

## Frequently Asked Questions about Domestic Violence

### **Am I really a battered woman?**

A lot of women who have been assaulted don't want to think of themselves as battered. Our society has taught us to believe that battered women have low self-esteem, are weak, or masochistic. No one wants to think of herself in that way. In fact, battered women come from all races, are rich and poor and everything in between, have lots of education or none, and have no special personality characteristics.

The only thing that all battered women have in common is that their partner has caused them to live in fear and has tried to take control of their lives.

If you identify yourself as a battered woman, you might have to accept that you can't change your partner, and that he has a serious problem with violence. Many women don't want to think of their husbands or boyfriends as batterers.

If you can't figure out whether you have been battered, call the crisis line, and talk to one of the counselor/advocates.

### **Is it just the drinking?**

NO!! If he stopped drinking, he wouldn't stop being abusive.

A lot of times, assailants will drink so that they can have an excuse for assaulting their partners. Many batterers blame their drinking or drug use for their violence, and claim they cannot help themselves. That is not true. They have the choice not to batter. They also have the choice to seek help for their use of alcohol or other drugs.

A lot of batterers claim that they can't help what they do when they are drunk or high – that they are out of control and therefore not responsible for what they do. In fact, a lot of people drink, but only some assault their partners.

Batterers' judgement and physical ability may be harmed by their drinking or drug use. If he is trying to strangle you into unconsciousness, and he is drinking, he might misjudge and kill you. If he pushes you, he might miss, and push you down the stairs. But people will not commit acts that they feel are totally wrong even when drinking.

### **Could I be killed?**

YES!! Most battered women survive and many leave their assailants for good. However, one third of all female homicide victims are killed by their husband or an intimate partner. If you are battered, you are in danger of being killed. Most homicides occur after women have left or when assailants realize deep down that they are leaving for good. On average, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than 3 women are killed everyday in the United States by their husband or intimate partner.

### **Can I change him? Can I help him?**

NO! He has to make the decision to change. You cannot save him.

The only thing you can do for him is to give him a referral to assailants' counseling and hope he goes.

### **He says he's sorry and that he'll never do it again. Can I trust that?**

NO! Survivors experience a "honeymoon" or "respite" period after an assault. Many assailants say they are sorry after an attack. Often they will also cry, plead, apologize, and send gifts.

Some will enter counseling once or twice, and then drop out. He might share some of his grief and pain with you. He'll seem vulnerable and open to you. He will remind you of the man you fell in love with. However, eventually, you will be assaulted again (In some cases, assailants decide that they can control their partners without physical assaults, and escalate the psychological controls – controlling money, controlling access to children, convincing their partners that they will lose their children if they leave. They don't have to hit any more, because their victims know that they are capable of brutality and violence).

Some survivors say that the apologies and gifts are just another method of control. He's afraid you will leave. Being abusive will strengthen your resolution to go, so he tries being sweet and loving instead.

Violence never goes away by itself. It usually increases in frequency and intensity over time. Battering is a behavior that is learned. It's learned in families, and it's learned in our culture. It is developed and practiced over time. It takes specialized work by counselors trained to deal with this problem for batterers to have a chance to change.

### **Will he go to prison?**

Usually he will not. In most cases, domestic assailants are charged with misdemeanor assault and battery. If convicted, the maximum sentence for a first offense in Michigan is 93 days in jail (The second and third conviction might mean more time in jail). More often, they are put on probation, and often they are sentenced to batterers' counseling. If you assailant is charged with a felony, there is a possibility that he might go to prison.

It is not your fault if your partner is convicted of a crime and therefore it is not your fault if he goes to prison or jail. He committed the crime; it's his responsibility.

### **What about couples counseling?**

Assailants often say that their partners are the crazy ones and need counseling. Survivors may think that they can save their marriage through couples counseling. They hope that contact with a therapist will help their partner realize he's violent, and that he'll stop abusing them,

When there is violence in a relationship, couples (or marital) counseling does not work. Couples' counseling assumes that the primary problem is "the relationship" or "communication" and that both people are responsible for making the changes necessary to make the relationship better.

This will not end the violence – it increases the danger. No matter what issues or problems there may be in a relationship, battering is one individual's problem – the one who is using the violence.

Usually, the survivor is afraid to say what is really going on because the assailant may punish he for doing so. The assailant usually uses the therapy as another means of keeping control over her.

### **Isn't divorce against God's Law?**

Not necessarily. Consult a leader in your faith who also knows about domestic violence. If divorce is forbidden in your religion, you might want to consider an order for separate maintenance. Consult your religious leader for your house of worship's position about a marriage with violence in it. Often, the church believes that if one person is violent and abusive, then they have broken the marriage vow. Your religious leader may tell you that God does not want you to be hit or hurt.

A lot of battered women have strong spiritual beliefs and/or are very connected to their religious community. Some religious communities are very supportive of a woman's safety. Others are not. Sometimes they may counsel the woman to stay and try to work it out, or even actively support the abuser (usually because they don't understand about domestic violence). Try to find someone connected with your faith who is knowledgeable about violence against women.

### **Why does he hit me?**

People batter in order to control their partners. He may say it's because he was hit as a child. He may blame losing his job, or being discriminated against. He may say he's been treated badly in other relationships, or that what you do forces him to hit. Some women want to believe these "reasons" because they think that by changing what they do, they will be able to stop the violence. Unfortunately, batterers make a choice to assault because they want their partners to do as they say. If you change your behavior, he will still hit you.

**I feel like he makes up rules and punishes me for breaking them.**

**Am I crazy?**

NO!! Batterers do indeed make rules in relationships and then punish their partners for breaking them. Usual rules are:

- You cannot leave the relationship unless I am through with you
- You may not tell anyone about my violence or coercive controls
- I am entitled to your obedience, service, affection, loyalty, fidelity and undivided attention. You must prove to me that you are on my side.
- I get to decide which of the other rules are critical.

**Is he mentally ill?**

NO! Many people believe that anybody who would beat and torture someone they claim to love is “crazy” and needs help.

Batterers may need help, but they are not mentally ill because they batter. Mental illness does not cause battering. Most people who are mentally ill are not physically violent.

**What if I hit him? Doesn't that make me just as bad?**

NO! Battered women try all kinds of methods to stop the violence. They may do as the assailant tells them, try to calm him down and give him what he wants. They will try to argue and reason or cry and plead.

Most battered women try using force to get the assailant to stop hitting them. The most common things that survivors do are – bite the assailant or scratch his face to stop him from choking her or twisting her arm; grab a knife and tell him to back off; or push him away to run out of the room. All of these acts are self-defense, and not criminal.

Sometimes assailants will call the police and claim they are the real victims, and show the police their scratches or bites. Sometimes battered women are arrested incorrectly. If this has happened to you, tell the police the whole sequence of events. If you've been arrested incorrectly, your local domestic violence program can help you set the record straight. Call your local domestic violence program.