

Training Resource

Myths & Realities Relating to Domestic Abuse and Coercive Control



1. Domestic Abuse Myths vs Realities

We hear many myths perpetuated about domestic abuse. Some of them we understand and can comfortably challenge in a multi-agency or other setting, such as: “Why doesn’t she/he just leave?” Others are more nuanced and subtle.

2. Okay, but *why* doesn’t she/he just leave?

We’ll start with this one for those who are new to the sector, require a refresher, or work infrequently with people impacted by domestic abuse.

- The risks significantly increase (especially for women) after they end the relationship. Post-separation abuse, stalking and ongoing harassment may occur, along with concerning levels of assaults and domestic homicides. Some people feel safer staying put than attempting to leave and live constantly looking over their shoulder. Some people may need help and support from the police and/or specialist services to manage risk.
- The ability to access safe and appropriate accommodation is a significant barrier to leaving, especially in the current housing climate. Refuge and other safe accommodation with support attached, is often full and may be harder to access for large families or those with additional and complex needs. Families may be expected to move to other areas, leaving children’s schools, elderly parents who rely on the victim-survivor for care, employment, and social networks. Other types of temporary accommodation may be deemed undesirable or unsuitable or is too far from employment and schools. Financial control may have destroyed credit scores and blocked avenues of safe credit, making it impossible to secure private housing. Often, a parent does not want to render their children homeless, or the property or tenancy belongs to them, but they don’t know how to get the abusive party to leave.
- Children may not want to leave their home or their other parent. Older children may refuse to leave. Children may be extremely unhappy in temporary accommodation or new location.
- Disability and illness can be a significant barrier to ending an abusive relationship. The victim-survivor may have an adapted home for themselves or their child, or they may rely on the abuser for care. They may fear losing independence and becoming institutionalised, preferring to endure abuse than go into a care facility. Sometimes, it is the abuser who is disabled or ill, leaving the victim-survivor feeling guilty about leaving them. The growing number of older adults with dementia plays a part in this dynamic. Elderly and ill people are at increased risk of abuse.



- Family pets can be a barrier to leaving. Many landlords and temporary housing options do not allow pets and fostering options are limited. There is a link between animal abuse and human abuse, so leaving animals behind may not be an option as they may be hurt, starved, neglected or used as emotional blackmail. Ownership of the animal may be unclear or disputed. Rehoming may be the only option available which many pet owners are unwilling to do, especially older or sick animals who may not find a loving home.
- Many people who have been abused or coercively controlled may lack the emotional means to make big life decisions or take decisive action. Their confidence, self-esteem and resilience have been eroded, and they are too exhausted, overwhelmed or scared to leave. They may have been told repeatedly that they won't cope without the abuser, no one else will ever be interested in them romantically, and they will fail. If we are told something often enough, it acts as a form of psychological indoctrination, and we begin to believe it.
- Domestic abusers are rarely abusive every minute of every day. Abuse often happens in a cycle with more positive times between incidents. This gives the victim-survivor hope that things can change. They may believe the promises and assurances that the abuse will never happen again, or they may buy into the abuser's excuses for the abuse such as addiction, mental health problems, or a range of other excuses. Although these issues exacerbate the problem, they are not the root cause of domestic abuse. The root cause is the desire to exercise power and control and the belief they are entitled to do so.
- Many victim-survivors stay in a state of denial, especially at the start. They cannot accept or refuse to look at the reality of the situation. They can be resistant to any suggestion of abuse and defend their partner's actions. This can create significant safeguarding problems when the children are at risk or being significantly impacted.

3. Other Myths and Realities

Myth: Domestic abuse happens mainly in poor or underprivileged families.

Reality: There is no evidence to suggest domestic abuse appears more or less in any one socio-economic group. In fact, it is known to cut across all social groups regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, income, faith, disability or marital status. You might support more people who are disadvantaged by low-income, housing instability or immigration status because they lack the means or social support to manage the issue without the need for services.



Myth: Some people provoke or orchestrate abusive episodes for a reaction, for attention, or to create drama.

Reality: This is a damaging myth that uses victim-blaming to excuse abuse. The vast majority of people want to be safe and happy in their relationships, not orchestrate a situation where they are living in constant danger and exposing their children to harmful behaviours. When an abused person defends themselves or fights back, they are often portrayed as the primary aggressor, despite putting up with abuse, sometimes for years. Even in the unlikely event that someone deliberately provokes the other party, there is no excuse for abuse and violence. If someone is unhappy with their partner's provocation, they have the option to end the relationship. No one is ever responsible for someone else's abuse.

Myth: People who experience abuse have poor boundaries, low self-esteem, or problems around co-dependency.

