

STOP  
HURTING  
*the* WOMAN  
YOU LOVE



Breaking the Cycle  
of Abusive Behavior

Charlie Donaldson, M.A.  
Randy Flood, M.A.  
*with* Elaine Eldridge, Ph.D.

*“It takes real courage for a man to admit to himself that his life is not working out as he had planned, especially if he has to face the fact that he has hurt the women and children he loves.*

*Fortunately, when a man decides he is ready to make positive changes, he can draw on the wisdom of people like Charlie Donaldson, Randy Flood, and Elaine Eldridge, and learn from the numerous men whose stories they recount and discuss with great insight and compassion in these pages.”*

—JACKSON KATZ, creator of the award-winning educational video  
*Tough Guise* and author of *Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt  
Women and How All Men Can Help*

*“There are tools on nearly every page of this important, practical, down-to-earth book. I highly recommend it to any men who want to stop hurting the women they love and themselves. I also encourage therapists to draw on the authors’ insights and exercises.”*

—JOHN LEE, author of *The Flying Boy* and *Facing the Fire*

# **Stop Hurting the Woman You Love** **Breaking the Cycle of Abusive Behavior**

[menscenter.org](http://menscenter.org)

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Charlie Donaldson, M.A., and Randy Flood, M.A.,  
with Elaine Eldridge, Ph.D.

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## Preface

**W**e have over twenty-five years' combined experience working with men who abuse women. Often, our memories of the individuals—their personalities and offenses—fade with time, but the knowledge of the harm they've done stays with us.

Some of the men in our groups are angry, aggressive, and antisocial. They use women carelessly and callously, and they have little interest in establishing real relationships. Other men want their partners to be happy; they dream of creating stable and loving homes. They truly want to love the women in their lives. Yet they too hurt their partners—emotionally and physically—and in spite of their remorse, many of them are abusive and violent again and again. Our book is for this second group.

When we work with these men, who too often sabotage their relationships, when we prepare workshops on domestic abuse for other therapists, and when we wrote this book, we repeatedly ask ourselves two questions: Why do these men abuse their partners? How can we help them to stop? We hope our answers to these questions will give men the knowledge, inspiration, and drive to stop hurting the women they love.

During the last several years, we've noticed more and

more books for women who've been abused, as well as books for therapists who work with men who abuse. Since there is no book that approaches the men themselves in an inviting but challenging manner, we have written *Stop Hurting the Woman You Love*. While it is aimed at men who abuse, it also includes information helpful to victims and survivors as well as behavioral health professionals and court and law enforcement personnel.

Here are a few other things we want to point out.

The people depicted in the client stories are fictional compilations, and any similarity with real persons is coincidental.

This book deals solely with abusive heterosexual men. We are certainly aware that domestic abuse is a problem among gay and lesbian couples, but we see that as a topic for another book. In the same way, *Stop Hurting the Woman You Love* isn't designed to address men who are victims of domestic abuse. This is an important issue as well, but outside the scope of this particular book.

We are trained in and subscribe to the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program, better known as the Duluth Model, for working with men who abuse women. The fundamental tenet of the Duluth Model is: *Safety for the victim, accountability for the abusive man*. In this book, we have worked to portray the suffering of women and children at the hands of men who abuse, and we've attempted to avoid any statements or implications that would put women at risk. At the same time, we have endeavored to address men with respect, remembering that they are human beings who can change and be accountable for their behavior. They can stop hurting the women they love.

Finally, a remark to women whose partners read this book. We believe that reading *Stop Hurting the Woman You Love* will be helpful to many men. We hope that reading this book will encourage the man in your life to reduce or even

eliminate his abusive behavior. However, it needs to be read in combination with treatment for domestic abuse, support group meetings, and the establishment of strong relationships with accountability partners. Even with these sources of accountability and support, men can relapse into emotional and physical violence. We therefore urge you to be vigilant and to take measures to increase your safety by getting information and support from your local women's shelter.

*Randy Flood*

*Charlie Donaldson*



## introduction

### **Read Me First!**

**Y**ou're stuck in traffic. You try to look around the truck in front of you, but you can't see what's holding things up. You feel the pump of adrenaline as you get more upset—you're going to be late for work. You are already angry and upset over last night's fight with the woman in your life. Traffic has stopped completely, but you can't stop the thoughts racing through your mind. Why do you argue so much? Why do you end up yelling at each other? Why can't you just get along? Your life seems gridlocked.

