

Appendix 9: Challenging Misconceptions About Domestic Abuse

Many people will have misconceptions and attitudes about domestic abuse which are incorrect. Here are some common myths about what domestic abuse is and who it affects:

- MYTH:** **Abusers are violent because they cannot control their anger and frustration**
REALITY: Abusers do not beat random people on the street, their parents or their bosses. They direct their violence only at their spouses. Anger management is not the solution. For most abusers, anger is a tactic, not a cause. Perpetrators of domestic abuse often show their ability to control their anger by becoming very calm and "reasonable" when explaining their abusive behaviour to others such as law enforcement.
- MYTH:** **Couples in an abusive relationship just need relationship counselling**
REALITY: Domestic abuse is not a conflict resolution problem, it is an abuse of power. The problem belongs to the abuser. Giving an abuser marital counselling is like giving a child abuser parenting classes.
- MYTH:** **The abuse can't be that bad if she/he stays**
REALITY: Survivors have many reasons for staying in an abusive relationship. There are social, economic, cultural, religious reasons why they might stay. Survivors may have no place to go. They may not have the means to support themselves or their children if they leave. They may be ashamed about the abuse. They may be reluctant to leave for emotional or religious reasons. They may fear that the abuser will carry out threats to harm her/him, him/herself the children, friends or family. A perpetrator of abuse will work to ensure that survivors feel that they cannot cope on their own. It is important to remember that leaving is a process not an event.
- MYTH:** **Abusers are often provoked into reacting**
REALITY: There is never an excuse for abuse. No one deserves to be beaten or mentally tortured, no matter what the supposed provocation. Attacks are often triggered by innocent requests and actions. Domestic abuse is ALWAYS A CHOICE.
- MYTH:** **Abusive relationships will get better over time**
REALITY: Once abuse begins, it tends to get progressively worse. It will not stop unless the abuser is held to account and gets professional help.
- MYTH:** **Perpetrators of abuse are always malevolent and brutal**
REALITY: When they are not abusing, abusers can be very "loving" while promising it will not happen again. Abusers may lead very "normal" lives and appear to be very prominent and respectable members of the community, except for their violent, aggressive impulses within the family.
- MYTH:** **Alcohol and substance abuse cause violence.**
REALITY: While alcohol/substance abuse are often correlated in cases of abuse, they are not the cause. Control and inhibition over violent behaviour may be reduced and used as an excuse, but survivors are usually abused whether the abuser is drunk or sober. Many people who abuse their spouse do not drink.
- MYTH:** **Perpetrators abuse because they are mentally ill**
REALITY: Personality disorders, mental illness, poor impulse control, and generational abuse do not cause domestic abuse. Even in the minority of cases where a mental illness may cause a person to be abusive, the abuse is not specifically targeted at one person but to everyone around during the episode. However, if an abuser also has a mental illness, they may be more dangerous. For example, an abuser who is severely depressed may stop caring about the consequences of their actions, making them more of a threat to their partner.
- MYTH:** **Domestic abuse is always violent**
REALITY: Actual physical violence can be a relatively small part of a relationship characterised by coercive control. Often the threat of violence is enough to maintain power and control. Emotional and psychological abuse are always associated with violently abusive relationships.
- MYTH:** **Abusers don't beat their children.**
REALITY: Domestic violence against a spouse is often correlated with violence towards children. An abuser may be abusive to his/her partner without ever doing so to the child(ren). However, if the child is in an environment where they are witnessing abuse either visibly or audibly then it is still considered child abuse.

- MYTH:** **Once an abuser, always an abuser.**
REALITY: Perpetrators can change with spiritual and professional help to find non-violent solutions to problems. They can change, but the majority do not. 9 out of 10 abusers do not believe they are doing wrong and need to end their violence. They never seek help.
- MYTH:** **Domestic abuse is a family matter – the community should not interfere**
REALITY: Domestic abuse is a violation of Christian principles. We have a moral responsibility to help the oppressed. Domestic abuse is also against the law, and that makes it everyone's business. Assaults within the family are as much of a crime as assaults outside the family.
- MYTH:** **Domestic abuse only affects a small portion of the population**
REALITY: 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6-7 men in the UK will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime.
- MYTH:** **A victim of abuse can fully understand what is happening to them**
REALITY: When someone is in a relationship in which they are subjected to abuse they will often feel very confused about what is happening, and they are sometimes not sure that what they are experiencing is abuse. Abusers are very intentional about stripping the victim of their sense of value and their ability to cope.
- MYTH:** **The victim should stay for the sake of the children**
REALITY: Child witnesses of domestic abuse on average exhibit more aggressive and antisocial behaviors, fearful and inhibited behaviors, anxiety, depression, trauma symptoms, temperament problems, and lowered social competence, than children who do not witness such violence. Youth who witness domestic abuse are more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, commit other delinquent behavior, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crimes.
- MYTH:** **Perpetrators abuse because they come from violent homes**
REALITY: There is definitive research to support the cycle of violence theory and there is no definite inevitable link. Some children grow up to make healthy choices and can go on to have positive relationships free from abuse. While we are profoundly influenced by our family of origin, our future is not determined by our past.
- MYTH:** **Domestic abuse is due to poverty or a lack of education**
REALITY: Domestic violence is common throughout all levels of society, whether rich or poor. There is no evidence to support the idea that uneducated or poor people are more likely to abuse than are more educated and affluent people. Domestic abuse and violence can happen to anyone at any time.