

MYTHS AND REALITIES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

- MYTH:** Domestic abuse is a “family matter” and the community should not interfere in family matters.
REALITY: Domestic abuse is against the law, and that makes it everyone’s business. Assaults within the family are as much of a crime as assaults outside the family. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that the costs of intimate partner violence exceed \$8.3 billion dollars each year in the United States.¹
- MYTH:** Domestic abuse affects only a small percentage of the population.
REALITY: Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a partner at some point in their lives.² On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in this country every day.³
- MYTH:** Only women are abused by men.
REALITY: Current statistics show that 85 percent of domestic abuse victims are women and 95 percent of the perpetrators are men.³ There are men victimized by women in relationships, men victimized by men, and women victimized by women. Domestic abuse occurs in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender communities at approximately the same rate as in heterosexual relationships.⁴
- MYTH:** Only low-income families and minorities experience domestic abuse
REALITY: Domestic abuse can happen to people at every strata of society. It cuts across all races, economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. Most previously recorded statistics may be skewed because they come from public agencies, city hospitals, police departments, social service agencies and the courts. Since middle and upper class people often have other options open to them; they are less likely to seek assistance from such public agencies.
- MYTH:** Abusers are violent in all their relationships.
REALITY: Many abusive people are only abusive to a targeted intimate partner. Some abusers are quite successful in their professions and are very charming to other people. In fact, presenting a good image to friends, employers, family, and neighbors can give the abuser more power and control because people would be less likely to believe the abuser to be capable of abusive behavior.
- MYTH:** Domestic abuse is caused by mental illness
REALITY: Personality disorders, mental illness, poor impulse control, and generational abuse do not cause domestic abuse. Even in cases where a particular mental illness may cause a person to be abusive, the abuse is not specifically targeted at one person but to everyone around during the episode. However, if an abuser also has a mental illness, they may be more dangerous. For example, an abuser who is severely depressed may stop caring about the consequences of their actions, making them more of a threat to their partner.
- MYTH:** Domestic abuse is caused by alcohol and drug use.
REALITY: Although alcohol and drugs are often associated with domestic abuse, they do not cause the violence. If alcohol and drug usage caused violence, then everyone who consumed alcohol or used drugs would become violent. Not all abusers drink, and not all people who drink are abusive. Violence often continues even after an abuser stops drinking. Intoxication may, however, increase the severity of the abuse. For example, intoxication may prevent an abuser from recognizing the level of force they are using, which may lead to more severe injuries for the victim. Abusers often use their intoxication as an excuse for violent behavior leading the victim to believe it is the cause. In reality, domestic abuse and substance abuse must be understood and treated as independent problems.⁶
- MYTH:** Abusers are violent because they cannot control their anger and frustration.
REALITY: Abusers use anger as an excuse to rationalize or blame their abusive behavior: anger is not a cause of abuse, it is a conscious choice made by the abuser. Typically, their violence is targeted to certain people at certain times and places. Abusers generally do not attack their bosses or people on the streets, no matter how angry they may be. They often choose to abuse their partners only in private, or may take steps to ensure that they do not leave visible evidence of the abuse. Abusers tend to choose their tactics strategically according to what is the most effective way to gain power and control.⁵ Perpetrators of domestic abuse often show their ability to control their anger by becoming very calm and “reasonable” when explaining the abusive incident to others such as law enforcement

MYTH: Therapy will stop the violence. If s/he goes to therapy, it will be safe at home.
REALITY: Referral of a batterer to a Batterer Intervention Program (BIP) or therapy is one of the strongest predictors that a victim will return to a batterer. However, research outcomes on the effectiveness of treatment for batterers are inconclusive at this time. The effectiveness of BIP's is measured by victim reports and re-arrest. Victim reports can be potentially unsafe, and re-arrest data grossly under-estimates the actual re-offense, making accurate data difficult to attain. What is known about these programs is that the rate of attrition (drop out) is around 50%, and the people who drop out are also the most likely to re-offend.⁵ The batterer program alone will not effectively reduce a batterer's potential for violence. Some believe the batterer program's best role is to hold the batterer as long as possible increasing the time the victim has to get into a safer position. It should also be noted that marriage therapy is generally ineffective and can be dangerous when there is domestic abuse in a relationship.

MYTH: Boys from violent homes will grow up to be batterers and girls will be victims.
REALITY: Not all children who grow up in homes where there is domestic abuse are directly abused or grow up to become victims or abusers. However, it is important to note that children from homes where domestic abuse occurs are at greater risk for all of these outcomes than children from homes where there is no violence. Research has found that men who witnessed their parents' domestic abuse as children are twice as likely to abuse their own wives as sons of non-violent parents. Exposure to physical or sexual abuse or domestic abuse as a child is only one risk factor for future violence. Other risk factors include living in an impoverished community with frequent exposure to drugs, guns, and crime; having parents that use harsh or erratic discipline; and being isolated from community, family, or school.⁶

MYTH: Even if s/he is violent, it is better for the children to have both parents. Children aren't negatively affected by the domestic abuse unless they are actually abused.
REALITY: Witnessing violence as a child is associated with adult reports of depression, trauma-related symptoms and low self-esteem among women, and trauma-related symptoms among men. Child witnesses of domestic abuse on average exhibit more aggressive and antisocial behaviors, fearful and inhibited behaviors, anxiety, depression, trauma symptoms, temperament problems, and lowered social competence, than children who do not witness such violence. Youth who witness domestic abuse are more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, commit other delinquent behavior, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crimes.⁷

¹ Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2003). Costs of intimate partner violence against women in the United States. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/ipv_cost/IPVBook-Final-Feb18.pdf

² The Commonwealth Fund. (1999). Health concerns across a woman's lifespan: 1998 survey of women's health. Retrieved from http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr_doc/Healthconcerns__surveyreport.pdf?section=4039

³ Bureau of Justice Statistics (2000). Intimate partner violence. Retrieved from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ipv.pdf>

⁴ National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Domestic violence and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender relationships. Retrieved from <http://www.ncadv.org/files/lgbt.pdf>

⁵ Bancroft, L. (2002). Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men. New York: GP Putnam & Sons.

⁶ National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. (2002). Children exposed to intimate partner violence. Available from: http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/NRC_Children.pdf

