



# Women's Resource Center

Serving Victims of Family Violence and Sexual Assault



## What You Should Know About Domestic Violence



### What Is Domestic Violence

Known by many names: wife abuse, marital assault, wife beating, battering, intimate violence, partner abuse, domestic violence is all of these and more. Rather than any single behavior, work with victims has taught us that domestic violence is a pattern of many assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners or former partners.

The relationships include those currently intimate, dating, married, or cohabiting, heterosexual as well as gay men and lesbians, as well as those who may be divorced or separated. The relationships may be of long or short duration, and the participants may be elderly couples, teenagers and all ages in between.

Assault and coercive behaviors include physical and sexual violence, psychological and emotional attacks, threats against property, pets and even the children in the home, economic coercion and many more such acts. Some are injurious and criminal in nature while others are not.

All are designed to manipulate, control and dominate the partner and to achieve compliance and dependence. By isolating the partner from family, friends, neighbors or co-workers, the batterer ensures that his or hers are the only messages heard.

Over the course of a relationship, a pattern of multiple acts occurs, using a variety of the behaviors described here. Sometimes, the batterer does not have to utilize more than a

few well-planned actions to maintain control. A certain look or a reminder of past actions may be enough to achieve the desired result. Other individuals use a wide variety of actions with no particular pattern. The behavior can last a few minutes, hours, and sometimes even days. Success depends on a variety of factors; the batterer convinces the partner that his or her actions cause the batterer to respond. The victim is at fault, not the batterer, and therefore needs to be corrected. The batterer may minimize or even deny that anything harmful has occurred.

Within the relationship, perpetrators have access to their victims, know the daily routine and the special vulnerabilities the victim may have, such as a physical illness or disability. Victims must deal with the complexity of an intimate relationship with the batterer, and maintaining that relationship often makes those outside the home unaware of and insensitive to the nature of the abuse and violence.

The parts of the pattern of behavior interact with each other and victims respond to the pattern, rather than an individual act. Many cite the pain of emotional and psychological abuse (like name-calling, putdowns, using the children, constant criticisms, etc.) as being even more difficult to bear than physical assault.

Whatever the batterer feels: jealousy, anxiety or fear that she will leave him, he uses violence to get or keep power and control. While he may suffer from low self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness outside the home, he feels entitled to be empowered at home, and society has vested him with that entitlement until fairly recently.

## Common Myths About Family Violence

### Myth 1: Family Violence is Not Very Common

Almost all family violence experts seem to agree that domestic violence is much more common than ever realized. The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse reported in 1994 that over three million children experienced some form of abuse (physical, sexual, neglect, or emotional abuse). Straus and Gelles reported in 1986 that 28% of American couples experience at least one act of violence during their marriages, 16% experience at least one act of violence per year, and 5% experience severe violence in any given year. Even these data are considered conservative.

### Myth 2: Only Poor People Are Violent

While some studies do provide evidence that there appears to be a higher incidence of violence in families at or below the poverty line (Straus et al, 1980, cite a violence rate 5 times that of families above the line), and a later study indicated "blue-collar" husbands more violent (13.4%) than "white-collar" husbands (10.4%), this does not lead to the erroneous assumption often heard, that poor families are always violent, or that only poor families are violent. This is not true. Poor people who lack other support or resources are much more likely to turn to police or social agencies more often than families who have money.

### Myth 3: Children Who Witness Abuse or Are Abused Always Become Abusive Parents or Abusive Spouses

This is a dangerous generalization to make as it tends to make one accept the intergenerational pattern of abuse as the complete explanation, in and of itself, to predict behavior. Most of the research has been done on self reports and in retrospective research which relies on adult memories and perceptions. Also, there is not often a comparison group of nonviolent adults giving self reports. The data suggest that child witnesses to violence, or victims of abuse are more likely to be abusive, but not predetermined to be so.

