

Myths and Facts about Domestic Violence

Myth: Survivors of domestic violence like to be beaten.

Fact: Survivors of domestic violence have historically been characterized as masochistic women who enjoy being beaten. Evidence does not support this anachronistic psychological theory. Rather, survivors 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 survivor, but does not mean that the survivor enjoys it.

Myth: Survivors of domestic violence have psychological disorders.

Fact: This characterization of battered women as mentally ill stems from the assumption that survivors 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 survivors 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 survivors 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 survivors 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 survivors 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 survivors to become involved in abusive relationships, however, some survivors may experience a decrease in self-esteem as a result of being abused, since perpetrators frequently degrade, humiliate, and criticize survivors.

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 batterer intervention programs.

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

Fact: Most survivors 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 survivors to return. Additionally, a lack of support from friends, family members, or professionals, such as court personnel, law enforcement officers, counselors, or clergy members, may cause survivors to return. Since the risk of further violence often increases after survivors separate from their abusers, it can be even harder for survivors to leave if they cannot obtain effective legal relief. While some survivors may become involved with other partners who later begin to abuse them, there is no evidence that the majority of survivors have this experience.

Myth: Perpetrators of domestic violence abuse their partners or spouses 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 exist at 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 causal factor more women would be perpetrators of abuse, since women experience stress no less than men. Domestic violence flourishes because society condones spouse or 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 efficacy of particular actions by law enforcement or the judiciary. Research on the usefulness of mandatory arrest or civil protection orders has yielded conflicting results (See *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 abuse and that improved protocols can decrease domestic violence related homicides. Thus, law enforcement officers must make arrests, prosecutors must prosecute domestic violence cases, and courts must enforce orders and impose sanctions for criminal convictions. It is important for batterers to receive the message from the community that domestic violence will not be tolerated, and that the criminal justice and law enforcement systems will be involved until the violence ceases.