

5 Myths About Domestic Abuse Everyone Believes

Perhaps the only good thing we can say about domestic violence right now is that we know it when we see it. The Ray Rice video and the pictures of what Chris Brown did to Rihanna's face have cemented a solid image into the public consciousness, giving us a framework to point at and say, "That! Yeah, that! Let's get that right on out of here." Which is good, right? The "know your enemy" part of the fight against domestic abuse is taken care of.

Except we kinda don't know the enemy at all. And since one in four women and one in seven men will be abused in their lifetime, this is kind of a big blind spot. We spoke to six different victims of domestic abuse -- male and female -- and found out that lots of these cases don't look like the plots of Lifetime movies ...

No, It Isn't Always A Tough Guy Beating A Submissive Woman

When we say "domestic violence," most of us get the same image in our head: a man, probably a white guy with a southern accent, probably wearing a sleeveless white shirt, standing over a woman who cowers on the ground in fear. But while that happens, that's only a tiny sliver of the whole picture. For instance, we mentioned about three sentences ago that, while domestic abuse happens less often to men, it still happens. And of the women who've reported at least one instance of domestic violence in their life, more than half say it was "bidirectional." That's how it went for "Lindsay":

"We had our first argument at his parent's house in the yard at 2 a.m. We started wrestling, both of us back and forth. He got in my face and yelled at me, and I punched him right in his face, so he grabbed me and we started wrestling in the yard ... I had a nice little violence streak myself, so it made the whole process destructively fun."

In this case, "fun" may be a bit subjective.

But after Lindsay got pregnant, the dynamic changed:

"That's when the fear set in, because I was so sick and had no way to defend myself. He kept going, and it got worse ... he dragged me down a flight of stairs by my hair and threw me over a balcony."

See, here's the thing: Even bringing up the concept of a woman getting physical with a man is borderline offensive to some, because it makes it sound like they're equally at fault, and that therefore no one involved can be considered a victim. The reality is that mutual abuse can mean one party gets slapped, while the other gets put in the hospital; one lives in fear for their life, the other is merely annoyed. What we do know is that women are twice as likely to get injured from abuse, simply because guys generally are bigger and stronger than them.

Which isn't exactly the best factoid for guys unwilling to pick on someone their own size. But, as wrong as it is to say that men have it as bad, it's equally wrong to pretend male victims don't exist. The two men we spoke to both said that they had trouble believing that they were victims themselves, let alone convincing other people:

"The first one that I remember the most vividly is when she threw a DS at my head," said Dean. Another time, they were shopping and, *"there was a problem with her card, and after it went through it, ended up overcharging her. I tried to reach over and comfort her, but she dug her fingernails into my arm and cut my wrist open."* And that right there is another misconception. It isn't always about huge blow-ups and dramatic beatings; it can also mean smaller, but constant, abuse that slowly wears away the victim's sense of self-worth and urge to protect themselves.

Oh, and when Dean finally called the police on his abuser, he almost ended up being the one arrested.

Which isn't surprising, since the idea that domestic violence only flows one way is pretty deeply ingrained. Once again, these cases get used as ammo by people trying to argue which gender gets it worse, but at the end of the day, the same gender roles wind up screwing everybody -- just in different ways. As Will says, *"There are very few people who could ever believe I was unsafe, or I was manipulated or used. How can a man be physically scared of a woman, let alone emotionally? That doesn't compute to society. Men aren't meant to have emotions. We are supposed to be the rock or whatever."*

Not All Abuse Is Physically Violent

Unless you're a special kind of wanker, you probably agree that beating the hell out of someone you love is bad. That's why the hallmarks of any movie or public service announcement about domestic violence are bruises, broken bones, and black eyes -- maybe covered with makeup or flimsy excuses, to drive home how shameful victims find the experience.

Even if we don't see someone actually in physical pain, we're shown the signs that some kind of physical altercation took place. In reality, abuse is a lot more complicated than that. Studies consistently find that victims of abuse find the emotionally abusive acts more devastating than the physical violence, and that oftentimes, the most traumatic part of the physical abuse is the fear it inspires -- fear that is the same whether they're getting hit, or only feel like they might. Two of the people we spoke to, Sarah and Shannon, never suffered physical abuse at all.

