

# Myths

## **Myth: "I just lost it."**

**FACT:** Batterers say they could not help themselves from using violence. Most men who batter use other methods of dealing with frustration, anger or "provocation" when it is convenient for them. When the batterer feels angry, he does not beat up his boss, his secretary, the neighbor, a stranger on the street or children playing in the next yard. Only in the privacy of his own home or when he perceives he will receive no negative consequences will he choose to use violence toward his female partner and possibly his children.

## **Myth: Abusers batter because they have low self-esteem.**

**FACT:** Many people believe that batterers are violent because they feel bad about themselves. They pick on their partners to make themselves feel better. While it may be true that many or all batterers have low self-esteem, this does not explain why they batter. The problem is not how batterers feel about themselves, it is the permission they give themselves to control and hurt other people. There are many men and women with low self-esteem who are not violent.

## **Myth: Stress causes violence.**

**FACT:** Neither stress nor drugs nor heredity cause domestic violence. Domestic violence is "caused" by a person choosing to use violence. That person has learned from his culture and interpersonal relations to use violence and that his behavior is legitimate, necessary and appropriate at that moment in time. Like drug and alcohol abuse, many people use stress as an excuse to be violent. Many people who experience stress do not use violence. Violence is only one of a myriad of responses to stress.

## **Myth: Alcohol causes battering. People who batter are alcoholics.**

**FACT:** Drinking does not cause battering. Getting sober and into a program does not stop the abuse or the violence. In addition, being a "recovering addict or alcoholic" may be used to sidestep responsibility for abusive behavior. Substance abuse is another way for an abuser not to be held accountable. Someone who drinks and is violent can learn to control both of these behaviors, and get help to do so.

## **Myth: There is poor communication in the relationship.**

**FACT:** This myth is grounded in the belief that the abuser wouldn't abuse if needs were met – a form of victim blaming. Abusers demand that their needs be met before the needs of all others.

For their safety, victims learn to read subtle, non-verbal communications well. Even when victims meet the needs of abusers, they continue to abuse.

**Myth: Women provoke battering or are masochistic.**

**FACT:** Battering and other abuses are degrading and humiliating. No behavior on the part of the victim ever justifies battering. No behavior on the part of the victim can change the abuser's decision to batter. Women who have been battered don't want or get any satisfaction from being beaten. Victims have begged the abusers to stop, sought help and tried to leave. What is viewed as masochism may be an adaptation for survival. It is the abuser's behavior that provokes or continues the violence, not the victim's.

**Myth: Batterers need to learn non-violence.**

**FACT:** Batterers *know* non-violence. The problem is not their inability to resolve conflict non-violently, but their unwillingness to do so.

**Myth: Battered women can always leave.**

**FACT:** This myth is based on the erroneous belief that leaving the relationship will stop the violence. In fact, batterers are likely to stalk the women who leave them - often making good on their threats: "If I can't have you, then no one can." The point of separation is the most likely time for the batterer to kill the woman, the children, himself and anyone who gets in the way.

Two major concerns block women from leaving: financial and emotional. Most battered women have not been allowed access to information about finances or control of assets, including their own if they work outside the home. In a society where the average woman earns 60 cents for every dollar the average man earns, even if she has marketable skills she is likely to have great difficulty supporting herself and her children.

Because of the violence, the survivor has probably been isolated from friends and family, leaving her with few if any emotional support systems. In addition, the batterer has, in the vast majority of cases, threatened that he will kill her, the children, her parents, her friends, her boss or himself if she tries to leave. Sixty-five percent of intimate homicide victims physically separated from the perpetrator prior to their death.

**Myth: He was abused as a child.**

**FACT:** Multiple research studies have examined the question of whether men who abuse women tend to be survivors of childhood abuse, and the link has turned out to be weak. A bad childhood doesn't cause a man to become an abuser, but it can contribute to making a man who is abusive especially dangerous. For some abusive men, the blame-the-childhood approach has an additional reason for being appealing: By focusing on what his mother did wrong, he gets to blame a woman for his mistreatment of women. This explanation can also appeal to the abused woman herself, since it makes sense out of his behavior and gives her someone safe to be angry at - since getting angry at him always seems to blow up in her face. The abuser only wants to draw attention to his terrible childhood if it's an excuse to stay the same, not if it's a reason to change. (*Why Does He Do That?*, by Lundy Bancroft).

**Myth: Battering or being hit "goes along" with being a woman.**

**FACT:** Some people believe it is their right to keep their partner in line and punish their partner for acts of rejection, anger or other behavior. However, there is no legal or moral authority given to a person to discipline his/her partner. Except in self-defense, there is no acceptable reason for using violence against one's partner.

**Myth: Battering isn't that common; it doesn't happen that often.**

**FACT:** Nearly four million women are abused by their husbands or boyfriends each year (*Speaking Up*, 1997). About one-half of the couples in this country have experienced violence in an intimate relationship. A woman is beaten every nine seconds in this country.

**Myth: Battering isn't all that serious.**

**FACT:** Battering is the leading cause of injury to women in this country.

Women who are battered may be verbally abused, slapped, kicked, punched, thrown around, and knifed. They may have minor injuries, they may have very serious injuries, or they may be killed. Women may have broken ribs, concussions, permanent brain injuries, hearing loss, and miscarriages as a result of beatings.

More than one million abused women seek medical help for injuries caused by battering each year. Battering causes twenty percent of visits by women to emergency medical services. (Stark, Flitcraft, and Frazier, 1982)

Thirty percent of female homicide victims are killed by their husbands or boyfriends. Battering accounted for twenty-five percent of suicide attempts by women. (*FBI Uniform Crime Reports*, 1982; Stark and Flitcraft)

**Myth: Men are battered almost as often as women.**

**FACT:** The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 95% of assaults on spouses or ex-spouses are committed by men against women. Many women use self-defense against men who batter.

**Myth: Battering only occurs in poor communities or neighborhoods, or among uneducated or minority people.**

**FACT:** Abuse occurs in all communities, to people of all ethnic/racial, faith, political, socio-economic identities, to people of all levels of ability, all ages and sexual orientations and occupations.

If we think of domestic abuse as something that happens only to poor people, or people of color, or people with little education, the dominant culture will find it easier to ignore. In reality, this is a serious national problem that affects all women despite their race, class or educational background.

**Myth: Children need their father, even if he is a batterer.**

**FACT:** Male children witnessing assault on their mother or female caregiver are 1,000 times more likely to be batterers as adults than those who did not witness such violence. Forty to 60 percent of men who abuse women also abuse children. (American Psychological Association, 1996). Children need healthy role models. Unhealthy role models damage children now and in the future. Men who batter women are more likely to batter children physically, sexually and emotionally. Their need for power and control of family members often stifles the healthy development of their children.

**Adapted from Safe Haven for Battered Women**

**Battered Women's Project  
24-hour hotline  
1-800-439-2323 / out of state 207-769-8251**