

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 that she cannot 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, psychophysical complaints, and 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.

Contrary to some of the earliest research, the concept of “learned helplessness” does not appear to apply to more than the smallest (<5%) of the domestic

violence victims (L. Walker, 1979). Later data, using a much larger sample (6,000 victims), done in 1990 by E. Gondolf, support a theory of survivorship and details the methods to which victims will resort to help themselves and their children.

Early advocates and clinicians in the domestic violence field realized fairly quickly that “doing it for the victim” is not nearly as successful as “giving the victim all her options” and letting her make her own choices. They also realized quickly that they needed to believe her accounting as few others did so.

Often the batterer the victim describes is unknown to anyone outside her own home. Family, friends, co-workers, neighbors may never have seen him practice the behaviors she cites. This disbelief helps reinforce her own feelings of shame, self-blame and responsibility for the batterer’s behavior.

WHY VICTIMS STAY

Leaving a violent relationship is an act of courage that few understand, particularly in the justice system. The reality is that leaving is a process involving many factors rather than a simple physical act. There is an overriding terror that worse will happen when she tries to leave, and it is a valid fear: the risk of severe injury and death increases dramatically when a victim leaves the batterer.

The children’s security, the financial cost, the issue of where to go, when and how to go, all enter in to the process. Many victims have no access to transportation or family finances and assets and must plan very carefully to surmount these obstacles.

Often, if the batterer senses any loss of control from any sign the victim gives him, he may accelerate the control and violence and make it even more difficult for her. The timing of such an action is critical. Should she get a protective order? When will it be served? Where can she and the children go for safety? Will he carry out threats he has made against her family members? How can she protect them?

Sensing his loss of control, he may successfully manipulate her with romantic actions, gifts, promises to change, go to counseling (usually, with her) or say other things which lull her into believing him. He has usually had much practice and success with the manipulative behavior and she will learn all too often that this is one more example of control and abuse.

VICTIMS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

1. Victims living in rural areas or small towns – while isolation is a common tactic batterers use to control their victims, the isolation of a victim living on a reservation or in a small Indian community away from any populous

urban area often presents overwhelming barriers to a victim of domestic violence. Consider these issues:

- Limited access to vehicles
- Roads that are often impassable
- Phone service that may often be inadequate or nonexistent
- Emergency response that is coming from a long distance
- Emergency response that is operated by volunteers who are often friends, relatives, neighbors, etc.
- Limited contact with anyone outside the home, including medical care providers
- Bruises and gashes will heal before anyone else sees them
- Nature of living in rural area provides ready excuses for any injury
- Fear, distrust of, or lack of knowledge of, any of the services available