

Domestic Violence Awareness & Prevention

Interview with a Hairstylist Who Has Helped Abused Women

(This transcript has been edited.)

CWNY: Hello everyone. This is Victoria Pilotti from the Center for the Women of New York. I'm here with Susan, a hairstylist who has much experience with domestic violence cases in her shop. Each time that I've spoken with her, I learned something new about how to see the signs and how to help women. So, Susan, can you tell me what it is that gives you the knowledge that a woman needs help, that she is having difficulty in her relationship.

Susan: It is definitely the way they appear at my salon. Some of them are sad. Some of them want a drastic change or some of them have bruises, sometimes they have bruises, like bumps on the scalp. So you ask sometimes "Oh, you hit your head over here, you have a bump here?" They lie, they start lying. Then you start talking about yourself a little bit and, and then they feel more confidence, and some of them start telling you, or some of them just listen, very carefully to what you're saying. And some of them come with the partners. When I asked them, "What would you like to do to your hair?" The partners right away answer that question. Or if I propose like three different styles, they right away turn their head to the husband and the husband says, "Oh, I think it's short or long or whatever. They control that part very much. Some of them say, "Oh no, no, no. I cannot do that color because my husband is not going to like it. So those are the types of control when they need the approval from the partner. It is very different from when they say, "Oh, my mother says that looks. Your husband or boyfriend tells you what they want for you. That's how I, more or less can see if they are being abused.

CWNY: Let's talk about the physical signs, something you pointed out to me that I didn't even realize was a way to physically harm a partner. You would see bald spots on the scalp. So can you talk about that and other physical signs?

Susan: Yes. That's a very different type of bald spots—ones that you can tell that the hair was ripped and some look like alopecia which is completely different—it looks like the skin on the palm of your hand. You can see it is soft, but when it is ripped, some parts are long, some parts are short and some parts you see signs of blood like when you rip the hair, you can tell. Sometimes I point it out like, "Oh my gosh, over here, it looks like your hair was stuck in something that pulled it out. It looks really bad." Some of the persons start crying and start telling you what's going on. Or some of them just ignore it or invent any stupid excuse like, "Oh no, my hair got stuck in my car. And then when I pulled it up or pores, or, or my brush got stuck in there and I pulled it out very hard." You know you can't harm yourself that way. You know you can patiently or with a scissor, you can cut your hair but not rip it that way. When somebody pulls your hair, you can tell.

CWNY: You also see other types of physical abuse. What else have you seen in the years? Oh, and by the way, tell our listeners, how long have you been in this profession?

Susan: I am in this profession 20 years.

CWNY: In the 20 years, tell us some of the other physical signs. And then the next question will be about the behaviors. But the physical signs that you've seen besides the ripped hair from the scalp, the bald spots.

Susan: When I see somebody that comes to my chair and has difficulty sitting and they need to hold on with their hands. They say, "I did so much exercise and I did something to my back" but then you see them like really sad, and then don't talk that much or they don't want to answer the phone. So something's going on there. Then you try to get some information just to help. I try to talk to them, try to give some examples of someone else. Then they start talking, but to see bruises on the face or on the arms is very difficult because abusers know where to hit, in the stomach so you won't see anything, that's what they do.

CWNY: It reminds me of one of the signs of child abuse as well. When the child has difficulty sitting, they've been hit there, or some of them have been sexually abused. Some of these women are also sexually abused by their partners. They have violent sex with them. Would you guess that?

Susan: Yes, definitely. I mean, you can tell, the person looks so sad and they want a drastic change, and then you've noticed they have been crying for a while. Something is going on. Before you do something drastic, you always ask questions or suggest "Let's start with color in case they want to cut the hair really short or given some ideas to avoid a drastic change because after all the problems have passed and you regret your hair color or you can get in trouble if you do something drastic and your partner doesn't like it and they can hit you, so I try to prevent those things.

CWNY: I remember your telling me that in particular, with one woman, you had to intervene in the phone call she was having with her abusive partner because your appointment was running a little late. That was a big issue with him. I remember your getting involved by saying very loudly, "I'm about to blow dry your hair." Can you be more specific on how you helped her get over that control conversation with her spouse?

Susan: She started first by asking, "How long is it going to take, because I need to do so many things at home." I said, "It is going to take an hour and a half, maybe two hours." When the hour and a half passed, she said "I need to call my house," because she was very nervous. So she called her husband saying, "Hi, honey, how are you?" I said, "I'm about to blow dry your hair," and I turned on my blow dryer so he could hear that she was at the hair salon. Then I said, "I'm going to take another 30 minutes." Okay, honey, I'm going to be late 30 minutes". She prepared me first "Please talk like you're talking to me and then I'm going to talk to him because I want him to hear that I'm here and not at another place." I thought, seriously, do you have to do that? That's another form of abuse and control, because if you're going to pamper yourself at the salon, you can take the time if you want and you prepare your house before you go and your partner has to understand, but no, she was very nervous all the time. He'd pick her up and was constantly calling or texting. She would say "He's jealous", or she would try to make excuses for him.

CWNY: You had to prove that she was actually in a salon to him. He did not believe her that your appointment was running late.

