

by Joan Bridge
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The letter to Ann Landers read: "I was seeing a 48-year-old man on a steady basis. Last December a 17-year-old girl moved into Rodney's apartment. I thought nothing of it when she said she was a friend of his 20-year-old niece.

"A friend tipped me off that the 17-year-old was no friend of anybody's and that she and Rodney were shacked up. When I confronted him, he slapped me around, loosened three side teeth and gave me a shiner. The following day I laid an assault charge on him. The charge got an unusual amount of publicity and Rodney is now in danger of losing his job. Also, his ex-wife has threatened to take away his visiting privileges (they have three children).

"The question: should I drop the charges or not, Ann? I can't handle this kind of guilt and I am very mixed up."

To which Ann Landers gives the advice: "Drop the charges and Rodney."

The street where I live is a respectable street where middle class suburbanites bring up their two-parent families and grow respectfully middle-aged. One Saturday lunchtime I was startled to hear the roar of the engine of a powerful car outside, followed by a screech of brakes. The noise came again — and again. Looking out of the window I could see someone lying across

the hood of the car and blamed foolish teenagers. Then I saw my husband run across the road with a metal garbage can in his hands. He was brandishing it like a weapon.

This was no teenage prank. This was a man and wife quarrelling. She would not let him drive away without first talking to her and in order to prevent being run over she had had to jump onto the hood. He was trying to throw her off the car by accelerating and braking. She was clinging to the windshield wipers.

As the men on the street came running down their driveways the driver got out of the car, lifted the woman off the hood and threw her onto the road. She picked herself up, placed herself squarely in front of the car again and said "I won't move until you have talked to me". The man reversed at top speed, oblivious to an oncoming car which had to dip into a driveway to avoid him, and roared off up the road.

A woman came out of a nearby house and led the wife away. Another wife peeped timidly around her driveway and disappeared back into her house. A man came down the street to tell us that he thought the driver was the owner of a business "and you know what is happening to businesses these days". I said, "I hate men, I really do", knowing that I didn't really hate them, I only hated what they did to women. None of us had anything useful

to contribute. All of us felt disturbed.

I felt hostility choking me until, later, my husband and I began to talk. He said he had wanted to hit the car with the garbage can, but had realized that his own anger was almost uncontrollable — and he also feared reprisals from the law and the younger, muscular driver. We talked about aggression: man against man; man against woman.

I realized for the first time that this was a problem for men to solve with men. Women could help by acting honestly and assertively but coping with men's anger was something men must do with men. I wondered how many men saw they had a problem, how many were willing to talk to each other about it, who had any answers?

After a series of phone calls to various social agencies I discovered that Deryl Goldenberg, working through the Family Services Association in Vancouver, conducts a group counselling service for men called a Directing Anger Group. It is for men who realize that their anger gets out of control too often, who voluntarily want to change and who will honestly share situations and events with other members of the group when they feel dissatisfied with how they have handled themselves.

Goldenberg says that the first problem he encounters is that of denial. Males usually learn early in life that anger is O.K., that expressing it is O.K. and that even snap outbursts of violent behavior

Women in the hood Coping

are not that bad. It is "masculine", it is often expected and it is never seriously threatened by females.

With this background of social and family acceptance it is often hard for a man to accept that he has the power to control his anger for himself or that his anger does harm to himself as well as to others. He feels he is only responding in a natural and normal way to provocation from others. If a man cannot get over this stage of denial, Goldenberg says, he cannot help him and does not want to work with him.

Before Goldenberg can begin to heal the wounds that their violence and anger have created, the men must see how they create or contribute to the provoking situations for themselves. "By denying their responsibility for what is going on, they paint themselves into an emotional corner where the only way out is violence," he says.

Boys are not taught to be emotionally responsive. That, in our society, is for girls. For a teenage boy to cry publicly would take bravery of heroic proportions and he would risk being tagged a sissy, a queer, a baby. By perpetuating these standards of emotional denial — which go against everything nature ordained as normal and natural — we encourage males to isolate themselves from their feelings. We make them emotional cripples. This reinforces the denial.

Because women are physically weaker, encouraged to be soft, submissive, appealing, placating, they rarely back up threats ("I will leave you, I will get the protection of the police") with consequences. In fact, like the woman who wrote to Ann Landers, they are more likely to feel guilty about being the recipient of brutality. Women also know where the economic power lies. If they lose their man they lose all pretences to middle class comforts, or even borderline economic survival. Anything may seem better than this, physical beatings included.

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