The truck ahead finally inches forward. You run through the recent history of your relationship: the angry voices, threats, ultimatums, stony silences. Sometimes it seems as if you and your partner have the same argument over and over. You're angry, but most of all you are tired.

You are not always sure what happens. The arguments seem to come out of nowhere. The night before you told your wife you were going to a bar with friends. You weren't planning on being out all night; you just wanted to relax and have a few drinks. She wanted you to stay home and help your ten-year-old son with his homework. You ended up screaming at her, telling her you never get to do anything and that living with her is like a life sentence in hell. You called her a few spiteful names, and she walked out of

the room with tears in her eyes. You don't want to talk to her that way, but the words just spill out. You've grabbed and pushed her before, and you were afraid last night that you might do it again. Or worse.

You're shocked at your own behavior, and you know you have to do something. Much as you hate to admit it, you know you need some help.

If your relationship is rocky because of domestic abuse—and especially if you have been violent with the woman in your life or you worry that you might be—this book is for you. If your partner has left you because of domestic abuse, then this book will help you to avoid the behavior that caused her to leave and will help you in your next relationship. Over the course of the thirteen chapters, we will

- help you to understand why you emotionally or physically hurt your partner
- give you down-to-earth tools to avoid domestic abuse
- assist you in developing a plan to create a more satisfying and healthy relationship

You will find a time-out plan that really works, questions that help you to explore what kind of man you are, and sensible techniques to improve your relationship and make you feel better about yourself and your life.

We have more than twenty-five years' combined experience running groups for men who have abused their partners and have sometimes been violent with them. We've worked with hundreds of men from all walks of life. Many of these men have been ordered by the court to attend our sessions as part of their probation agreement. On their first day in group, they're usually angry that they have to sit in a room with other men once a week for six months to talk

about themselves and their relationships. Many men begin by blaming their partners and minimizing their abuse. But as the weeks pass, they begin to admit that physical abuse—whether a man has threatened his wife, pushed her, or hit her hard enough to break her jaw—is serious business. And many of them eventually understand that they are responsible for the violence in their homes.

The men in our groups also begin to recognize the destructiveness of their verbal and emotional abuse. Even when their behavior doesn't lead to physical injury or divorce, their constant criticism and humiliation deeply injure their partners. Once a man has emotionally or physically abused his partner, the relationship is never the same. Abuse creates a chasm between partners. It erodes trust that may take years to rebuild. In a minute—even a few seconds—everything changes.

You may be thinking, *Okay, but what about her?* In our work with abusive men, we often hear them say, “Well, she hit me first.” We know that not all abuse is perpetrated by men against women. We recognize that wives and girlfriends can hurt men. But our goal is to help you take the first steps toward stopping your abusive behavior and creating a loving and healthy relationship. This book is designed especially to help men like you avoid abusing their intimate partners. You are not alone.

Three requests.

First, throughout this book you will find exercises and questions to help you examine your behavior. Invest in yourself: take the time to respond carefully. You will learn important things about yourself.

Second, this book is not intended to stand alone. We encourage you to participate in group or individual counseling with a therapist who has specialized training and experience in working with men who have abused their partners. If you

are fearful that you may injure your partner, we urge you to get professional help immediately. You can also log on to our Web site, [www.menscenter.org](http://www.menscenter.org), for further information. The “Resources” section at the end of the book lists reading materials and additional Web sites.

Third, we ask that you read this book with courage and determination. If you are like many men, you are probably angry with your partner and blame her for provoking you to abuse. Throughout this book we will continually ask you to do something that is difficult and sometimes painful: to change your focus and take a look at yourself and your behavior. We know from our experience working with men like you that you are up to the task.

Although men who attend our treatment groups initially resist exploring their attitudes and behavior, many end up finding the process to be worthwhile and make significant changes in their lives. Many report that they are less abusive, argue on fewer occasions, communicate more deeply, and are happier in their relationships. Some make temporary changes and then fall back into abusive behaviors. Others approach their lives with a new sense of accountability and diligence. Most important, many of these men avoid violence.

