

# They Say, We Say

## Dispelling Myths About Domestic Violence

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month – a time when domestic violence service providers across the country plan events to mourn those who died, celebrate those who've survived and now thrive, promote the availability of free and confidential help, and encourage their community members to get involved in efforts to stop the violence.

It's also about raising awareness, but then again, it's always about raising awareness. Despite tremendous success in bringing domestic violence out from behind closed doors...in building a nationwide network of hotlines, shelters, and counseling centers...in enacting sweeping legal protections...ignorance, indifference, skepticism, and denial continue to create barriers to individuals coming forward for help and thwart efforts to effect lasting social change.

We thought we'd take this opportunity during October to dispel some of the misperceptions about domestic violence, and, in the process, try to raise a little more awareness.

**They Say: It's Just a Domestic**  
**We Say: It's Actually a Deadly Crime**

Even after all these years, far too many people still don't get that it's against the law to abuse a family or household member or intimate partner. Likewise, far too many people underestimate the potential for lethality in violent relationships.

*"What started with domestic violence..."* This is how a morning news show began its report on a deadly shooting rampage in another state that took the lives of 11 victims – many of them related to the shooter.

*"What started with domestic violence" implies it ended with something else, that the gunfire, the murders, the high-speed police chase, the killer's suicide were incidental to the domestic violence.*

It plays into the public perception that domestic violence is something less than a crime, nothing more than a "situation" involving couples or family members who fight with each other.

The reality is that domestic violence can be, and often is, as brutal and deadly as any stranger-on-stranger assault...that without appropriate response and intervention, the violence and the consequences can only get worse and continue into the next generation...that it reaches far beyond the closed doors of a home and has profound and lasting impact on an entire community.

[2008 Domestic Violence Fatality Statistics](#)

**They Say: Not My Neighborhood**  
**We Say: It Can Happen Anywhere**

People in general don't want to believe that domestic violence happens in their neighborhood. And when it does, you can always find a neighbors willing to talk about their shock and disbelief that such a thing could take place on their quiet, peaceful, well-kept street. For example, following a domestic violence murder in one Pennsylvania county, one of the neighbors told reporters.

*"It's a wonderful neighborhood...it leaves a person shocked that something like this would happen in a peaceful, law-abiding neighborhood. You read in the paper that violent crimes happen in big cities, but you don't think it would happen in your own backyard."*

The fact is domestic violence can and does happen in all communities, in all income and education levels, with victims and perpetrators representing a diverse cross-section of society. Where someone lives has little to do with the people they live with and what goes on behind their closed doors.

**They Say: Not My Business**  
**We Say: It's Everyone's Business**

One of the more common statements people make about domestic violence is that it's not their problem, not their business. What they don't know is that domestic violence takes a toll on an entire community. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates the annual cost of lost productivity due to domestic violence equals \$727.8 million, with more than 7.9 million paid workdays lost each year. The CDC also estimates the health related costs of intimate partner rape, physical assault, stalking and homicide exceeds \$5.8 billion each year, with \$4.1 billion going toward direct medical and mental health related services.

And sometimes, many times, the cost is someone's life.

Consider this statement by a next-door neighbor in a newspaper article about a domestic violence murder:

*"...beyond the constant fighting, bickering and arguing that often left one of the two locked out of the house, they were a pretty normal family ...they never took the fights outside the house. They kept it all inside."*

We're all in big trouble if that's what is considered a "normal" family.

**They Say: If They Wanted To Get Help, They'd Ask For It**  
**We Say: If Only It Were That Easy**

People fail to realize that in homes where domestic violence is a way of life, fear can cripple and paralyze so much so that victims aren't able to reach out for help. Or maybe they think someone else already is helping. Chances are, no one is. Even if someone is, keep in mind there's strength in numbers.

**They Say: If They Wanted to Leave, They Would**  
**We Say: Leaving May Not Always Be Possible**

Victims often stay with or return to their abusers for varying reasons, including:

