Experts Weigh In: Can Domestic Abusers Really Change Their Ways?

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The now infamous viral video of NFL running back Ray Rice assaulting his soon-to-be wife, Janay, raised a huge question in the national consciousness about men who physically abuse their intimate partners. Can an abuser really reform and go on to have healthy love relationships? An article in The Wall Street Journal suggests that reform is possible, but only for those willing to work.

Abuse experts say treating a perpetrator of domestic assault can be just as difficult as treating someone who abuses alcohol or drugs. Although both men and women commit acts of violence against their intimate partners, it is a male-dominated problem, as almost 85 percent of domestic abuse victims are female.

But there is hope. Decades of studies show that 60 to 70 percent of males convicted of domestic assault who complete a comprehensive treatment program can reform. These programs pair education with psychotherapy in a small group setting, where men meet at least once each week to develop communication skills, change sexist ideas and learn how to tolerate conflict in a relationship without resorting to violence.

“What I and other people look for in that first moment is the degree of real remorse and how much he takes responsibility for 100 percent of what he did,” Barbara Gilin, PhD, a licensed clinical social worker who has worked with domestic violence victims and their abusers for 35 years, told The Wall Street Journal. “And the main factor that determines whether a man is going to change is whether he sticks to the program.”

But the men who actually complete such programs comprise a vast minority of those who enroll. In addition, many men start anti-abuse therapy only because the treatment is court-ordered. Still, doctors say tens of thousands of men arrested for domestic abuse have learned to become nonviolent after they’ve completed these types of interventions.

For more information about domestic abuse in intimate relationships, click here.

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