We know that you may sometimes feel like flushing this book down the toilet. Don't. It will plug up your toilet, and your life and relationships will only get worse.

chapter one

## It Started So Well

Bob, a quiet and soft-spoken man, seems out of place in Charlie's domestic abuse treatment group. While most men blame their partners for having to attend the group, Bob has said little about Daisy's role in landing him in court for domestic assault. But his story is typical in other ways.

"I wanted Daisy the moment I laid eyes on her," Bob remembers. "I don't mean I just wanted to sleep with her, although that's all I thought about for the first couple of weeks. What I mean is that I wanted her to be my wife. I wanted her in my life permanently. I was a happy man the day we married. Everything was fine for three or four years."

Bob is quiet for a moment. He shifts in his chair. The other men in the group wait patiently; most of them know what Bob will say next because they have said it themselves. "I don't know when things started to go wrong," Bob continues quietly. "It was just little things at first. She started getting on my nerves. When we were first married she'd usually go along with what I wanted. We never argued much. But after a while we started to disagree more and more, and I got tired of trying to explain my point of view to her. I mean, how many times can you repeat the same thing?"

Charlie asks Bob to explain one of these repetitive arguments.

“Well, for the first two years we were married we lived in an apartment, and we always spent Thanksgiving with her folks. That was okay with me because my family lives about six hours away. But after we bought our house, she insisted on having her family—all sixteen of them—to our house for Thanksgiving dinner. I didn’t mind having them over, but I explained over and over that I really didn’t want to be Mr. Host. She wanted me to talk to her sisters’ husbands, make sure everyone had something to drink during the game, that sort of thing. I mean, it was a *holiday*—all I wanted to do was eat and watch football like everybody else. We had the same stupid argument for about three years. It always started out as a discussion, but it always ended up in an argument.”

Bob slumps in his chair. “I don’t see why she couldn’t go along with me. It really wasn’t that important.”

“Having her family over was important to Daisy,” Charlie points out. “So what happened last November?”

“There’s not much to tell. We argued again, but it was different this time. She raised her voice, and I started shouting, too. I suddenly found myself holding her by both arms, shaking her. She screamed at me to let her go. I put my hand over her mouth to keep her from yelling, and all of a sudden, I realized what I was doing and let her go. She ran out to the garage, locked herself in the car, and called 911 on her cell phone.”

“So here I am.”

Bob’s story is not unusual. Some of his experiences may be similar to yours. Like him, your relationship with your wife or girlfriend probably began on a positive and happy note. Being with her was easy; she made you feel good about yourself. For a while, life only seemed to get better. You thought about her all day long and couldn’t wait to see her in the evening. Sex was great. Life was good.

## **Something Happened**

But after a while—maybe months, maybe years—something seemed to go wrong. You didn't always want to do the same things or go to the same places, and your disagreements turned into arguments. Your disputes grew louder and more frequent. It seemed as if she deliberately did things to irritate you. She spent hours on the phone talking to friends. She seemed more interested in the kids than in you, and sometimes she didn't pay attention to you at all. She lost interest in sex—in fact, you hardly had any sex life at all.

Your life with her deteriorated to the point that some nights you didn't even want to go home. When you did arrive home, there were explosive arguments. And you found yourself yelling at her, perhaps calling her names and criticizing her. You may have threatened her. And one day, like Bob, you found yourself going over the edge: you grabbed her by the arms, or pushed her hard against the wall, or perhaps you even hit her. Whatever you did, it scared her. She didn't trust you anymore. And you knew you had gone too far.

You were probably shocked by your behavior. Your violence seemed sudden and uncontrollable. You felt guilty and you promised yourself, and her, that you would never behave like that again. And then . . . maybe . . . you did.

You knew you wanted to stop.

## **That Something Is You**

But what happened to the good times? How did a relationship that began with love and mutual commitment disintegrate into arguing, name-calling, pushing, and hitting? Most men have their ups and downs, and coming home after work to a weed-choked lawn, too many bills, a whining toddler, and an indifferent wife might irritate any man. But you

are more than irritated. The problem you are experiencing goes deeper than that. When things don't go the way you think they should, you sometimes find yourself in a sudden rage, and you want to blame her for making you angry.

You may think, "Why should I have to work so hard when she can't even keep the house clean? Why doesn't she understand that Sunday is my only day off and I shouldn't have to waste it at her mother's for dinner? Why does she always criticize my drinking when all I want is a couple of beers to calm myself down?" If she would do what you wanted her to, you may think, the arguments would stop. If she would stop making you so angry, you wouldn't find yourself on the verge of pushing or hitting her.

