

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: COMMON MYTHS

Myth: “Victims of domestic violence like to be beaten.”

Fact: Victims of domestic violence have historically been characterized as masochistic women who enjoy being beaten. Evidence does not support this anachronistic psychological theory. Rather, victims of domestic violence desperately want the abuse to end, and engage in various survival strategies, including calling the police or seeking help from family members, to protect themselves and their children (Dutton, *The Dynamics of Domestic Violence*, 1994). Silence may also be a survival strategy in some cases. Moreover, enduring a beating to keep the batterer from attacking the children may be a coping strategy used by a victim, but does not mean that the victim enjoys it.

Myth: “Victims of domestic violence have psychological disorders.”

Fact: This characterization of battered women as mentally ill stems from the assumption that victims of domestic violence must be sick or they would not "take" the abuse. More recent theories demonstrate that battered women resist abuse in a variety of ways (Dutton, *The Dynamics of Domestic Violence*, 1994). In addition, most victims of domestic violence are not mentally ill, although individuals with mental disabilities are certainly not immune from being abused by their spouses or intimate partners. In fact, individuals with mental and developmental disabilities are at the highest risk of abuse, because of their lack of opportunity to protect themselves. Some victims of domestic violence suffer psychological effects, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Depression, as a result of being abused (Dutton, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Battered Women*, 1994).

Myth: “Low self-esteem causes victims to get involved in abusive relationships.”

Fact: Traditional theories presumed that individuals with adequate self-esteem would not "allow" themselves to be abused by intimate partners or spouses. In fact, studies have demonstrated that most victims of domestic violence fail to share common characteristics other than being female (Cahn & Meier, 1995). There is little support for the theory that low self-esteem causes victims to become involved in abusive relationships, however, some may experience a decrease in self-esteem as a result, since perpetrators frequently degrade, humiliate, and criticize victims.

Myth: “Victims of domestic violence never leave their abusers, or if they do, they just get involved in other abusive relationships.”

Fact: Most victims of domestic violence leave their abusers, often several times before they succeed. It may take a number of attempts to permanently separate because abusers use violence, financial control, or threats about the children, to compel victims to return. Additionally, a lack of support from friends, family members, or professionals may cause victims to return. Since the risk of further violence often increases after victims separate from their abusers, it can be even harder for victims to leave if they cannot obtain effective legal relief. While some victims may become involved with other partners who later begin to abuse them, there is no evidence that the majority of victims have this experience.

Myth: “Batterers abuse their partners or spouses because of alcohol or drug abuse.”

Fact: Alcohol or substance abuse does not cause perpetrators of domestic violence to abuse their partners, though it is frequently used as an excuse by the abuser. Substance abuse may increase the frequency or severity of violent episodes in some cases (Jillson & Scott, 1996). Because substance abuse does not cause domestic violence, requiring batterers to attend only substance abuse treatment programs will not effectively end the violence. Such programs may be useful in conjunction with other programs, such as a batterer intervention program.

Myth: “Perpetrators of domestic violence abuse their partners or spouse because they are under a lot of stress or unemployed.”

Fact: Stress or unemployment does not cause batterers to abuse their partners. Since domestic violence exists in all socioeconomic levels, domestic abuse cannot be attributed to unemployment or poverty. Similarly, advocates note that if stress caused domestic violence, batterers would assault their bosses or co-workers rather than their intimate partners. In addition, if stress were the casual factor more women would be

perpetrators of abuse, since women experience stress no less than men do. Domestic violence flourishes because society ignores partner abuse, and because perpetrators learn that they can achieve what they want through the use of force, without facing serious consequences.

Myth: “Law enforcement and judicial responses, such as arresting batterers or issuing civil protection orders, are useless.”

Fact: There is a great deal of debate about the efficiency of particular actions by law enforcement or the judiciary. Research on the usefulness of mandatory arrest or civil protection orders has yielded conflicting results (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996; Sherman & Berk, 1984; Zorza, 1994). Most experts agree, however, that actions by one piece of the system are only effective when the rest of the criminal justice and civil systems are functioning (Zorza, 1996; Wanless, 1996), when women are provided with safe, economically feasible alternatives to living with the abuse, and that improved protocols can decrease domestic violence related homicides.