"I remember telling my ex that it would hurt me less if he hit me," Sarah said. *"One of the worst was when I was sitting on my bed, and my daughter was a few months old, and I was trying to cover my baby's ears while he was screaming at me and throwing blankets and calling me a *****bitch. He used to tout 'I've never hit you,' as if it was something to be proud of."*

"Don't hit people" is a lesson you were supposed to learn the same year as "Don't poop in your pants." Neither are something to brag about as an adult.

Sometimes the abuse is manipulation, like how Shannon's ex repeatedly told her he was going to kill himself. *"He took my keys, went back to my room to get a knife he had given me to keep him from killing himself, and then he wouldn't leave. I had to call my friends at 5 a.m. to get him out of my room. Later, a girl took me aside and told me that he had planned to do this. He had told his boss that he wouldn't be in that morning."*

What these stories have in common is that the victims and perpetrators both knew that no one would take claims of abuse seriously if they didn't have a black eye, or at least a few bruises to show off. Shannon said that because she was never beaten, she didn't think it was abuse. Hell, the abuser probably didn't, either. "What, does this look like a mullet and a tank top to you? I'm not one of *those* guys."

The Abused Don't Always Stay Out of Fear

If you've seen even one movie on the subject -- such as, say, the Julia Roberts thriller *Sleeping With The Enemy* -- you probably think that the abused stay in relationships out of a fear of what might happen if they try to escape. "If you leave, I'll kill you." The reality is, again, way more complicated.

"People say, 'Man, if she ever hit me, I would just go,'" says Dean, "and I just want to turn to them and say, 'You're in a really nice relationship, right? Been together for several years? What if you went home tonight and she struck you. You'd just go?' It's easy to say you'll swim for shore when you're not in the middle of the ocean."

This is probably true of all humans -- your idea of a "deal breaker" usually exists only in your imagination. "I'd never work for a boss who treated me like that!" is a lot easier to say when you're not the one depending on that paycheck to pay the rent. And remember that in an abusive relationship, it's almost always smooth sailing in the beginning. *"If someone hits you on the third date, you're gonna think they're insane,"* says Shannon. The problem is that her abuser didn't start abusing her until they'd been together for months: *"I didn't want to leave the relationship, because I had already invested so much time and energy into it."*

For some couples, the bad stuff doesn't surface until their lives have become entwined in ways that are impossible to cleanly separate. When you're living under the same roof and have kids, joint bank accounts, and the same social circles, severing a relationship is severing a part of yourself. How long would you have to have your leg caught in a bear trap before you'd finally decided it was worth it to hack the thing off, *127-Hours*-style? You'd try almost everything else first.

And if it's not a broken version of love or financial dependence that keeps you in an abusive relationship, it might be something far stranger. *"At times, I would provoke him, because afterwards, the sex would be so great,"* Lindsay said. *"After every time, he would sit there and cry and moan about how much it hurt him to hurt me, he'd treat my wounds, and then we would have the most awesome sex ever and everything would go back the way it was."*

And this is where we're going to lose a lot of readers, because they can use this story as an excuse to dismiss everything Lindsay is saying. *"She provoked him? On purpose? That must mean she liked it! Hey, I bet all women secretly like it! Look at me, I'm a piece of garbage!"* Don't do that. Understanding how she came to think that that is what intimacy looks like is a knot that it would take a therapist to untie. In fact, many have tried. And the truth is that most of our subjects mentioned a strong attraction to their abuser, even though they knew that the attraction was destroying them emotionally and putting their lives at risk.

"As much as I hate to admit this, the thought of [her] still makes my heart skip a beat," Dean said. "I know I could never be in a relationship with her again. It would have to be a perfect storm, she would have to prove she was different. But even after the hell I went through, even after all that, I still miss her."

It's so hard to get domestic abuse victims to press charges against their abuser that many jurisdictions no longer give them a choice. They'd prefer to try to "work through it," but unfortunately ...

"Fixing" An Abuser Is Nearly Impossible

We all already know that *Beauty And The Beast* isn't the most enlightened glimpse at relationship dynamics, considering the fact that someone who locks you in the attic and regularly tries to claw you to death is indeed an abuser. But have you ever thought about how old that story is, and how often it gets retold in different forms, even today? The myth of a victim changing -- fixing -- an abuser is powerful, because human beings really want to believe that you can somehow repair an abusive relationship. At least, that's according to therapists, who explain that victims are extremely likely to return to their abuser when given the chance.

Some people believe that it's a survival technique. In pre-civilization days, even being with an abusive partner was safer than trying to live alone (because tigers). But no matter the reason, the fact remains that the human brain (and all of society) will do everything it can to keep you in a terrible situation. Hell, that's what *Fifty Shades Of Grey* is about, even if the author doesn't know it.