So you tell her that you want a clean house, that you don't want to go to her mother's, that you have a right to drink a few beers. But she doesn't get the message. When talking doesn't work, you try raising your voice to get her attention and make her agree with you. Maybe you shout and slam your fist on the table. Maybe you storm around the house but refuse to talk. You insult her, criticize her behavior, call her names, and eventually, perhaps, you grab, push, hit, or choke her. Domestic violence is the ultimate way of letting her know that she'd better pay attention to you.

Some men think that unless they have actually hit their partner, they are not guilty of abuse. No one calls 911 when they threaten or insult or yell at their wives or girlfriends. "If the police aren't standing in my living room," a man may think, "how could I be accused of abuse?" But abuse takes many forms. Domestic violence that results in a physical attack on your partner is one obvious form of abuse, but behavior that threatens, intimidates, or constantly demeans your partner is also abusive. In fact, for many women the scars of emotional abuse often last longer than those of physical abuse.



## There Is Hope

You already know that to have a happy and healthy relationship, you will need to avoid emotional abuse and domestic violence. We don't need to tell you that. And you probably suspect that to revive the love and happiness you once felt and to regain your partner's trust and affection you will need to make some major changes in your life.

We want to help you with those changes, not only because you may be able to salvage your present relationship or avoid torpedoing a new one, but because it is the right thing to do. Hurting our partners, physically or emotionally, is never justifiable.

"Changing your behavior" doesn't mean turning yourself into a saint. The changes we're talking about involve taking control of your life so that you can be the man you want to be. It means being the best part of you. It means learning to respect the woman in your life by seeing her as a person like you. You can have a loving, trusting relationship unmarred by physical or emotional abuse.

You may think, "But what about her? Shouldn't she have to change? She could certainly stand some improvement!" It's true that she could probably change; most of us could improve our behavior. *But if you are serious about avoiding domestic violence and saving your relationship, the changes will need to start with you.* And the truth is you can't make her change. You can only change your own behavior. Although domestic abuse damages your partner and your relationship, healing begins when you take responsibility for your behavior and start on the journey of personal change.

If your partner has already left you because of domestic abuse, you are faced with the probability that no amount of change and good behavior on your part will bring her back. A relationship that has suffered serious abuse sometimes

cannot be healed. But you probably don't want to live alone for the rest of your life. Sooner or later another woman will catch your eye, and when she returns your glance, you will want to be ready to begin a relationship without the shadow of domestic abuse. If your partner is still with you and remains committed to working on your relationship, then the success of your commitment depends on your willingness to work on you.

Your act of emotional or physical violence may seem to have come out of nowhere, happening so suddenly that you couldn't control it. But in fact, you can learn to understand and change the attitudes and beliefs that lead to abuse. You can let go of trying to control her and instead control yourself. This is the work that will keep you from hurting your partner again.

But learning how to control yourself takes time. If you are concerned that you may be violent with your partner *now*, the next chapter offers short-term suggestions for avoiding domestic violence.

## chapter two

# The Time-Out

## Avoiding Violence *Now*

If you have been violent in your relationship or if you are concerned you may be violent, you have one goal that ranks above all the rest: to avoid physically hurting your partner. In the long run, you'll probably need to make some changes to avoid emotional abuse—yelling at her or insulting, criticizing, or threatening her. But if violence threatens your relationship *right now*, then avoiding physical abuse is your top priority. It is the most important thing you can do.

The purpose of the time-out is to prevent domestic violence. Some men can remain in the same room with their partners during an argument without becoming abusive. Others have more trouble managing their feelings and behavior, and they need to physically leave to avoid violence and abuse.

If you have been violent with your partner or are concerned that you may be, then both of you will benefit from the time-out technique. The time-out is intended to let you remove yourself from a potentially explosive confrontation before you become violent. It is not designed as a long-term solution. Instead, the time-out is a stopgap measure devised to give you the time you need to control your behavior.

## **Violence: The Last Step in a Process**

Domestic violence doesn't just happen. It is supported by an unseen foundation of boyhood experiences and a man's sense of *entitlement*, his belief that a woman should go along with what he wants. The final steps leading up to violence often involve a series of interactions between the two of you. That process can start when you try to persuade your partner to do something.