Myth: “Children are not affected when one parent abuses the other.”

Fact: Studies show that in 50-70% of cases in which a parent abuses another parent, the children are also physically abused (Bowker et al., 1988). Children also suffer emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and developmental impairments as a result of witnessing domestic violence in the home (Jaffe, 1990).

Myth: “It's not really that serious or she would leave.” “If she doesn't take it seriously why should I?”

Fact: Victims generally HAVE tried to leave, usually six or seven times before they leave for good. The most dangerous time for a victim is the moment they decide to leave. Law enforcement must take domestic violence seriously because they are the experts on danger and violence, not the victims. One way that victims cope with fear and danger is by denying its seriousness. Officers are the professional and objective observers who need to keep in mind how serious the situation is when victims cannot.

Myth: “It's only poor families that have this problem.”

Fact: Do not think that because a call comes from a middle or upper class neighborhood that battering is not happening. Do not be misled into believing that a preacher, teacher, judge, famous person, or law enforcement officer cannot be a batterer. Never assume that batterers are only people you don't know or that they are very different from you.

Myth: “I would know a battered woman or a batterer if I saw one.”

Fact: Battering is often the best-kept secret in a family. Some women never tell anyone about the violence until they leave. Battered women go to great lengths to make excuses for their injuries and absences from work and social engagements. Batterers can be from the religious community or law enforcement. Batterers can seem very normal in their day-to-day activities and relationships with other people.

Myth: “She must be doing something to provoke him.”

Fact: Blaming the victim is a common response by those who do not understand the problem. Everyone gets angry, but not everyone is violent. There is never an excuse to use punches, kicks, strangulation, death threats and weapons in trying to settle an argument. Every adult must take responsibility for his or her own actions. There are always options other than violence.

Myth: “Drinking or drug abuse is the main problem in abusive situations.”

Fact: Although men who abuse alcohol and drugs tend to batter their wives and girlfriends more often than others, this abuse does not cause the violence. It is sometimes used as the excuse for the violent behavior on the part of the abuser. It does however; make it more dangerous for the victim and for the officer answering the call. Violence is a separate problem and a batterer's promise not to drink anymore is no guarantee that he will not continue to be abusive.

Myth: “Men and women probably batter each other about equally.”

Fact: The vast majority of victims of domestic violence are women. Women are 6 times more likely than men to experience violence committed by intimates.

Myth: “A victim will be free and safe after she (he) leaves/presses charges/gets a Temporary Protective Order.”

Fact: Unfortunately when a woman decides to leave, she often faces even more intensive violence. The batterer feels very threatened when his partner decides to leave, he feels justified in using whatever means necessary to regain control. The highest risk for further harm or actual death occurs from the point of separation to about 2 years post-divorce.

Myth: “Batterers are out of control when they become violent.”

Fact: It is the consensus of most therapists who provide treatment to batterers that the opposite is true -- batterers are not out of control but even more calculating in their attempts to maintain control over their victim. Studies indicate that some batterer's heart rates actually lower during the abuse. The majority of batterers pick a time when others are not around to witness their actions. They often assault their victim in the "bathing suit" area or in the back of the head where the injuries are not readily apparent or where the victim would hesitate to show the injury. If the batterer were truly out of control, it would be impossible to select when and where to initiate the assault.

Myth: “This is just an isolated incident.”

Fact: The vast majority of domestic violence calls for assistance and cases that make it before the court are just the tip of the iceberg. Victims are afraid of the perpetrator, afraid they will not be believed, embarrassed and too ashamed to follow through with any legal process, or want to believe the batterer when he says it will not happen again.

Myth: “If an authority figure tells the batterer to stop he will.”

Fact: Batterers are con artists. They will tell law enforcement officers, judges, probation officers and advocates what they want to hear. And they will sound believable. Unfortunately for the victim, the Jekyll/Hyde personality is always present and anything said by an authority figure can and will be used against the victim.