

Myths & Realities of Domestic Violence

(Adapted from Lenore Walker, *Battered Women*)

There are many misconceptions in our society about domestic violence. Unfortunately these misconceptions victimize women and keep the perpetrator socialized to maintain dominance, power and control over his partner. Below are some of the most common myths about domestic violence and the truth behind them:

Myth: If a victim of abuse doesn't leave, then it's her own fault for staying.

Reality: No one deserves to be beaten once or a thousand times and our right to be safe does not end at our front door and does not have a time limit. Escaping an abusive relationship is a long and often very dangerous process. A woman who is "staying" in an abusive relationship might still be holding out hope her partner will change. She may also be planning for a safe escape or simply in very legitimate fear of what her partner might do if she does leave.

Myth: Domestic violence doesn't occur in *my* community.

Reality: Domestic violence occurs in all facets of society. Victims and abusers come from all socio-economic classes, races, educational levels, religions, sexual orientations, cultures, and geographical locations. The only common thread is that 80-90% of victims are women.

Myth: Religious beliefs will prevent battering.

Reality: Religious beliefs do not prevent someone from being battered. Women with very strong religious beliefs are battered and men with strong religious beliefs might still be batterers. While a few faith communities may sometimes reinforce harmful myths about domestic violence, many are and can become a critical source of strength, education and safety for victims and a place of accountability for perpetrators.

Myth: Only a small percentage of women are battered.

Reality: All women are at risk. Statistics range from 25% to 50% of women will be battered at some point in their life.

Myth: Once a victim, always a victim.

Reality: Women who receive positive assistance and intervention can rebuild their lives and sense of self.

Myth: Battered women must be mentally ill.

Reality: Battered women's survival behaviors have often been pathologized and each victim of abuse will utilize different coping mechanisms and survival techniques. What might appear to be unusual or strange reactions or decisions may be what's actually helping them survive in battering relationships.

- Myth:** **Batterers are violent in all their relationships.**
Reality: Most men who batter their partners are generally not violent in other aspects of their lives. In order to maintain the secrecy of their abusive behaviors, they can appear as extremely charming or friendly individuals in public settings. Many victims of abuse have noted the “Jekyll and Hyde” nature of their abusers and the ease and speed at which they can change their demeanor depending on who might be around.
- Myth:** **Once a batterer, always a batterer.**
Reality: Research shows that some men do stop their violent behavior. Men have more success at stopping physical violence than stopping verbal and emotional violence. It is estimated it will take between three and five years of weekly therapy for a batterer to make significant lasting changes.
- Myth:** **Children need their father, even if he is a batterer.**
Reality: Children need healthy role models. Men who batter are more likely to batter children physically, sexually and emotionally. Children who have a batterer parent are significantly more likely to engage in high-risk activities as teens and adults.
- Myth:** **Drinking causes battering.**
Reality: Drinking does not cause battering. However, there is some association between drinking and battering. The violence can be worse when alcohol is involved.
- Myth:** **Abusers batter because they have low self-esteem.**
Reality: Many people believe that batterers are violent because they feel bad about themselves. They pick on their partners to make themselves feel better. While it may be true that many batterers have low self-esteem, this does not explain why they batter. There are many men and women with low self-esteem who are not violent. In addition increasing abusers’ self-esteem doesn’t necessarily end the battering behavior either.
- Myth:** **Batterers hit because they lose control of their emotions.**
Reality: Various studies of violent men show that careful planning goes into many violent episodes and that great discretion is used in choosing who and how to victimize. Because of the possibility of arrest and imprisonment, abusers rarely direct violence toward a neighbor, coworker or friend. Instead, they carefully direct repeated violence toward family members. Violent men often plan ahead for a violent episode by cancelling appointments, locking windows and doors, hiding keys, disconnecting the phone line, and waiting until neighbors should be asleep. Abusers are careful to maintain enough control during a violent outburst to inflict injuries in places normally covered by hair or clothing. They may call ahead from work to make threats about the abuse or punishment they have planned upon arriving home. A great amount of self-control and forethought is required for these kinds of premeditated assaults.
- Myth:** **Battering is an organic defect . . . like a disease.**
Reality: It is worth noting that in an extremely small percentage of cases, violent behavior may stem from a brain disorder such as Alzheimer’s or a severe head injury. However, people with this condition commit violent acts at random and toward anyone with whom they are in contact. This is not the situation in the vast majority of battering relationships. While some batterers use excuses such as physical problems, drinking, and war flashbacks to justify their actions, these “afflictions” usually do not cause them to harm anyone else except their partners. Battering is a learned behavior and is within a person’s control to change.