Susan: Yes. I have another client. The husband actually called me on my cell phone saying "I need to speak with this person. I'm her husband. I know she's there." I said, "Okay, give me one second." I

thought, "What's going on here? She has a cell phone, or maybe no signal or maybe the phone battery went?" I see her texting and think "I know you have your cell phone available." I start talking and giving examples of other persons and some of them, they listen to you. They pay attention. They ask you where they can go for help, but some are not going to say anything, but at least you talk to them. As soon as they get strong, they can make a decision to talk or look for help.

CWNY: In the 20 years in this profession, can you estimate how many women have had these signs, these behaviors in your chair?

Susan: What I remember, I knew something was happening and they opened to me and talked, at least 10, but there were more than 10, definitely more than 10 women being abused.

CWNY: More or less, how many women act differently than the average client? How many women have you seen behave that way?

Susan: Maybe 10% of my clientele, which is very sad.

CWNY: It is very sad. And what's even more sad, I asked you if any of them are calling you now--post COVID post, post isolation, post social distancing, now that the beauty salons have reopened you sadly said,

Susan: No, they are not calling me. They are not sending me a message. I know they need their hair (styled or colored). I know they need something, but they are not calling me. The people that I think they have been abused. They are not calling me right now to come to the house. (Post-COVID Susan is going to client homes.)

CWNY: Here's my theory on that. There's been a lot written about the abuser in the COVID isolation setting worldwide uses the excuse of the virus and contracting it by keeping the survivor indoors, even when they are allowed by regulations, by science, by data to leave the home. It's just another way to control. Yes, they are so used to having the, the public excuse of not leaving the home, that the abusers don't let them leave the home. I think survivors are staying home because they are not allowed to get their hair done anymore. My other theory is that the physical signs of abuse are much more prevalent because of all the time the abuser has spent with the survivor and the abuser is also in a state of their own depression and mental anxiety from losing work, losing pay, losing income, I think physical abuse escalated more than prior to isolation in the pandemic. It's really sad because I was hoping they would be calling and they would be getting some help, but we need to speak about how to help these women. We can't ever say, why don't you leave the person? They can't leave. They, they have so many reasons not to leave and they are surviving and they are making due, and they are finding ways to live with the abuser, but we can suggest what you've done. You've given them the 800 number to the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Don't you think that our listeners should always have that number available?

Susan: Definitely. Putting the number on your website or put it on your personal business cards, not say abuse, but you can point it out, over here is help, or you can go to my website and you can find a lot of other research about domestic violence. If you have a friend, here's a number, talk about this to everybody because everybody knows someone who has been abused. Even tell clients who have no problems, they always know somebody. So they'll give you the information to all your clients. I think we can help a lot of women.

CWNY: We have a lot of good men and they can see the signs, too, in their sisters' relationships, in their daughters' relationships. They have women who they care about. We need to educate men and women, but we need to be careful how we do it, because if we hand them the hotline in a way that the abuser can find it or if the abuser is in the shop with you, too, we have to be so careful how we give them this information. One thing our listeners need to know is that your situation is also ideal for helping these survivors in your shop. You are very strict about your appointments. So there's very little overlap with other clients waiting for their appointments. Women, especially women, we do have males who are survivors as well, but in your shop, you have seen only women who have been abused. The women sitting in your salon chair, they have that privacy, they have that security that no one else is listening.

Susan: Yes. They have the opportunity to talk and be safe.

CWNY: There's no stranger, no other client listening, no other hairstylists listening, no cosmetician. It's unique to you. It is more difficult in a more-than-one-person salon to do what you do, but there are ways because so many of our beauty enhancement professionals have such a relationship with their clients that they do text each other, they do call each other. Perhaps they could find some of these code words that they can develop together in that quiet moment when no one else is listening and can be that support. It would be best if unlike Susan here who has an instinct for keeping these women safe, if the listeners out there, you do educate yourself. We, at the Center for the Women of New York, are certified trainers on domestic violence awareness through the Professional Beauty Association. I invite you to visit the Professional Beauty Association's website. Their CutItOut program has resources for hairstylists and other beauty enhancement professionals and also do visit your state websites as well. They have resources on domestic violence, your local nonprofit organizations. In particular to New York, New York State has implemented a program for beauty enhancement professionals. New York City has a domestic violence support system as well. So government websites are also helpful in educating yourself. Of course, the National Domestic Violence hotline is a great resource for everyone throughout our country to educate yourselves, to learn how to help victims of domestic violence and to learn if you yourself are a survivor that you're not alone. Thank you, Susan, for this time, keep up the good work to help survivors.

For more information and for domestic violence assistance, which by the way, may also be referred to as intimate partner violence, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at thehotline.org, or 1- 800-799-7233, or chat at the website. When opening thehotline.org website, there will be a safety alert "Computer use can be monitored and is impossible to completely clear. If you are afraid your internet usage might be monitored, call the national domestic violence hotline. For more information on domestic violence, please visit our website, cwny.org/past-events and download our PowerPoint. And again, contact your local and state domestic violence hotlines and nonprofit organizations. It is important that survivors contact professionals at the hotline numbers, whether that's the national hotline or local hotline numbers, because the advocates and counselors will guide the survivors to create a personal plan of action. It is not easy to escape from an abuser. It is not easy to communicate because an abuser generally monitors the survivor's technology. The advocates and counselors will guide the survivor to create a plan, to create code words to use in their various communications and will start where the survivor is at and will not automatically suggest that they escape at that moment. Of course, if they are in danger for their lives at that moment, they will suggest calling the local police. So please recommend that survivors contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline or local domestic violence hotlines.