

Chapter 2

Dismantling the Myths about Intimate Violence against Women

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A number of myths or false beliefs exist about intimate partner abuse; some are more harmful than others. These myths are based on misinformation that is commonly held by both men and women, stemming from traditional values or attempts to understand the unbelievable—that a sane woman could actually be “stuck” in a bad relationship. People often try to make sense of these bad situations and end up maintaining harmful stereotypes.

Researchers studying domestic violence strive to publish studies that prove these myths to be untrue in order to stop their harmful effects. These beliefs are so common that they are often not questioned and are accepted by both men and women. All too often these myths are believed even by the victims themselves. Not only do they allow the violence and abuse to continue, but they keep victims stuck and lessen their opportunities to get the help they need. These myths must change if we will ever have any hope of stopping violence against women.

MYTH 1: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS USUALLY A ONE-TIME, ISOLATED OCCURRENCE

Battering is a pattern of power and control through use of force. It is not just one physical attack. Domestic violence includes the repeated use of a number of tactics, including intimidation, threats, economic

deprivation (controlling all money in the relationship and only providing necessary living expenses when one chooses to do so, usually when the partner is submissive and acting "appropriate"), isolation (keeping all friends and family members away), and psychological and sexual abuse. This abuse typically involves demeaning, destructive comments that crush self-esteem and any sense of self-confidence. When someone tells you constantly that you are ugly and stupid and no one else could possibly love you, you begin to believe it.

This pattern of domestic violence tends to occur in cycles and usually involves three phases. The first is the *tension-building phase*, where anger and conflict start to grow. This is a very uncomfortable, tense time in the home, marked by negativity, emotional distance, and increased fear. When this tension builds high enough, violence erupts in the *acute battering phase*, often resulting in significant physical damage. Violence is usually followed by the *loving phase*, in which the batterer becomes sorrowful and repentant and promises never to do it again. Evidence is clear that the cycle continues and cycles more rapidly, with increasing levels of violence.¹ Moreover, even if the violence does not happen often, it remains a constant, hidden, terrorizing factor.

MYTH 2: MANY VICTIMS "ASK FOR" VIOLENT TREATMENT AND ABUSE

This belief is maintained by individuals who beat others, by persons who cannot understand why women just don't leave, and even by those who believe that women "deserve" to be beaten for overstepping the bounds of being a proper wife. Batterers "rationalize" that they had to hit or beat their wife because she needed to learn that what she had done was wrong or that it is better to let out the anger rather than hold it in. This is a blame factor that serves to take all responsibility from the person committing the violence. Even well-educated people sometimes conclude, for example, that if only dinner had been ready on time, then this would not have happened. Others get wrapped up in the mistaken logic that if the woman did not want it, she would just leave. Therefore, the situation is not so bad or perhaps she even likes it.

Victims do not ask for this abuse any more than do the victims of other types of crime. Victims of domestic violence have historically been characterized as masochistic women who enjoy being beaten. Evidence does not support this theory. Rather, victims of domestic violence desperately want the abuse to end, and they engage in various survival strategies, including calling the police or seeking help from family members, to protect themselves and their children.² Women may also use silence as a survival strategy, and they may endure a beating to keep the batterer from attacking the children. Clearly these

strategies do not mean that women enjoy being beaten or abused, but these are ways that women have to lessen a dangerous situation. Some women will also admit to provoking the violence in order to get it over with in the hope of moving into the loving phase more quickly. This is certainly not evidence that this woman is "asking for" abuse. No one deserves to be hit. No one asks for it.

MYTH 3: IF A WOMAN IS ABUSED, SHE CAN EASILY LEAVE THE SITUATION

Many men and women believe this myth to be true, especially in America. In the land of democracy and free will, people believe that an individual can make absolutely any choice he or she wants to make, including leaving a violent spouse. "Just pack your bags and get out" is what battered women hear most often. The truth is that all women in battering relationships face barriers to leaving these relationships. First, they are at greater risk of being killed by the batterer than those who stay.³ There is significant evidence that a woman is at greater risk for being seriously injured or killed during the two years following departure than at any time she lived at home with the batterer.⁴ In reality, victims make repeated attempts to leave violent relationships, but they are prevented from doing so by their partners, who tend to increase control and coercion through threats.

Economic issues are often a major reason for staying. Women who leave their spouse often have no good alternatives for housing or support for themselves or their children. Because of the nature of the abuse, which often involves increasing isolation from others, victims tend to have a very small support system. Shelters are not readily available in all communities, and even this option has limitations and has an impact on the children. It is not simply a case of not wanting to leave; most women do wish to do so. However, the costs of leaving are significant.

We also need to consider the complexities of these relationships that make leaving difficult. As stated before, the violent relationship is cyclical and almost always involves a loving phase that serves to maintain the loving feelings the woman has for her partner. She hopes he will change and wants desperately to believe it when he tells her that he will never harm her again. She does not want to give up on the dream she has for the happy family she once hoped to create.

MYTH 4: PERSONS WHO COMMIT SUCH VIOLENCE ARE SERIOUSLY PSYCHOLOGICALLY DERANGED OR PSYCHOTIC

Actually, male batterers often appear to be normal in every respect. Studies have found that batterers come from all walks of life and every

socioeconomic and ethnic group. There are no psychological characteristics that distinguish batterers from men who do not batter. Even though some batterers do meet the criteria for antisocial personality disorder or substance abuse, many do not.⁵ Moreover, these characteristics are not immediately observable. Often people outside of the relationship have trouble believing that such a seemingly normal person would be capable of such acts.

