

## **Common Myths About Domestic Violence and Understanding the Cycle of Violence**

### Objectives:

1. Participants will learn the common myths about domestic violence and how myths have perpetuated the misunderstanding surrounding domestic violence in Indian communities.
2. Participants will learn the three cycles of violence and how it affects the lives of women and children living in violent homes.
3. Describe the dynamics of a violent relationship and the relevance of factors like family history of violence, substance abuse and medical or mental health issues to determine the likelihood of continuing violence.

### Activities:

1. Discuss some of the myths of domestic violence and how they have been responsible for the slow response of helping agencies to assist battered women and their children.
2. Assess the involvement of the various agencies in your community who respond to domestic violence incidents. How can they be more helpful? What other agencies should be involved?

### Discussion:

1. What is the most common myth in your community about battered women? What can you/your community do to dispel this myth?
2. What is the level of awareness of domestic violence in your community?
3. Does your community have the resources necessary to assist women and children in violent situations? If not, what can the community do to increase these resources?
4. Are your law enforcement educated on domestic violence and the dynamics of why women stay in violent situations?

### Training Modules (Power Point Presentations):

Domestic Violence Myths  
The Cycle of Violence

## Common Myths About Domestic Violence

Many myths abound that feed denial and misinformation about family violence.

**Myth:** Family violence is rare.

**Fact:** The statistics on family violence are not precise, although it's clear that millions of children, women and even men have been abused physically, emotionally, and sexually by family members and other intimates.

**Myth:** Family violence is confined to the lower class.

**Fact:** Although surveys show a higher incidence of domestic violence in lower income households, violence occurs in households of all income levels in the United States.

**Myth:** Alcohol and/or drug abuse is the real cause of violence in the home.

**Fact:** Because many batterers also abuse alcohol and other drugs, it's easy to assume that these cause domestic violence; however, they just offer the batterer another excuse to evade responsibility for his behavior. Domestic violence and substance abuse are two different problems that should be treated separately.

**Myth:** Battered wives like being hit, otherwise they would leave.

**Fact:** The most common response to battering is "Why doesn't she just leave?" ignores economic and social realities facing many women. Faced with basic expenses, a woman may feel that she cannot support herself and children. Moreover, in some instances, women may be increasing the chance of physical harm or even death if she leaves. Batterers escalate their violence when women try to leave, show signs of independence or have left.

**Myth:** Victims of domestic violence like to be beaten.

**Fact:** Victims of domestic violence have historically been characterized as masochistic women who enjoy being beaten. Evidence does not support this theory. Victims 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. Enduring a beating to keep the batterer from attacking the children may be a coping strategy used by a victim, but does not mean the victim enjoys it.

**Myth:** Victims of domestic violence have psychological disorders.

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

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

**Fact:** Most victims of domestic violence leave their abusers, often several times. It may take a number of attempts to permanently separate because abusers use violence, financial control, or threats about the children, to compel the victim 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 victims to return. Since the risk of further violence often increases after victims separate from their abusers, it can be even harder for victims to leave if they cannot obtain effective legal relief. Victims who receive appropriate legal assistance at an early stage increase their chances of obtaining the protection and financial security they need to leave their abusers permanently. While some victims may become involved with other partners who later begin to abuse them, there is no evidence that the majority of victims have this experience.

**Myth:** Batterers 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 cuts across socioeconomic lines, 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. 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 system and civil systems are functioning, (Zorza, 1996; Wanless, 1996) and that improved protocols can decrease domestic violence related homicides. (telephone interview, Ann O'Dell, 1996) 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.

**Myth:** Children are not affected when one parent abuses the other.

**Fact:** Studies show that in 50-70% of cases in which a parent abuses another parent, the children are also physically abused. (Bowker et al., 1988) Children also suffer emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and developmental impairments as a result of witnessing domestic violence in the home (Jaffe, 1990) In addition, some children (especially boys) who experience domestic violence in their homes grow up to repeat the same behavioral patterns. (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1986).

For example, an advocate at a shelter in North Florida reported that one abuser threatened to come to the shelter and kill the victim and anyone who stood in his way. The abuser revealed that he knew where the shelter was because he stayed there as a child when his mother ran away from his father (Hassler, 1997).