### Myth 4: Battered Women "Ask For It"

Criticisms of battered women, blaming the victims for not "just leaving", lead to conclusions such as they must really enjoy being beaten, are nags, or drunks, or are mentally ill, therefore they, and not the batterers are at fault. Attention needs to focus not on why they stay but why "he abuses".

### Myth 5: Alcohol and Drugs Are the Real Cause of Family Violence

While alcohol or drug abuse does figure in a majority of violent incidents, it cannot be said to be the cause of the abuse. Many abusers batter their partners whether drunk or sober. Many batterers never use alcohol or drugs. Being drunk or stoned often serves as an excuse for the behavior and another way to deny personal responsibility for battering.

Batterers frequently blame others, often the partner, for their violence. They also frequently minimize the level of violence they have used against the partner and/or the children. Some use violence outside the home as well as inside it and when this occurs, they will often claim someone else "started it" and they had no other choice of action.

Others are not violent outside the intimate relationship and appear to deal successfully with social and work situations, handle stress well and solve problems effectively. These are individuals who usually have no criminal record prior to a domestic violence incident. Batterers perceive much approval for the use of violence in their daily lives, from media, entertainment, sports events and from their peers. They are amused by and often actively join in conversation that demeans and degrades women. Some are strongly influenced by cultural background and male relatives such as the Hispanic tradition of male as "Macho".

In summary, the most frequently encountered characteristics of battering males appear to be:

- history of witnessing violence as children
- substance abusing parents
- personal substance abuse
- tendency to minimize violence, deny it or blame others
- jealousy, possessiveness, dependency on partner
- low self-esteem, insecurity
- poor problem-solving skills
- inability to handle stress
- ineffective communication skills
- anger and hostility
- rigid ideas of male female roles, rights, responsibilities.
- Many batterers seem to believe that their partners are (or would be, if allowed) controlling, manipulative, equally violent as they themselves

are, and secretly want to be dominated.

### **Characteristics and Beliefs: Victims**

Much more data is available about victims from shelters and outreach domestic violence programs, from researchers able to use larger groups on which to base their conclusions and from victim-survivors who advocate for others in public speeches and in published accounts of their experiences. Again, it is necessary to point out the danger in generalization. There is no "typical" victim.

Like batterers, victims may minimize or even deny the effects of violent behavior: "it wasn't that bad", "I overreacted". They also may experience low self-esteem and it appears that the longer the battering relationship lasts, the lower the victim's self-esteem becomes. Sometimes, the victim forgets prior accomplishments, experiences difficulty making decisions beyond those necessary to survive the violent incidents and does not trust her own judgment. Spiritual and socialization experiences may have taught victims that divorce is failure, a sin, wrong. They hear they must "try harder to make the relationship work". The batterer needs and depends upon the victim and the victim comes to feel the he/she can not leave the battering partner. The victim may be physically isolated from family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, anyone who could provide messages opposing those most often received.

Depending upon the extent of the isolation, the victim may lose touch with any reality outside her own daily existence. She often feels that hers is the only family enmeshed in the violent, turbulent behavior, and that she must just try harder, do better, be better, for the violence to stop. She may experience love, affection and intimacy with the partner, and she loves and depends upon him in return. She may be overwhelmed trying to imagine any life without him.

Victims often suffer severe stress reactions: migraines, stomach disorders, psycho-physiological complaints, depression. She may use and abuse prescriptive drugs and alcohol, to "numb the pain". (Unlike batterer substance abuse patterns, some victims, when removed from the violent relationship, stop using/abusing drugs and alcohol.)

Victims sometimes use extremely creative methods to manage their environment, protect their children and survive. Often they do not

make the courageous decision to leave the relationship until confronted with the batterer's abuse of their children.

*NOTE: While narrative identifies the majority situation of male batterer - female victim, it is important to state that similar tactics, characteristics and beliefs exist in situations of male victim - female batterer, and in same-sex relationships.*

### **Effects on Batterer, Victim and Children**

#### **On the batterer:**

There is support for the use of violence to gain one's desired result, which may lead to an increase in the level of violent activity. This results in increased contact with law enforcement, the courts, probation officers, victim advocates, group leaders, and clinicians. Financial burdens increase as costs include those levied in court, probation/supervision costs, treatment/education fees, lost time from work.