- Fear of retaliation and further violence. Domestic violence victims often are in heightened danger when they attempt to end the relationship. In fact, the point of separation is the most dangerous time for domestic violence victims.
- Many stay for their children, because they fear their abusers will retaliate against their children if they leave or go after custody. Some survivors reason that they will sacrifice themselves so their children can have a father, good schools, a roof over their heads, a safe neighborhood or have financial security.
- They believe abusers can change. Having the batterers enter counseling bolsters the victim's hope about the relationship: if they can be cured, then the violence will end and their relationship can resume. While all victims want the violence to end, some may want to continue the relationship.
- Some stay because they believe in love and they still love their partners and are willing to forgive them. This is hard for people who have not been battered to understand. Women may love their partners, and at the same time hate their violent and abusive actions.
- Some stay because their batterers deliberately and systematically isolate them from support systems. Domestic violence victims need the help of family, friends, co-workers and others to weather the crisis and make the best decisions for themselves. Many batterers are extremely jealous and possessive; they constantly accuse their partners of affairs, demand that their partner speak to no one, and accuse them of infidelity every time they do so. Batterers force their partner to account for every minute of their time.
- Some battered women are forced to stay because they can't afford to leave, especially now, with the current economic crisis. Many women cannot afford to leave or get a divorce – they simply don't have the economic resources to support themselves or their children.
- Safe and affordable is hard to come by. Many victims cannot afford the costs of relocation or have the money to pay for a security deposit and first/last months' rent on an apartment.
- Some stay because they believe there is no place for them to go. Because of the systemic isolation by the batterer, victims may not have family or friends to turn to. The batterer often deliberately sabotages his partner's credit rating (or prevents her from establishing one at all), making it difficult to get an apartment or house.
- Women do not have economic resources equal to or approaching men. Nearly one half of all female-headed households with children live in poverty, as compared with only 8% of male-headed households. The majority of African American and Latina female-headed households live at or below the poverty level. Many battered women cannot find a job and batterers can damage her employment record by harassing her at work causing excessive lateness and absenteeism.
- Some stay because they are not given accurate information about battering. Professionals, family, friends and the batterer tell them that alcohol or drugs causes battering. They are told that they are codependent or enable his behavior – if they

would change, then their batterers would. Women then endlessly attempt to modify their behavior only to watch the violence worsen and find themselves blamed for not trying hard enough.

- Some stay because of their religious beliefs. Many victims come from strict religious upbringing and don't believe in breaking apart the family. Religious leaders may tell them that they must pray to make things better and that leaving or divorce is not an option.
- Batterers often play on their partners concern for their well being through threats of suicide or exaggerating the devastating effects of prison.

**They Say: Children Are Unharmed**  
**We Say: Children Are Always At Risk of Harm**

Make no mistake – every risk, every injury, and every disruption that domestic violence victims endure, their children endure as well. These children will be affected to varying degrees, with possible impact on their educational, social, emotional and behavioral development. How witnessing domestic violence impacts a child's development depends on a number of influences, such as age, relationship to the batterer, support systems, intensity, frequency and type of abuse witnessed and the relationship with the non-abusive parent.

When children are present at the scene of domestic violence murders involving their parents, the media all too often report that the children were “unharmed.” Unharmed? While these children may not have received any physical injuries in these lethal incidents, please let's not ever assume that they were not and will not continue to be harmed by the terrible tragedy that forever altered their families and their futures.

**They Say: A PFA is Just a Piece of Paper**  
**We Say: Yes, But...**

Yes, it is just a piece of paper, but with that paper comes the full power of the court, and the promise of enforcement and justice in every jurisdiction in this commonwealth and in this country. Tens of thousands of PFAs are issued each year in PA and, in the greatest majority of cases, they do exactly what they're supposed to do – protect the victim.

PFA orders have been instrumental in offering safety and protection to literally hundreds of thousands of domestic violence victims in Pennsylvania.

It's the same nationally. A 2002 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association indicated that protection orders (issued for 12 months or longer) are likely to reduce police-reported physical violence by 80 percent.

Keep in mind that a protection order is never intended to be the only safety option for domestic violence victims, who are encouraged to work with an advocate at their local domestic violence program to create a comprehensive safety plan that may include a shelter stay, relocation, pursuit of criminal charges, etc.

It's also important to recognize that a law is only as effective as the enforcement that is behind it. Lax and inconsistent enforcement by the courts and police can be deadly to those who count on the promise of justice that the PFA affords.

**They Say: It's a Crime of Passion**

**We Say: Passion Has Nothing To Do With Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is about obsession, possession, revenge, power and control. It's never about love and it's not a crime of passion. A perpetrator doesn't just "snap." The violence most often is methodical, calculating, and intended to cause fear and inflict injury – or worse. And we have 20 years of domestic violence homicide clippings to back this up.

**They Say: It's the Economy**

**We Say: It's Domestic Violence Made Worse By the Economy**

While there is no research or data to make the case that recession, unemployment or empty bank accounts directly cause domestic violence, we do know that these stressful circumstances often exacerbate situations where domestic violence already is a factor. Many programs in PA and around the country attribute their overflowing shelters and waiting lists to the financial hardships currently confronting victims and their abusers. Domestic violence advocates are gravely concerned for the safety of battered victims and their children who now have fewer options and resources as the abuse escalates and the funding for local domestic violence programs dwindles

Now, more than ever, we all need to be more in tune to what is going on behind closed doors in our communities. In far too many homes, the level of stress is palpable as resources shrink and crises brew. In homes where domestic violence is a way of life, the increased risk for more frequent and severe abuse of family members compounds the anxiety and fear.

**[Learn more about the impact of a toxic economy on domestic violence.](#)**

**They Say: There's Nothing They Can Do About It**

**We Say: There is Always Something They Can Do**

If nothing else, people should call 911, if they see or hear domestic violence.

**[Learn more about all the different ways to help.](#)**