Hi, I’m Helen Atkinson Barnes, and I’m the education program director at The Retreat, the only domestic and sexual violence prevention agency located on the east end of Long Island in New York. The East End is a rural community that includes wealthy second homeowners, vacationers, and those that service the economy and live here year-round.

What is domestic violence? My goal is to help our new volunteers better understand the new dynamics of abuse and its relationship to conflict.

Domestic violence has been in the news lately, and as more and more people have been quarantined in response to the coronavirus pandemic, more and more people are empathizing with the uncertainty and fear that those who are trapped at home are experiencing. People are recognizing that home is not a safe place for everyone, and yet myths and misunderstandings about what domestic violence is still persists.

So why would someone hurt someone they supposedly love? Many people assume that domestic violence happens when one person “loses it,” loses their temper or control; when in fact, domestic violence is all about one person exerting power and control over a person they are romantically involved with.

Domestic violence, also known as “intimate partner violence,” or more simply, “relationship abuse,” is defined as a pattern in which one person in a relationship hurts their partner in order to establish and maintain power and control in that relationship.

One way to understand this plan more deeply is to ask yourself the question, “Do couples always agree?” Do people in families always agree? Do friends always agree? Think about it. People disagree all the time, and that conflict is completely normal. People are different, and they have different tastes, habits, and values. People have conflict regarding all sorts of different issues—whether to go out or stay in, whose turn it is to walk the dog, what topping to get on their pizza, what team to root for, or even something as basic as whether it’s too warm or too cool, whether to turn up the heat or put on a sweater.

In a healthy relationship, how do people resolve conflict? Well, they talk it through, they compromise, they collaborate. In abusive relationship situations, by contrast, the abusive partner is willing to hurt the other person in order to get what they want. So this answers the question, “Why?” Why would someone hurt someone they love? It’s not because they “lose it,” it’s because they have something to gain, and they feel entitled to use their partner to get what they want—whether that’s the raw power to make the decisions, or the gratification that comes along with getting what they want, how they want it, and when they want it.

Domestic violence, as most people know, is not limited to physical abuse. There are many abusive tactics, and often those that an abuser will employ are those that are just scary or hurtful enough to get their partner to give them what they want. So while someone may be very violent, often a tone of voice that says, “Don’t cross me,” or the raise of an eyebrow that says “don’t go there” is all that it may take for an abusive partner to get their way.
One example of this is that of a man who removed his wedding ring a few times when he assaulted his wife. After that, all he needed to do was play with the ring to get his wife to comply with his demands. Threats can be especially subtle and insidious in long-term relationships.

At the Retreat, when we work with those who have been subjected to abuse, we often ask them to consider, “What did your partner want, and did the abuse stop once they got it?” Reflecting on the dynamics of abuse can help people understand that abuse is not always random or out of control, as much as an abuser might like you to believe that it is. It instead helps us all recognize how manipulative and controlling abusive behavior can be.