

HUMAN BEHAVIOR COURSE 2004
VIGNETTE 2:1 - "WORTHLESS WIFE"

Chief Complaint: Staff Sergeant (SSG) C is a 33-year-old woman with 12 years in the Army as records technician and the married mother of a 4-year-old son, Robert. SSG C's husband Mr. C is a local civilian accountant. SSG C is seeing you on a Community Mental Health Activity referral (you are a practicing general psychiatrist there) from her family practitioner. The reason for referral is SSG C's complaint that she has been depressed and unable to concentrate ever since she separated from her husband 3 months previously.

History of the Present Illness: SSG C left her husband after a 5-year marriage. SSG C said that violent arguments between them during which Mr. C beat SSG C had occurred for the last 4 years of their marriage, beginning when she became pregnant with Robert. There were daily arguments during which Mr. C hit her hard enough to leave bruises on her face and arms. During their final argument (about SSG C's buying an expensive tricycle for Robert), Mr. C held a loaded gun to Robert's head and threatened to shoot him if she didn't agree to return the tricycle to the store. SSG C didn't tell her unit of this and instead obtained a court order of protection that prevented Mr. C from having any contact with their son. She took Robert to her parents' apartment, where SSG C and Robert are still living.

In the 3 months since she left Mr. C, SSG C has become increasingly depressed. Her appetite has been poor and she has lost 10 pounds. She cries a lot and often wakes up at 5:00 A.M. and is unable to get back to sleep. She says that her only pleasure is in being with her son. She is able to take care of him physically, but feels guilty because her preoccupation with her own bad feelings prevents her from being able to play with him. She now has no social contacts other than with her parents, her son, and acquaintances in her the office she currently supports. She feels worthless and blames herself for her marital problems, saying that if she had been a better wife, maybe Mr. C would have been able to give up the cocaine. When you ask why she has stayed with him so long, she tells you that her family disapproves of divorce and kept encouraging her to try harder to make the marriage successful. She says she thinks a lot about what her life might be like trying to continue in the Army while taking care of Robert alone. She worries that she can't do it, especially at a duty station more remote from her now convenient family resources, an occurrence she expects to happen in the next two years. Her concerns about her Army career have also prevented her from telling anyone in her unit of her troubles and from seeking military mental health assistance.

Ever since SSG C left Mr. C, he has been calling her at her parents' home and begging her to return to him. A week ago, SSG C's parents took her to their civilian family practitioner. Her physical examination was normal, and the civilian doctor encouraged her strongly to seek military mental health care. Amazingly, SSG C has continued to function on the job, though she has been forced to take nearly two weeks of sick leave since she left Mr. C, telling her supervisor and others that she had developed a chest infection that she couldn't seem to throw.

Past Psychiatric History: SSG C has no history of depression.

Family Psychiatric History: SSG C has no family history of violence, mental illness, or substance abuse. SSG C's parents have been happily married for over 35 years.

Social & Developmental History: SSG C was raised an only child and graduated from high school and secretarial-school before joining the Army at age 20. She earned excellent evaluations for the 6 years of service before her marriage and for the first 2 years until Robert's birth. Before her marriage SSG C had been fairly independent but was very close to her parents, visiting them as regularly as her station would allow and speaking to them by phone a couple of times a week when it didn't. SSG C had many friends back then whom she saw regularly. She still stayed in touch with several close high school friends. In high school she had been popular, an excellent athlete, and a good student. In the Army she has always been well liked and is typically involved in organizing unit or office holiday parties and coordinating money collections for farewell and birthday gifts.

SSG C met Mr. C at a party in the office where he worked as an accountant with a friend of SSG C's. The two married after a 3-month courtship during which SSG C observed Mr. C using cocaine twice at parties. When she expressed concern, he reassured her that he was only "trying it to be sociable," and denied any regular use. Mr. C, a college graduate, is the oldest of three siblings. His father drank a pint of bourbon each night and often beat Mr. C's mother. Mr. C's two younger brothers both have histories of substance abuse.

During their first year of marriage, Mr. C became increasingly irritable and critical of SSG C. He began to request that SSG C stop calling and seeing her friends after work, and refused to allow them or his in-laws to visit their apartment. SSG C convinced Mr. C to try marital therapy, but he refused to continue after the initial two sessions.

Despite her misgiving about Mr. C's behavior toward her, SSG C decided to become pregnant. During the seventh month of the pregnancy, she developed thrombophlebitis and had to stay home in bed, Mr. C began complaining that their apartment was not clean enough and that SSG C was not able to shop for groceries. He never helped SSG C with the housework. He refused to allow his mother-in-law to come to the apartment to help. One morning when he couldn't find a clean shirt, he became angry and yelled at SSG C. When she suggested that he pick some up from the laundry, he began hitting her with his fists. She left him and went to live with her parents for a week. He expressed remorse for hitting her and agreed to resume marital therapy.

At her parents' and Mr. C's urging, SSG C returned to her apartment. No further violence occurred until after Robert's birth. At that time, Mr. C began using cocaine every weekend and often became violent when he was high.

Mental Status Examination: You note that SSG C is pale and thin, dressed in worn-out jeans and dark blue sweater. Her haircut is unstylish, and she appears older than she is. She speaks slowly, describing her depressed mood and lack of energy. She makes frequent eye contact with you but looks fatigued, worried, and demoralized. She denies any suicidal ideas and there is no evidence of hallucinations or delusions. You find her to be alert and fully oriented with a couple of near misses when calculating serial sevens to 65. Otherwise cognitive testing is intact. Her judgment seems okay, and she shows generally appropriate insight to her circumstances though she remains quite concerned and insistent about keeping her family issues from impacting her job performance.