Let's say, for example, that you want her to agree that you should get a new truck. She refuses, insisting that you need a new van for the family instead of a pickup. When asking doesn't get what you want, you start to insist, perhaps loudly or with threats, that she agree. But she *still* won't go along with you. Her refusal can stir up old feelings of hurt and rejection. "Why don't I ever get what I want around here? Why is it always the family first, regardless of what I need?" you may think to yourself. "Why doesn't she ever understand that I need things, too?" At this point, the steps in the domestic violence process zip by with dizzying speed.

Your hurt feelings are so uncomfortable that they barely register before you convert them to anger. Anger is an easier emotion to handle because it doesn't make you feel bad, at least not at first. Anger lets you feel more in control. Anger gives you power; it lets you feel justified. So when you angrily tell her, for the last time, that you're going to get a truck no matter what she says, you reinforce your message with physical violence.

How can you stop yourself from getting caught in this tornado? What can you do to save your relationship rather than destroy it with violence? You can learn that you are not entitled to always get your way. You can become less demanding and controlling. You can learn to negotiate. And you can learn to be less angry.

But all those changes take time . . . months, and probably years. And you don't have that much time. In the middle

of an escalating confrontation, you have only a few precious minutes in which to alter the final stages in the domestic violence process. If you've been working on getting along better with your partner, the gains you have made in improving your relationship will be lost if you hit or choke or punch or kick or push her even once more. To avoid more physical abuse, you need something that you can do *now*—a self-stopping technique that will allow you to control yourself and keep you from committing a violent act. The best thing you can do is to *get the hell out of there* when you think you might become violent. It's like hitting the eject button before your plane crashes. If your plane is losing altitude, you need to get out before you hit the ground. The two of you will probably parachute to different places, but at least you won't crash with the airplane.

### **Your Best Defense**

Taking a time-out is like hitting that eject button. It is your best defense against yourself—the hurt, angry, violent you. Used properly, the time-out can prevent you from committing an act of domestic violence and can contribute to a healthy relationship. It is a way of honoring yourself and maintaining the safety of your partner.

The time-out is not a new idea. You may even have tried it before. But you may not have used it effectively, and your partner may not have liked you walking out on her. In the middle of a hot argument, you may have shouted, “This is ridiculous—I'm out of here!” and slammed out of the house. But whatever you were talking about wasn't resolved. Your partner felt cut off and discounted, and you probably came back pretending that nothing had happened, making things even worse.

You may say, “Well, what if she hits me first? She needs to take the time-out!” We know that some women can be

aggressive and violent, but you are probably much stronger than your partner is, and therefore more capable of injuring her. Even if both of you are physically aggressive, you're the one who is more likely to cause significant injury. So the time-out becomes your responsibility.

### **Finding Your Exit Point**

To use the time-out properly, some preparation is needed. First, you need to identify your exit point. Second, you need to request your partner's cooperation.

The exit point is the moment at which you can still get yourself to leave to avoid hurting the woman you love. Once your anger has boiled beyond your control, it will be much harder to stop yourself from completing the steps in the domestic violence process. Anger doesn't *cause* violence, but it can exaggerate your feelings of hurt or entitlement when your partner doesn't behave the way you want her to.

To identify your personal exit point, you need an internal anger thermometer.

The scale on the thermometer below goes from 0 (freezing) to 100 (boiling). Most men call the range from *20 to 40 degrees* irritation: your brother-in-law who knows everything won't stop talking; you need four-by-fours cut at the lumberyard and no one seems to be working there.

At *60 degrees* you are probably angry: you feel justified in telling off a co-worker who has taken credit for your work, even though you know it will cause trouble at your job; you bark at your wife when she tells you that you need to take care of the kids when you'd planned to play golf.

By the time your thermometer hits *80 degrees*, your rage is hot enough for you to break things and hurt people: you have upended the kitchen table and are ready to punch your wife if she crosses you.

At *100 degrees* an angry, violent man can kill someone.

You can begin to understand your pattern of anger by using the thermometer to help you identify which situations merely annoy you, which ones make you angry, and which ones make you want to hit someone. Understanding how and when you get angry is important because anger increases the likelihood of violence. If you don't know which situations set you off, you won't be able to control your responses to them.

