

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS MYTHS & FACTS

Be sensitive to common misconceptions about domestic violence and make sure that key staff understand the dynamics of domestic violence.

✘ Myth: It takes two to tango. She must have done something to provoke the abuser.

✓ Fact: Acts of physical violence are not justifiable, even if the violent person claims that he was “provoked” into using violence. (The only exception to this is when a victim must use force in self-defense.) “Nagging” is not a justifiable provocation for violence, nor is burning the dinner, nor is failing to keep the baby from crying—even adultery is no justification for domestic violence—no matter how distressing such behavior may be to the abuser.

✘ Myth: She’s got to take some responsibility for ending the violence too. Surely there are things she can do to keep him from getting so angry, like trying to be more understanding when he’s feeling stressed out.

✓ Fact: Only abusers are responsible for their violence; victims cannot control or manage the behavior of abusers. **Do not insist that the victim try to “work with” or placate the abuser.**

✘ Myth: From what she’s telling me, he hasn’t hit her in a long time. She should try to work things out.

✓ Fact: The level of domestic violence an employee experiences may vary at different times. The abuser may be very violent at some times, but may not use force for months afterwards. The abuser, however, may still be emotionally abusive or financially controlling. If there is still a pattern of behavior indicating that the abuser is trying to control, demean, or manipulate the victim, you should still talk to the victim about her options. Abusive behavior often increases over time. Waiting to see if “things get better” is not a safe option. However, be aware that many victims need a certain amount of time to feel strong enough and supported enough to leave. If the victim does not want to end the relationship, she can develop a safety plan for work and home. (See the section on safety planning for more information.)

✘ Myth: Victims of domestic violence have psychological disorders that cause them to become victimized.

✓ Fact: Many people incorrectly assume 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.⁴

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.⁵

⁴See Dutton, *supra* note 3.

⁵ Mary Ann Dutton, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Battered Women: Analysis of Legal Implications, BEHAV. SCI. & L. 215, 219 (1994).

✘ Myth: Low self-esteem causes victims to get involved in abusive relationships.

✓ **Fact:** Many well-meaning individuals assume that victims of domestic violence lack adequate self-esteem or else they would not “allow” themselves to be abused by intimate partners or spouses.⁶ In fact, studies have demonstrated that victims of domestic violence fail to share common characteristics other than being female.⁷ However, some victims may experience an understandable decrease in self-esteem as a result of being abused.

✘ 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. It may take a number of attempts to permanently separate because abusers use violence, financial control, or threats about the children to compel victims to return. Additionally, a lack of support from friends, family members, or other community members may cause victims to return. Since risk of injury increases when victims separate from their abusers, they may think that it's safer to stay than to leave. The earlier victims receive help, the greater their chances of obtaining the protection and financial security they need to leave their abusers permanently. While some victims become involved with other partners who later begin to abuse them, there is no evidence that the majority of victims have this experience.

✘ Myth: Victims of domestic violence must like to be beaten, or why would they put up with it?

✓ **Fact:** 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.⁸

✘ 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, although abusers frequently use it as an excuse. Substance abuse may increase the frequency or severity of violent episodes in some cases.⁹ Treatment for substance abuse alone, however, will not end abusive behavior.

✘ 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 cuts across socioeconomic lines, partner abuse cannot be attributed solely to unemployment or poverty. Similarly, advocates note that if work-related stress caused domestic violence, batterers would assault their bosses or co-workers rather than their intimate partners. Domestic violence flourishes because perpetrators learn that they can achieve what they want through the use of force, without facing serious consequences.

⁶ Naomi Cahn & Joan S. Meier, Domestic Violence and Feminist Jurisprudence: Towards A New Agenda, 4 B.U. PUB. INT. L.J. 339, 344 (1995) (discussing stereotypes of battered women).

⁷ Gerald T. Hotaling & David B. Sugarman, An Analysis of Risk Markers in Husband to Wife Violence: The Current State of Knowledge, 1 VIOLENCE & VICTIMS 101,118 (1986).

⁸ See Dutton, *supra* note 3 at 27.

⁹ Irene Anne Jillson & Bettina Scott, Violence, Women and Alcohol: Reducing the Risks, Redressing the Consequences, Dept. of Health & Human Services, Draft Report, Jan. 1996.