

MYTHS ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE

There is an enormous amount of misinformation about domestic abuse in our culture. Some of the common myths and the reality behind them are listed below.

MYTHS ABOUT THE ISSUE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE IN GENERAL

1) Domestic abuse occurs in only “certain types of families” (e.g. being low-income, uneducated, young, unsuccessful, or a person of color)

The Reality: Abuse occurs in all social, racial, economic, educational, age, occupational, sexual orientation, personality, and religious groups although lower socio-economic abusers and people of color may be more likely to come to the attention of legal authorities in our society.

2) Domestic abuse affects only a small percentage of the population

The Reality: In fact, domestic abuse is often underreported and FBI statistics indicate that 40-50% of all women 18 and over will experience at least one incident of physical violence in a relationship with a partner.

3) Domestic abuse is only serious or “real” abuse when it is happening “all the time” in a relationship

The Reality: Even one violent act or threat of a violent act can create an atmosphere of fear, humiliation, intimidation, and terror for the victim.

4) Domestic abuse doesn’t occur all that frequently, “isn’t that big a problem” or “doesn’t really exist” at all

The Reality: It is estimated that two to four million women are battered each year by their husbands, ex-husbands, and male lovers and, according to FBI statistics, 1400-1500 women are murdered by their partners each year.

5) Domestic abuse is just “normal” behavior (i.e. it happens in most or all relationships)

The Reality: Most relationships do not have a pattern of coercive, demeaning, intimidating, or violent behavior between partners.

6) Physical violence is the only kind of abuse that really matters

The Reality: Victims frequently report that emotional and verbal abuse leave devastating and debilitating scars that often take longer to heal than the damage created by physical violence.

7) Domestic violence is a private family matter

The Reality: Domestic violence is assault and is illegal.

8) Alcohol and drug use “cause” the abuse and violence

The Reality: Although the correlation between chemical abuse and domestic abuse is often high, these are, in fact, two distinct and freestanding issues and need to be addressed as two separate problems. Many alcoholics do not batter; some batterers do not drink or abuse chemicals.

9) Strong religious beliefs can prevent or “cure” domestic abuse

The Reality: Often, batterers buttress their “right” to “discipline” (i.e. abuse) their partners and children with rigid and narrow religious beliefs and interpretations of the Bible and Biblical quotations.

10) Male and female partners are equally violent with one another and the impact of the violence is the same

The Reality: 95% of reported victims of domestic assault are women; studies that reported finding equal male and female violence rates in the home often did not explore whether women's violence was in self-defense (as it often is) nor did they acknowledge or address the strength and power differential when men and women become violent with one another.

11) Domestic abuse is a couple’s or an individual’s problem

The Reality: Domestic abuse is also a societal issue due to the unhealthy messages men often receive about what it is to be a man and the messages we all receive from the media and other cultural institutions about male and female roles and expectations.

12) Domestic abuse occurs only in heterosexual relationships

The Reality: Although there is currently little research on the prevalence of partner abuse in gay and lesbian relationships, it is estimated that the problem exists at similar rates to those identified in heterosexual relationships.

13) There is nothing that a mental health or health care provider can do to help when domestic abuse is occurring

The Reality: Although domestic abuse can be frightening and frustrating for professionals who come in contact with it, they can still offer accurate information about what abuse is and its effects on the couple and family relationships, validation and emotional support, and referrals to appropriate community resources to intervene in what is going on in an abusive relationship.

MYTHS ABOUT WOMEN WHO ARE IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

14) Women are responsible for the abuse they receive and somehow provoke, cause, or deserve the abuse (i.e. “it takes two to tango”)

The Reality: Women may become explosive and hurtful and say or do disrespectful and abusive things to their partners, but this still does not give men the right to batter them nor does it justify a violent response; in fact, most women do whatever they can to avoid being abused.

15) Abused women are emotionally unstable or mentally ill

The Reality: Often battered women present with severe depression, anxiety and panic attacks, and low self-esteem; however, these symptoms frequently relate directly to the abuse that has been occurring in their lives and often subside or improve when the women begin to feel safe and empowered through their contact with advocates, support groups, and therapy to make changes necessary to protect themselves and their children and move on with their lives in a healthier way.

16) Many abused women actually like the conflict and the abuse (i.e. they like the “pain” and chaos and they are actually “masochistic”)

The Reality: No one “likes” being verbally or physically abused or violated in other ways although the batterer may believe that they as a couple have been brought closer together if his partner acquiesces to his affectionate

or sexual advances in the honeymoon or deception phase due to her fear about his explosive reaction if she refuses to do what he wants. Women who are raised in abusive families of origin may come to accept that this is all she can expect in a relationship or family but that still does not mean that she “enjoys” the abuse and the emotional pain.

17) Abused women will always seek out and find themselves in abusive relationships

The Reality: The idea that a woman involves herself in a series of abusive relationships did not hold true in Lenore Walker’s survey of battered women; even when a woman does involve herself with another batterer, it is not always easy to tell that he will become abusive when they first begin to date. Men often do not become violent until a commitment is made, i.e. moving in together, becoming engaged, or getting married.