**Myth:** Domestic violence is irrelevant to parental fitness.

**Fact:** Because children often suffer physical and emotional harm from living in violent homes, domestic violence is extremely relevant to parental fitness. (ABA News Release, 1997) A history of domestic violence can indicate that the perpetrating parent physically or emotionally abuses the child as well as the other parent. In addition, abusers frequently use the children as pawns to continue to control the other parent. Further, an abuser's focus on controlling the victim undermines the abuser's ability to parent because the primary concern is not the child. Courts should consider the effects of the abuser's behavior on the children when determining custody and visitation arrangements.

Some courts mistakenly penalize the victim in custody cases by assuming that the victim is emotionally unstable because of the violence or because the victim "let the violence happen." In most states, however, custody statutes now recognize that domestic violence is relevant to the abuser's parental fitness. Courts in most states are required to consider domestic violence as a factor in custody determinations or employ a presumption that perpetrators should not receive custody of the children. (The Family Violence Project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1995).

### *Sources*

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Joan Zorza, Must we Stop Arresting Batterers? Analysis and Policy Implications of New Police Domestic Violence Studies, 28 New Eng. L. Rev. 929 (1994). See also Marion.

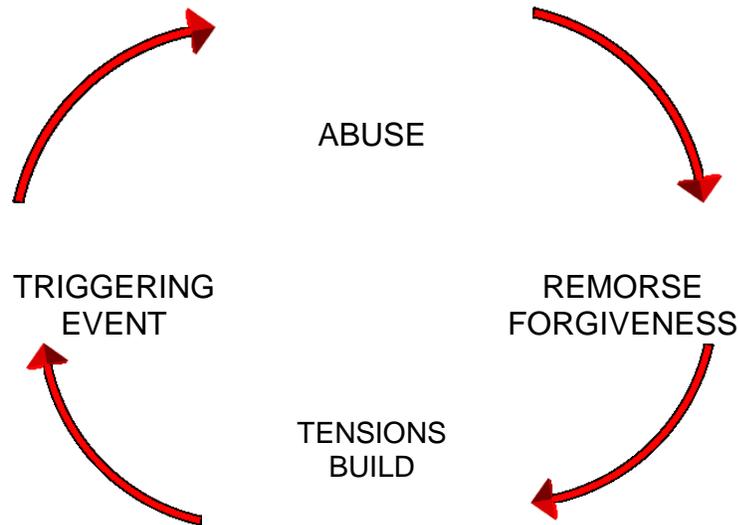
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After domestic violence training was implemented in 1991 by the San Diego Police Dept, the rate of domestic violence arrests increased, and the rate of domestic violence related homicides was drastically reduced by 59%. Telephone interview with Anne O'Dell, Retired Detective Sergeant, San Diego Police Dept (June 14, 1996).

Lee H. Bowker et al., On the Relationship Between Wife Beating and Child Abuse, in Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse 158, 159, 162 (Kerstii Yllo & Michelle Bograd eds., 1988).

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## THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE



## LENORE WALKER'S THEORY OF VIOLENCE

### PHASE ONE

#### Step One:

- Minor battering
- Victim's denial of anger helps them to cope with a situation they desperately believe will change
- Victim blames outside factors; takes guilt for battering incident; apparent passive acceptance spurs on the abusive behavior and batterer doesn't have to find control

#### Step Two:

- Batterers don't want behavior made public, causing fear in them the victim will tell, thus increasing the oppression
- Batterer's brutality keeps victim captive
- Learned helplessness syndrome

#### Step Three:

- As Phase 1 progresses, batter incidents increase, anger escalates, victim realizes Phase 2 is coming and works hard to control external situations: keeping children quiet, no phone calls
- Soon coping techniques fail

#### Step Four:

- Batterer increases possessive smothering and brutality; victim less able to defend herself against the pain and hurt
- Victim withdraws; batterer moves in more oppressively

- Unbearable tension builds up
- Victim sometimes triggers Phase 2 in order to break the unbearable tension, to just “get it over with”