"I tried really hard to put us into counseling throughout the years," Diane, another abuse victim, says. "Couples counseling, individual counseling, AA [because her abuser was a heavy drinker]. But he couldn't accept that, because his friends and mother never had a problem with what he did." Even if Diane had gotten her abuser to go to a counselor, it may not have worked. When Sarah told a counselor that her abuser had threatened to kill himself in front of their children, the counselor cried out, "Why don't you go back? Don't you care? He's gonna kill himself!"

And like counselors, Sarah blamed herself for the abuse: *"When watching Crazy Heart ... there's a scene where [Jeff Bridges] tries to reconcile with [Maggie Gyllenhaal]. When she turned him down, my immediate reaction was, 'Don't do that! You're going to drive him to drink!' That's the mentality many of us take on. If we just do this, or just do that, he will be better. And the people around us reinforce that."*

The implication behind all the outside advice Sarah got was that this problem was somehow a communication issue, and if they could just listen to each other, it would be solved. You know, kind of like how you need to let your spouse know that you don't actually like their meatloaf, and that you've always eaten it to avoid hurting their feelings ("Well crap, honey, why didn't you say something before?"). But that's naive; what abusers want/need is control, at all costs. Even if you can get them to give up certain behaviors (say, threatening to call the police if they get violent again), getting them to give up their need for control requires fundamentally changing who they are as a person. It's not that this kind of change never happens, but you sure can't count on it.

But don't take our word for it. Experts recommend against going to couples counseling at all when the relationship is abusive. There's no point. Usually, the abuser will see the counseling as one more way to get control (for instance, by using the sessions to put all of the blame on the partner) or as a threat to their power (in which case, they'll stop going the moment the counselor recommends any meaningful change, often claiming they were the victim of bias).

That means that, yes, leaving is often the only choice. But ...

Leaving Doesn't Magically Fix Everything

At the end of the movie *Waitress*, the hero faces her abuser down, threatens him, tells him she wants a divorce, and that's it. She gets to move on and live her life in peace (it's basically the end of *Sleeping With The Enemy*, except instead of Julia Roberts shooting her husband to death, Keri Russell wins a local pie-baking contest and opens a diner). And as wonderful as that sounds, no one we spoke to got to close this terrible chapter of their lives so easily.

"Two weeks [after I left her], she called me, threatening to kill herself," Dean told us. "She had just had sex with someone and had been kicked out of that house ... she wanted me to calm her down, and I did. After that call, we've talked a few times, off and on. If she called me tonight after this interview to calm her down, I'd do it again."

Will's situation was more antagonistic. *"I wanted a week away ... some friends invited me to stay with them. Within two days of my being there, she sent them a letter telling them I was mentally unstable, so they asked me to leave. Now, I always feel like everybody wants to get the jump on me. What if they are trying to manipulate me?"*

But at least he had somewhere to go. When Diane left, she ended up living in a homeless shelter. *"I started thinking that maybe he was really right. Maybe I am all the terrible things he told me I was,"* she said. *"I'm just alone, by myself, with nothing, on the street."* For that month, Diane joined the 63 percent of homeless women who have suffered domestic violence. She left the shelter because *"I felt like I didn't deserve to be there. I was out of place. There were people who were in worse places than I was that needed a bed more than I did."* So where in a movie, this would be the part where the credits rolled over an upbeat song with hopeful lyrics, Diane ended up moving into her car with her cat, only for the animal to die shortly afterwards. If you think it was a downer for us to tell you that, well, try living it sometime.

As for Sarah, she says that to this day, the abuse she suffered has changed the way she interacts with men. *"It makes me really anxious to be around healthy couples. I'll be around my friends in healthy marriages, and when the woman is being blunt or ribbing her husband or joking around, it really freaks me out. Because what if he gets mad? I had a friend who said 'Go get the baby, he's crying,' and I panicked. 'Oh my gosh, you didn't say please go get the baby. He's going to think you're telling him what to do.'"*

Today, Sarah has rebuilt her life and is raising her daughters, still having to interact with her abuser, due to the children, but now with a home of her own and good relationships. Yet she still can't forget, or go back to seeing the world the way she did before. *"No one really understands it when I explain it to them. But knowing that there are so many women who will spend their lives in these situations -- women who don't know they should leave, women who aren't allowed to leave -- it makes me feel guilty that I was able to."*