Individuals in the batterer's work, church or social settings may be made aware of the domestic violence incident, resulting in increased anxiety, loss or decrease in self-esteem, and even depression. In some employment situations, (law enforcement officers, for instance), continuing employment could be jeopardized by the domestic violence arrest/conviction/probation. The resulting increase in stress, financial hardship, loss of status and embarrassment may in turn trigger more violence against the victim. Finally, recent studies have indicated that some batterers may experience increased feelings of displeasure with themselves after a violent incident because they inwardly disapprove of the behavior.

#### **On the victim:**

After a violent incident, victims feel - in addition to the pain of physical injury - fear of a loss of stamina, energy, ability to manage their situation or protect the children. They also often experience a feeling of helplessness, desperation, isolation, feelings of being "off balance", particularly when an incident occurs without any prior warning.

Often there is an immediate need to hide the signs, cover the bruises, make up stories to explain the injuries, minimize or even deny the occurrence. There is sometimes an intense level of shame and embarrassment, particularly

when others, (neighbors, teachers, doctors, nurses, police, etc.) become involved. There are intense feelings of fear and anxiety.

"What do I do now?" "How will the kids and I survive?" "He has threatened to kill me - will it happen now?"

Many victims have never called the police before, nor seen the courts, or the judicial process. They are ignorant of and terrified by the procedures and find the entire experience frightening and overwhelming. The batterer at this time may be stepping up the frequency and severity of threats to take punitive action against her for involving "outsiders" in family matters.

All of these effects heighten her feelings of helplessness, her lack of self worth, and may even help to convince her that she is at fault, she is "crazy", and no one will help her.

#### **On children who witness violence in their homes:**

Children are terrorized by the sights and sounds of violence in their homes. Many suffer from nightmares, shaking, stuttering, nail-biting, anxiety, depression, digestive upsets, and other physiological, emotional and behavioral responses. Cognitively, their development is delayed by their experiences. They suffer learning disabilities, delays in speech and other developmental measures. Some display behaviors similar to children with attention-deficit disorder and hyperactivity disorder.

Some act out aggressively, mirroring the behaviors they see in the home, while others withdraw and stop communicating. Some are injured attempting to intervene and stop the violence. They may be hit with objects thrown at the victim. Infants and toddlers may be injured by being dropped or hit while the victim is holding them and is the target of a violent act.

Often, children are unable to concentrate at school or when away from parents, for fear they will never see them again. Some suffer from extreme separation anxiety long after it is an age-appropriate behavior.

Other possible responses to domestic violence include eating disorders, early sexual activity and pregnancy, and in some cases, suicidal or homicidal ideation. Children who come to the attention of juvenile court authorities for an arrest for violent behavior (with siblings, parents,

schoolmates, friends, others) very often relate histories of violence in their families of origin.

#### **FOR INFORMATION IN NORTH SAN DIEGO COUNTY ON CRIME PREVENTION, HOME SECURITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH PROGRAMS, CALL:**

##### **LAW ENFORCEMENT:**

Carlsbad Police Dept (760) 438-5511  
 Oceanside Police Dept (760) 439-7296  
 Escondido Police Dept (760) 741-4721  
 Sheriff's Dept  
   Vista . . . . . (760) 758-6401  
   Encinitas . . . . . (760) 753-5591  
   Poway . . . . . (858) 748-7400  
   Fallbrook . . . . . (760) 728-1115

#### **FOR COUNSELING, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE EDUCATION AND PREVENTION CALL:**

##### **Women's Resource Center**

1963 Apple Street  
 Oceanside, California 92054  
 (760)757-3500  
 (760)757-0680 Fax  
 Email: wrccemail@aol.com