18) Women who end up in abusive relationships were always abused when they were children

The Reality: Although some women in battering relationships experienced or observed violence and abuse in their families of origin, the percentage is significantly lower than for their male partners who are abusing them.

19) The police and the legal system can protect an abused woman

The Reality: Often police and the courts fail to take strong action against a batterer and, even when there is an Order for Protection or restraining order, it may not be taken seriously or enforced as it needs to be. Many women are assaulted and hurt with OFP;s in place.

20) Women can change their abusers if they are a “good enough partner” and attentive, caring, and loving enough to their man

The Reality: Many women, especially young women, believe this romantic notion that they can somehow transform their partner into a non-abusive person if they only “try hard enough.” In fact, men are responsible for their abusive and violent behavior and, once violence has occurred in a relationship, there is a strong probability that it will occur again over time, becoming more frequent and more severe. Only men themselves can make the decision and take the steps necessary to intervene in and change their controlling and abusive attitudes and actions.

21) Women can leave anytime if they really want to do so (i.e. “it's easy to get out”)

The Reality: Women do not leave abusive relationships for a number of very valid reasons including fear about retaliation (men may threaten to stalk, harass, hurt, or even kill their partners, their children or others they love), economic dependency, lack of awareness of alternatives and community resources, socially-learned and prescribed caretaking roles, family and cultural pressures, and emotional dependency and the love women feel for their partners when they are not abusive; in addition, the attempts to control, the abuse, and the violence often escalate when she actually attempts to leave (this is the time that is most dangerous for battered women).

22) Abuse ends when an woman leaves the relationship

The Reality: When a woman leaves the relationship, this is the most dangerous time for her and the potential for her to be battered or murdered actually increases. Many men do everything they can to “punish” their partner for leaving them (e.g. long, expensive, contentious divorce and child custody proceedings)

23) If an abused woman is asked about the abuse, she will be “offended” or feel bad

The Reality: A woman in an abusive relationship already "feels bad." She may be hesitant or uncomfortable in talking about the abuse because she may not believe that anything can actually be done about it, but providing her someone who is interested in her and with community resources is one way to empower her to do what she needs to do to take care of herself and her children.

MYTHS ABOUT ABUSIVE MEN

24) Abusers are “out-of-control,” crazy, mentally ill, and aren’t really responsible for what they do or have done

The Reality: The vast majority of batterers do not have either “thought disorders” or “impulse control disorders” that create an actual “break” from reality. In fact, men have learned to use abuse and violence to control people and situations around them and make clear choices (although they may not be conscious of these choices until they begin treatment) about where, how, and when they become abusive with their partners and others.

25) Abusers are generally explosive and violent people and a woman should have been able to tell ahead of time that a man would be abusive

The Reality: Although batterers may have a history of generalized violence, there often comes a point in their lives when they become more person-specific and focus on abusing their partner and, at times, their children. Frequently, when they first meet a prospective partner, they are loving, charming, caring, and attentive and, even later in the marriage, they are not abusive at all times.

26) Abusers are “mean” and cruel at all times with their partners and their children (i.e. abusers are never loving partners or good fathers)

The Reality: Abusers go through a “cycle of violence” and can be, at times (especially during the honeymoon or “deception” phase), loving, nurturing, playful, attentive, sensitive to their partners’ needs, exciting, and affectionate. Some batterers abuse their children, some do not.

27) Abusive men will stop being abusive on their own

The Reality: Occasionally men are able to stop being violent on their own due to the potential for significant consequences (arrest, jail time, court involvement). However, effectively addressing the controlling attitudes and the emotional and verbal abuse that arise from these attitudes can best be accomplished in a treatment setting where abuse and control are the focus of the intervention.

28) Abusers can never change

The Reality: Because abuse is a learned behavior, it can be unlearned. Most batterers witnessed or experienced control and abuse in their families of origin and can stop the violence and decrease the verbal and emotional abuse through consequences and/or by attending a treatment program that specifically addresses these issues.

MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN IN HOMES WHERE ABUSE IS OCCURRING

29) Children aren’t really affected by the abuse, especially if they don’t see it or experience it themselves

The Reality: Children may still hear the abuse and violence occurring and/or feel the inherent tension that exists in a household where abuse is happening. Children can be affected behaviorally, cognitively, emotionally, physically, or socially by living in an abusive home and the effects can last a lifetime.

30) Children are always “better off” if they don’t have to go through a divorce even if there is abuse in the family

The Reality: There is no question that divorce can have traumatic effects on children. However, growing up in a controlling and abusive household creates enormous problems of its own including training boys to be aggressive, controlling, and violent and training girls that their role in life is to allow men to demean and victimize them.

31) Children are naturally resilient and will overcome the effects of coming from an abusive family on their own

The Reality: Children are often deeply affected by the dynamics in an abusive family and may desperately need professional attention and emotional support (also from parents’ friends, extended family members, teachers, coaches, neighbors and others) to help them understand what has been happening in their household, who is responsible for the abuse, and what they can do to take care of themselves in situations where abuse is occurring.