MYTH 5: VICTIMS SHOULD JUST GET OVER IT, BECAUSE THERE ARE NO LONG-LASTING EFFECTS AND A STRONG PERSON IS STRONGER WHEN THEY PUT IT IN THE PAST

In truth, there are significant long-lasting effects on a woman's physical and mental health. Although physical healing usually occurs fairly rapidly, the emotional scars are long lasting and sometimes permanent. Battered women tend to have low self-esteem as a result of constant or chronic name-calling and criticism. They are made to feel powerless and useless and begin to believe in these statements. Emotional abuse is usually not a one-time incident that can be ignored or dismissed. Most women report that the mental or emotional abuse is more destructive than the physical abuse.⁶ Many women develop chronic low self-esteem and even clinical depression.⁷

Although challenges often make us stronger, this is not usually the case in domestic abuse situations due to the relatively long-term and extremely personal nature of the relationship. We often hurt the ones we love the most deeply, because we know all of their weaknesses and insecurities. Batterers tend to be superb at finding these buttons and pushing them often as they serve to enhance their control over others.

MYTH 6: SEXUAL ABUSE IS ABOUT SEX, AND IF A WOMAN WERE PROVIDING ADEQUATE SEX, HER HUSBAND WOULD NOT BE ABUSIVE (TO HER OR OTHERS)

The vast majority of sexual assault is about power, anger, and control, not about sexual gratification.⁸ As in other forms of violence, the perpetrator believes that he is entitled to force others to his will. It is simply not true that men who rape or engage in sexual abuse of others do so because their sexual needs are not being met by a partner. One study found that rapists often have higher levels of consensual sexual activity than other men.⁹ The reality is that sexual abuse is not about sex or sexual gratification at all. Although these perpetrators may achieve sexual release through their actions, it is not their motivation for engaging in such acts. When aggression is rewarded and associated with increased power and even sexual gratification, the tendency

toward aggression will continue and even grow.¹⁰ The motivation tends to be a desire for power and control, and the desire comes from a perceived powerlessness and the wish to gain power.

MYTH 7: MANY WOMEN ARE JUST AS VIOLENT AS MEN

The truth is that women who become violent or kill are far more likely to be responding to violence rather than starting it.¹¹ The idea that partners engage in "mutual combat" has been disproved. Although some women do engage in violent acts, they usually do it in self-defense.¹² Domestic violence is a serious issue for both men and women. According to the National Institute of Justice and the CDC, almost one-third of domestic violence is against men; however, men in general produce greater injury overall. The amount, frequency, severity, and consistency of violence against women are far greater than anything done by women to men.¹³ The likelihood that women will become more violent in response to an escalating threat to their lives increases when they stay in an abusive relationship.

MYTH 8: VIOLENCE ONLY HAPPENS IN BAD OR POOR FAMILIES

Studies of domestic violence consistently have found that battering occurs among all types of families, regardless of income, profession, region, ethnicity, educational level, or race.¹⁴ Although there are risk factors associated with higher rates of domestic violence, such as alcohol use, lower socioeconomic status, childhood exposure to abuse, early marriage or early parenthood, and stress, domestic violence occurs in all communities and among all types of people. Because many victims will not report family violence due to the stigma attached, we do not have a clear picture of differences across social classes or ethnicities. The fact that there are more calls received from poorer urban areas may not mean that the rate of domestic violence is higher among lower income groups.¹⁵ It is important to remember that even men in respectable positions, like attorneys, physicians, or even psychologists, can be batterers.

MYTH 9: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS WORSE IN OTHER COUNTRIES

This myth tries to dismiss gendered violence in this country as being less a problem compared to that in less modernized countries. The reality is that the United States has the highest levels of reported rape in the industrialized world. The rate is about 18 times higher than that in

England and 9 times higher than that in Canada.¹⁶ Every six minutes a woman in this country is raped; every 18 seconds a woman is beaten, and every day four women are killed by their batterers. The rates of partner abuse tend to be high in other countries, but the rates in the United States are similar to many European countries.¹⁷ About 25 percent of women in the United States will experience abuse during their lifetime, which means about three million women are abused each year.¹⁸ Cultural differences may affect rates of reporting; therefore, actual rates in most countries can only be estimated.

Violence in the United States often occurs within the family, with the risk of injury for women and children being higher at home than on the most dangerous city streets.¹⁹ Between one-third and one-half of women who are seen in U.S. hospitals are there due to injuries related to domestic violence.²⁰

MYTH 10: IF I AM UNDERSTANDING AND PATIENT, THINGS WILL GET BETTER

Many women (as well as family and friends of battered couples) want to believe this myth and hope that things will get better. However, waiting and hoping a batterer will change is not a good plan. As stated earlier, abuse is typically a pattern that gets worse over time—growing in frequency and intensity—if active steps are not taken to change it.

There are things that women can do to prevent or escape abuse. In later chapters, many of the options and legal issues involved will be discussed. One of the first steps in preventing abuse is to understand the realities of the situation and dismantle the myths. Holding on to erroneous beliefs continues the cycle of violence and avoids putting blame on the batterer by blaming the victim instead. Studies have shown that more and more Americans believe that domestic violence is a serious crime, and all 50 states have passed laws to protect abused women. However, the continued belief of these myths keeps progress slow.