relationship violence, we use denial as an indicator of many things: Character, remorse, lethality, progress, etc. Consider something: The client is always lying. We know this because they are human beings. Deception is part of our brain's design. The extent to which someone lies has more to do with early environment than current situation. But when we catch someone lying, we 'pathologize' it as therapists. Why? Would we prefer that the client didn't know the difference between right and wrong? Legal/not legal? Or, that they were extremely forthcoming with their false righteousness?

What most learned as kids is: If you know you are going to get caught, and you know you are going to get punished, denial is your best friend. We all know this. We've all

stood with our hand in the cookie jar and denied the existence of cookies, the jar, even our hand. So 'rock and hard place' of our accountability is finding which of these things the offender does not deny. A continuum of denial is working in all of us.

### Motivating the Interviewee

#### ***Detect remorse***

*DVT: Do you feel now that hitting her was wrong?*

DVO: I think she knows my buttons..and she pushed them all.

*DVT: Did you regret doing it afterward?*

DVO: What would you do if your wife fucked another guy?

#### ***Respond with respect***

*DVT: I don't know.. Ask her why, maybe?*

DVO: An' if she told you to go fuck yourself?

*DVT: I'd feel betrayed, for one. Really angry...Probably want to leave the relationship.*

DVO: Exactly! So that's what I did.

#### ***Separate Emotional Pain and Abuse***

DVT: You aren't here because you were betrayed, you are here because you attacked her.  
(This is an educational response in motivational interviews)

#### ***Establish recidivism***

*DVT: Do you think you would ever hurt her again?*

DVO: I think am going to stay away from the bitch. She's alot of fuckin' trouble.

*DVT: Do you think you will ever go back to her?*

DVO: Do I look stupid?

*DVT: Have you ever left, and gone back before?*

DVO: Yeah, couple a times, that was different.

#### ***Signs of Empathy***

*Q: Do you feel what you did was wrong?*

A: Yeah. I shouldn't hurt someone just because I am right.

*Q: Did it feel wrong while you were doing it?*

A: Yes, but I didn't think I had a choice. I was in a rage, almost blacked out.

*Q: Are you going to do it again?*

A: I don't know, I hope not, but I guess it depends.

*Q: On what?*

A: If I ever feel that way again.

#### ***Insight to Childhood***

*Q: Do you feel what you did was wrong?*

A: Of course, It's wrong to hurt someone you're supposed to love.

*Q: Did it seem wrong while you were doing it?*

A: No, but that's because I felt like the victim in all of it.

*Q: Are you going to do it again?*

A: I can say never...but I am not totally sure.

*Q: What do you mean*

A: I don't know, just seems the little kid in me doesn't forgive so easy.

The first scenario is a common denial. If this scenario were 'cookies stolen from a jar', this is the kid who says the jar made him do it and cookies push his buttons. The second is more contemplative. A stage of accountability that is sad for being caught. However, we are somehow more comforted by the first. But, don't be fooled, his anger isn't a reliable boundary. The offender's physiology is steeped in self-deception, yet we find comfort in the lie that he intends to stay away from her.

The second interaction feels aloof and coldly resolved, yet is the brutal honesty of a small internal shift in thinking. The client has approached a limit in him self rather than the limit of an external rule or law. In many cases, a progress note from a counselor to the court would look more favorable in the first scenario than in the second. This is a minor issue in the larger problem of treatment. Yet, it illustrates our biases in favoring certain kinds of offenders based in our need to see remorse.

The third scenario, though most accurate feels unwieldy in the eyes of the court. Probation officers used to wince at this type of report. It was not the black and white response they were looking for. To them, it reeked of uncertainty and gray areas. Though it is in fact exactly what we must know to effectively address violence in the offender. The process of relational safety is only now underway. By seeing his injured kid as the culprit, his better adult can take charge of the violence.

Some argue there is no better adult. But that is not true unless we are dealing with a sociopath. Someone who finds pleasure deception, unconditional violence and the victimization of others. Quite truthfully, we are often dealing with the cathartic response of an adaptive adult. This is a psychotic rage that emerges during feelings of helplessness. It is the autopilot of the abuser.

