

Relationship Violence:

Myths and Realities

Myth: *Relationship violence is rare.*

Reality: Although statistics on relationship violence are not precise due to underreporting, it is clear that hundreds of thousands of women, children, and men are abused by family members or intimate partners each year in the United States alone. According to the most recent data available, the United States Department of Justice reports that 700,000 incidents of relationship violence occurred in 2001. Relationship violence is the leading major cause of injury to women in the U.S., exceeding rapes, muggings, and auto accidents *combined*, according to the U.S. Surgeon General's Office.

Myth: *Relationship violence only occurs in lower socioeconomic classes.*

Reality: Reports from police records, victim services, and academic studies show that relationship violence exists in every socioeconomic group, regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, gender, religion, educational or income level, or culture. Violence can occur in married, cohabitating and dating situations. Studies show equivalent rates of relationship violence among all cultural groups. In other words, abusers and their victims reflect the whole spectrum of socioeconomic and cultural groups in our society.

Myth: *Victims of relationship violence are masochistic.*

Reality: Persons experiencing relationship violence are *not* responsible for the brutal actions of another person. However, relationship violence victims often blame themselves. Victims also are frequently and unjustly blamed by society for their circumstances. The most common response to battering—"Why doesn't the victim just leave?"—ignores the economic, social, and psychological complexities and realities facing most victims, such as:

- Often, safe shelters are full and those experiencing violence in their intimates are financially dependent upon their abuser.
- Family, friends, local law enforcement, and the workplace, at times, are less than fully supportive. In many cases, relationship abuse survivors feel revictimized by the very systems they are reaching out to for support.
- Moreover, in many instances, the victim may be increasing the risk of physical harm or even death if she attempts to leave an abusive partner.

Too many people believe that relationship violence is a private matter between partners, rather than a criminal offense that impacts the workplace and community and merits a strong and swift response. Silence is the abuser's best friend. Your efforts to break the silence can make a difference.

Myth: *People who abuse are violent because they cannot control their anger and frustration.*

Reality: Relationship violence is intentional conduct, and abusers are not out of control. Their violence is carefully targeted to certain people at certain times and places. They generally do not attack their bosses or people on the streets, no matter how angry they may be. Abusers also follow their own internal rules about abusive behaviors. They often choose to abuse their partners only in private, or may take steps to ensure that they do not leave visible evidence of the abuse. Abusers also choose their

tactics carefully—some destroy property, some rely on threats of abuse, and some threaten children. Studies also indicate that in fact, some abusers become more controlled and calm as their aggressiveness increases.

Myth: *Men are victims of relationship violence as often as women are.*

Reality: Men do experience relationship violence, in both gay and straight relationships. However, research shows that women are victims in 90-95% of relationship violence cases. To the extent women do use violence, it is generally in self-defense. Reports of violence against men are often exaggerated because abusers will accuse their partners of using violence as a way to avoid or minimize their own responsibility. In addition, men who do experience relationship violence often have more access to resources to leave violent situations than do women.

Myth: *Relationship violence is due to poverty or lack of education.*

Reality: Relationship violence is common throughout all levels of society, whether rich or poor. It is often easier to keep the violence hidden when a person has money and connections, but it happens nonetheless. There is no evidence to support the idea that uneducated or poor people are more likely to abuse their wives or partners than are more educated and affluent people.

Myth: *Alcohol and drug use is a major cause of relationship violence.*

Reality: Although alcohol and other drugs are often associated with relationship violence, they do not cause the violence. Many abusers do not drink or abuse drugs. People who drink and abuse their partners usually do not beat random people on the street, their parents or their bosses. Abusers often continue to be abusive even after they stop drinking. An abuser may use alcohol as an excuse for the violence, or alcohol may prevent him from realizing the level of force he is using, but alcohol is not the cause.

Myth: *Abusers are never a loving partner.*

Reality: When not in a violent episode, victims of relationship violence often describe their partners as playful, sensitive and exciting. People do not seek out or intend to become involved with an abusive person; most abuse begins, increases, and becomes more severe over a period of time. Memories of happier times and the positive characteristics of abusive partners often instill hope that the abuser will change, often reinforcing the abuser's apologies and promises to do so. However, abusive patterns are very difficult to change, particularly without the willingness of the perpetrator to take accountability and seek help. The cycle between abusive incidents, apologies and better times is often referred to as the "cycle of violence" and can make it very difficult to emotionally extract oneself from an abusive situation. Severe swings in mood and behavior is a warning sign of an abusive personality.