## PHASE TWO

*Two characteristics of Phase 2:*

1. lack of control
2. lack of predictability
  - acute battering with major destructiveness
  - lasts usually from 2 to 24 hours, with some reports of a week or more of terror
  - only batterers can end Phase 2
  - there’s an element of overkill and victims express extreme futility of trying to escape
  - victims suffer emotional collapse 22 to 48 hours after acute battering; they seek isolation; thus doctors often do not see them until a natural healing time has passed
  - extreme sexual abuse also during this time

## PHASE THREE

*Unusual period of calm*

- batterer is extremely loving and kind and contrite
- they are sorry and promise to never do it again
- they believe they can maintain control
- also believe they have taught victim a lesson so that they won’t have to beat them again
- promises to give up drinking
- convinces victim they’re needed, makes them feel guilty for leaving; makes victim feel the responsibility
- promises they will get help if victim just stays

The victim sees batterer being sincere and loving. Victim chooses to believe this is what they are really like, this is everything they wanted in a partner. Victim believes that if only they help the batterer they will change. A Symbiotic Pair: each dependent on the other. During Phase 3, when loving kindness is most intense, symbiotic bonding takes hold.

Phase 3 is a time when almost all of the rewards of being married or coupled take place; thus making it extremely difficult for the victim to leave or end the relationship.

**CALM LOVING BEHAVIOR GIVES WAY TO LITTLE BATTERING INCIDENTS AGAIN. PHASE 1 TENSION BUILDING RECURS. A NEW CYCLE OF VIOLENCE, OF BATTERING, BEGINS AGAIN.**

## **HISTORICAL INFLUENCES SUPPORTING ABUSE OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN**

The regard of women and children as possessions (chattel), not persons, and the belief that what happens in the home is a “family matter” immune to outside interference, is deeply rooted in history. Old English common law held that a man had the right to beat his wife and children, so long as he used a stick no larger in circumference than his thumb. The expression “Rule of Thumb” came from this practice, which was still on the statute books in America early in this century.

Husbands and fathers were entitled to compensation for “damage to their property” when wives or daughters were victims of rape.

Until earlier in this century in America, women could not vote, own property in their own names, nor execute legal documents. A woman was considered to cease to exist in her own right when she married, taking her husband’s name and his identity.

Late in the 1800s, at least two states, Alabama and Massachusetts, passed laws identifying spouse abuse as a wrongful act. Women campaigning for suffrage promoted their gender as equal to men, capable of being educated and functioning in other roles along with those of wife and mother.

Another century passed before equal rights for women and minorities became the rallying point for large numbers of Americans and lawmakers took note, passing laws to support and promote equal opportunities for jobs, housing and education. Feminists active in the movement to advance opportunities for women also examined closely what women experienced in their daily lives. As the abuse and battering by their intimate partners became known, women reached out to other women for help.

The first shelter, Haven House, in Pasadena, CA, was opened in 1964; Chiswick Women’s Aid opened in England in 1971 and became the first widely publicized shelter for battered women (Johnson, 1980). In 1974, the National Organization for Women (NOW) made battered women a major priority.

While American is recognized as one of the most violent nations in the world, it is also one of the most progressive and aggressive in recognizing and responding to family violence as a major segment of the violence in today’s society.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES**

From the early 1970s, the shelter movement grew in a grassroots fashion, first offering women and their children a place to stay in safety and a chance to explore their options. Underfunded, staffed mostly by volunteers, these safe houses gave women an opportunity to support and help each other, and residents discovered a commonality in their experiences which cut across racial/cultural, educational and social/economic classes.

Pennsylvania formed the first state coalition against domestic violence, and also became the first state to enact a law providing orders of protection for victims. Another landmark event in 1976 was the first national conference on battered women, held in Milwaukee, WI.

In 1978, Florida became the first state to enact laws mandating consideration of spouse abuse in child custody determinations.

Today there are some 1500 shelters for battered victims and their children. Services offered include emergency shelter, a 24 hour hotline, outreach counseling, safety planning, children's programming, legal advocacy, transportation and case management. Many also operate transitional housing programs for those who no longer need the security and structure of shelters, but are not yet ready to begin living on their own without the support services. Shelters network with schools, colleges and vocational training programs to assist victims with educational activities designed to support their empowerment.