We all have trap doors by which we escape difficult emotions. It is simply that these emotions surfaced under conditions that weren't as harsh as the violence would suggest. He lid popped off because he thought she might have been having an affair. So he hit her as if he had walked in the door, seen her in the arms of another man, laughed at him and kicked him in the balls while telling him he was a fool and has been fucking other men under his nose since the day they first met. You see, we all have the potential to regress to a violent response in a helpless betrayed feeling. But for the wounded kid with easy access to regressed emotional flooding, there are many trap doors on a hair trigger.

An alternate question more tailored to accountability through understanding offender origins is as follows:

*At what point in the conflict did you feeling like a victim?*

*At what point did you notice you were the aggressive one?*



Offenders cannot answer this without some helpful confusion or dissonance. It begins to work on the duality of their mind; the differences between logical and emotional intelligence. It makes some assumptions based in a shared reality. 1) They are not always aggressive, and almost never plan to be. 2) They have kept their cool many times in conflict, but not this most recent time. 3) They, like everyone, can feel vulnerability if only for an instant, before defensiveness and anger. 4) They sense the victim in themselves as a precursor to their aggression. 5) They come to see their rage as the mistake in their relationship.

### Summary

Because we, and consequently they, lack insight to their emotional origins, anger management programs have failed the domestic offender as have psycho-educational programs assigned by the court. Unless better questions about trauma bonds are confronted, instability remains and change is bleak. *Aggression then roots as an adaptive solution for untenable emotions.*

Some of the answers to the why question have been labored upon in books like this one before. Much of therapeutic process is designed to unfold ‘why’ we do negative things consciously. Addiction, for example, has its origins in anticipating pain. Those who suffer a wide range of addictions are avoiding a higher level of suffering. In a cursory way, some men inflict suffering medicate the pain of old wounds. The offender inflicts pain to deal with his own affliction. This pattern is relatively accurate to the majority of offenders plagued by impulse control. The premeditating offender, on the other hand, one who requires the terror of innocents for their own peace of mind, is almost entirely ‘other’ by design. A range of typologies will be addressed in these chapters, but we shall limit the discussion of sociopaths and unconscionable offenders. Not because this is unimportant to the study of violence, but primarily to demarcate the adaptive origins of aggression as opposed to the maladaptive heredities that create a monstrous lack of empathy and social conscience.

The first section of the book looks at the design of aggression from its broad nature to the intimate bonds of conflict and aggression. The second act deals in types of offenders and the environments in which they flourish. Finally, the third section calls for informed conscience in the treatment of violent offenders beginning with individual resilience and concluding with larger forms of cultural resistance. In this way, the reader might get a more complete ecology for change. Prevention curriculums and outcomes are discussed in terms of their intent, content and relative virtue.

### **Adaptive Curriculum for Our Abusive Minds**

#### **Humanistic – Individual - Mechanisms - HIM**

***Humanistic –Origins of Violence in our culture and our minds***

Session 1- The Purpose of Violence – Predators, Territory, In/Out Group Threats

Session 2 – Ancestry and Brain Chemistry- Strategies of Violence

Session 3- Violence and the Family

***Individual – Personal Child development, Family Systems and Brain Impacts***

Session 4- Early Childhood and Violent Flash-Floods

Session 5- Personal Family – Systems Teaching and Condoning Abuse and Neglect

Session 6-Brain Landscapes – Rivers of Impulsivity

***Mechanistic***

Session 7 – Instrumental Violence: Crude Tools for Complex Problems.

Session 8- The Brain Body Experience of Aggression

Session 9 – Primal Awareness that Evolves into Better Solutions

**Humanistic, Ecological, Resilience- HER**

***Humanistic-origins of Violence Against Women and Children***

Session 1- A History of Violence – Predators, Territory, Family

Session 2 – Ancestry and Brain Chemistry- Strategies of Violence

Session 3 – Evolutionary Violence Against Women and Children

***Ecological***

Session 4- Early Violence, Negative Sexuality, and Poverty of Trust

Session 5- Personal Family – Concentric Patriarchy: Abuse and Retaliation

Session 6-Brain Development – Powerlessness and Impulsivity Scars

**Resilience**

Session 7 – The Cost of Being Powerless, First Strike Survival

Session 8 - Exposing the Good Masculine in Every Woman

Session 9 - How PTSD Points the Compass to Recovery