Consider your level of irritation, anger, or rage in the following situations and pick a number between 0 and 100 for each.

- The car in front of you on the freeway is driving 20 miles per hour **under** the speed limit.
- Your boss **criticizes** you unfairly.
- You come home after taking your girlfriend out for a romantic dinner and she **refuses** to make love.
- Your son calls you a **prick**.
- The house is a **mess** when you get home from work.
- You think your partner has **cheated** on you.
- A careless driver bumps into your car and **dents** your trunk.

These are only a few examples. You can modify and add to them until you have a list of incidents that accurately represents what angers you. Write the most irritating of these situations beside the thermometer.



100 \_\_\_\_\_  
80 \_\_\_\_\_  
60 \_\_\_\_\_  
40 \_\_\_\_\_  
20 \_\_\_\_\_

## Five Lies That Ruin Lives

The bottom line is this: your life hasn't been going well because your relationship with your wife or girlfriend is rocky. Perhaps you're not in a relationship at all because you've been abusive in the past. Even the successes in your life seem threatened by your relationship problems. Your co-workers like you and your boss praises your job performance, but sometimes you feel that life at work will spin out of control if you have one more argument at home. You and your wife or girlfriend disagree about almost anything. You're often angry and frustrated. She talks about breaking up; you've threatened her and maybe pushed or shaken her. Perhaps the two of you have already split up, or you've been arrested for domestic violence.

But you're a bright and practical guy. You understand how computers and cars work, or at least enough to make them work for you. You're perceptive; you know when to ask for a raise, and you can solve problems with co-workers. But this problem, the biggest problem in your life—your relationship—you haven't solved. And there's a good chance that in spite of all you know, in spite of the fact that you're a sound thinker and make good decisions, you don't think very clearly about your relationship with the woman in your life. Your thinking may be so distorted that you've made some



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**W**women. *See* partners, of abusive men

## About the Authors

**Charlie Donaldson** is director of the Men's Resource Center in Holland, Michigan. He has specialized in working with men for twelve years and offers batterer intervention, substance abuse counseling, and men's therapy groups. As an adjunct professor in the School of Social Work at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, Charlie specializes in working with male interns focusing on men's issues. He has presented seminars for other therapists on the psychology of men who abuse women, obstacles and approaches to working with men in therapy, risk and lethality issues for batterers, and interventions for angry and assaultive men. Charlie was instrumental in creating the Batterer Intervention Service Coalition of Michigan and the Lakeshore Alliance Against Domestic and Sexual Violence of Ottawa County, Michigan. He is credentialed as a Limited Licensed Psychologist, Licensed Professional Counselor, and Certified Addictions Counselor I, and holds M.A. degrees in English and Counseling Psychology.

**Randy Flood** is director of the Men's Resource Center at Fountain Hill in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has provided specialized evaluation and counseling services for men since 1992, including men with domestic abuse issues. Randy is



credentialed as a Limited Licensed Psychologist and holds an M.A. in Counseling Psychology. A member and former chair of the Batterer Intervention Services Coalition of Michigan, Randy has also served as a consultant to the State Court Administrator regarding domestic abuse and divorce mediation. Randy provides consultation and training to organizations and workshop participants on domestic abuse, particularly on intervention and treatment of men. He is frequently sought out by the media to educate communities about sex addiction, anti-bullying initiatives in schools, positive coaching, and raising boys in the new millennium. Randy lives with his partner, Stephanie, and two children, Zachary and Anna.

While completing her Ph.D. at the University of Washington, **Elaine Eldridge** worked at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, where she collaborated on writing grant proposals and scientific articles. She freelanced in the Scientific Journals Department at the national headquarters of the American Heart Association in Dallas, Texas, for six years. Dr. Eldridge is an adjunct professor in the Department of English at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. She lives in East Grand Rapids, Michigan.



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*The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help*

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It’s true that you can’t change another person—your partner. But you can change your thinking and you can change your behavior, with the ultimate reward of improving your relationships, yourself, and your life.

Psychologists **Charlie Donaldson, M.A.**, and **Randy Flood, M.A.**, are cofounders and codirectors of the Men’s Resource Centers in Holland and Grand Rapids, Michigan. **Elaine Eldridge, Ph.D.**, is a writer and a college English instructor.

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