

Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women

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Understanding Men Who Batter

Men who batter women come from all socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The abuser may be young or old, blue collar or white collar, highly paid or unemployed. He may be a drinker or non-drinker. He may use drugs or not use at all. Batterers represent all different kinds of personalities, family backgrounds, and professions. There is no typical batterer.

The majority of batterers are only violent with their intimate partners. One study found that 90% of abusers do not have criminal records and that batterers are generally law-abiding outside the home. It is estimated that only 5-10% of batterers commit acts of physical and sexual violence against other people as well as their female partners.

Although there is no personality profile of the abuser, there are some behaviors that are common among men who batter their partners. These include:

- Denying the existence or minimizing the seriousness of the violence and its effects on the victim and other family members;
- Showing extreme jealousy and possessiveness which often leads to isolation of the victim from family and friends;
- Refusing to take responsibility for the abuse by blaming it on loss of control, the effects of alcohol or drugs, frustration, stress, and/or the victim's behavior; and
- Holding rigid, traditional views of sex roles and parenting, or negative attitudes toward women in general.

Why Do Men Batter?

Typically, when trying to understand why men batter, people want to look for what is "wrong" with the abuser, believing that they must be mentally ill in some way. However, battering is not a mental illness that can be diagnosed, but a learned behavioral choice. Men choose to batter women because the choice is theirs to make, and until quite recently, there have been no consequences for these actions.

Battering is the extreme expression of the belief of male dominance over women. To understand why men choose to batter, it is important to look at what they get out of using violence. Men use physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse to maintain power and control over their relationships with their female partners. They have learned that violence works to achieve this end.

Many batterers grew up in homes where they or a sibling were physically abused or their mother was abused by their father. The effects of a batterer on a child has been identified as a common factor for becoming a batterer in adulthood.

While many batterers have substance abuse problems, there is no evidence that alcohol or drugs cause violence behavior. In fact, batterers may abuse their partners while intoxicated as well as sober. However, battering incidents involving alcohol or drug use may be more severe.

Can Batterers Change Their Behavior?

Because battering is a learned behavior, it can be unlearned. However, the goal of non-violence in a relationship is unlikely to be achieved through traditional marital or couples therapy. Programs designed specifically for batterers are the preferred method for addressing abusive behavior.

Programs for batterers are not the cure-all for domestic violence, but one facet of a coordinated community response to the problem. Before developing a batterers program, there must be mechanisms in place to ensure the safety of the battered woman. This includes shelter and advocacy services. The criminal justice system must take an aggressive approach to treating domestic violence as a crime, through pro-arrest police policies and vigorous prosecution of offenders. The community must send the message to the abuser that battering will not be tolerated and there will be consequences for his violence.

The primary goal of a batterers program is to eliminate physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The focus is on the victim's safety and well-being. The following are key elements of a successful abusive behavior treatment program:

- The batterer is held completely responsible for the violence and for changing his behavior to end it;
- The focus is not on treating individual psychopathology, but on teaching how to choose and develop non-violent behaviors, emotions, and attitudes.
- The abuser learns about the social systems and norms that have given him tacit approval of battering.

Batterers programs cannot operate in isolation, but need to be coordinated with community services for abused women. Ideally, batterers programs should not compete for scarce funding with domestic violence programs providing life-saving services to victims. The batterers program should work in the community to change the response of systems to domestic violence, in addition to its work with individual abusive men.

Court-Mandated Counseling

Batterers who are convicted in criminal court are frequently mandated by judges to complete special counseling programs as part of their sentence or as a condition of probation, with stated consequences for violation. In civil court, protection orders or divorce/custody determinations may include conditions that the batterer attend counseling. In some areas, criminal courts give the batterer the option to have charges dropped by completing a counseling program, thereby avoiding the entire trial process. This dangerous practice can reinforce the idea that domestic violence is not a crime and gives the abuser a method of avoiding consequences for this violence. Batterers must not be diverted from prosecution. Court-ordered counseling needs to be a part of sentencing or probation after adjudication.