Reality: It is not unusual to hear these myths perpetuated among professionals. There's a lot to unpack here because these are three distinctly different issues: -

- **Poor boundaries:** Becoming a victim of domestic abuse does not necessarily mean someone has poor boundaries. It means the abuser disrespects their boundaries and makes it unsafe to assert or reassert them. Other people may be naturally less assertive, struggle to say no, or want to please people, which might come from early conditioning or rejection, or simply be character traits. Even so, the responsibility lies firmly with the abuser, not the victim-survivor. Blaming someone's poor boundaries is another form of victim-blaming. Some people may have been fortunate enough to have supportive family and friendships who never ignored or disrespected boundaries, so they never needed to set a physical or emotional boundary before and find it difficult. Domestic abuse and coercive control are crimes – no other crime is blamed on someone's boundaries. Of course, it's perfectly acceptable to support someone to set firmer boundaries, as long as it is explicit that the abuse is/was not their fault.
- **Low self-esteem:** Low self-esteem can lead to a higher tolerance of abusive behaviour and make it more difficult to leave. Abusers often seek to destroy a partner's self-esteem to make it easier to control them. Additionally, a person with chronically low self-esteem may not feel worthy of a respectful relationship. However, low self-esteem should never be used to justify abuse. Abuse is never the fault of the victim-survivor and always the responsibility of the perpetrator. Low self-esteem is a vulnerability factor, not a cause, and using it to justify abuse is a form of victim-blaming.



- **Co-dependency:** Co-dependency means becoming overly focused on another person's needs or approval at the expense of your own wellbeing. The idea migrated from addiction systems into abusive relationships. Victim-survivors were sometimes seen as "drawn to" abusive partners, "addicted to chaos," "rescuers," or "unable to leave because of their own pathology." That framing badly misunderstands coercive control. Victim-survivors have often been wrongly labelled as co-dependent because professionals misunderstood survival behaviour as relational dysfunction. A victim-survivor may placate, monitor moods, avoid conflict, return to the relationship, defend the abuser, minimise harm, or struggle to leave — but these are not necessarily signs of "needing" the abuse. A more trauma-informed and domestic-abuse-informed view would say: many victim-survivors are not co-dependent; they are constrained, controlled, frightened, and exhausted.

Myth: Women use refuges to get re-housed.

Reality: Women use refuges because they are fleeing abuse, fear and risk. Refuge is emergency safe accommodation for women and children who may have no safe way to remain at home. Many survivors lose their homes, belongings, routines, support networks, children's schools, pets, employment stability and local connections in order to reach safety. Refuge is not a back door into housing. It is a front door into safety. There are, unfortunately, always people who abuse systems, but living in a homeless hostel for months (which is what a refuge technically is) especially in shared accommodation, is not an easy option. They are used by women who have been professionally assessed and for whom there is no other choice.

Myth: Most domestic abuse is reciprocal with both partners using violence.

Reality: Domestic abuse is not simply about whether both people have ever shouted, argued, pushed, lashed out or behaved badly. It is about patterns of coercion, intimidation and control. Abused people may sometimes fight back, resist or defend themselves. That does not make the abuse mutual. A domestic abuse-informed response asks: Who is afraid? Who is controlled? Who is using threats, intimidation or violence to get their own way? Avoid "both as bad as each other" thinking. Look beyond incidents and assess the pattern: coercion, fear, injury, sexual violence, strangulation, isolation, financial control, threats to children, post-separation abuse, and who is changing their behaviour to stay safe.



Myth: Most domestic abuse incidents are fuelled by alcohol.

Reality: Alcohol can increase risk, severity and escalation, but it does not cause domestic abuse. Abuse is rooted in power, control, entitlement and coercion. Many perpetrators abuse when sober, and many people drink without becoming abusive. Where alcohol is involved, it may lower inhibitions, intensify violence or provide a ready-made excuse — but it does not remove responsibility. The key issue is not what the perpetrator drank, but what they chose to do and the pattern of fear and control surrounding it.

Myth: It is hopeless trying to help abused women because they always forgive or drop charges.

Reality: Abused people do not “drop charges” because they are wasting professional time. They may withdraw, disengage, reconcile, minimise, or appear to forgive because they are frightened, exhausted, traumatised, threatened, financially dependent, worried about children, under family pressure, unsafe, or unconvinced the system can protect them. Engagement is often not linear. Every safe conversation, referral, order, risk assessment or offer of support can still be part of a longer journey to safety. Leaving abuse is a process, not a single event. They may not be ready, able or safe to proceed today, but that does not mean support has failed. It may mean the perpetrator’s control is still active, the risks are escalating, or the practical barriers are too high. It is never hopeless to offer help. A domestic abuse-informed response understands that safety work is often cumulative. The role of professionals is not to force someone to leave or proceed, but to keep the door open, reduce risk, provide options, document concerns, and respond without judgement when she reaches out again.

4. More Truths about Domestic Abuse

All human beings are entitled to the same rights as every other human

- Humans have the right to be safe from violence and abuse.
- Humans have the right to be safe in their own homes.
- Humans should not be abused by those they trust and love.
- Humans should not be subjected to an abuse of power and control.

(The same applies to animals – change the word “humans” to “animals” and it will still be true.)



Victim-survivors are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of their children

- Children are our most vulnerable members of society.
- Despite the risks and challenges, parents have a duty to protect children from overhearing, witnessing or experiencing abuse. There is an expectation they will reach out for help rather than put their children at risk. This often creates tension around safeguarding procedures which may need to move at a quicker pace than the victim-survivor is ready for. In these situations, safeguarding children remains a priority, but the parent should be offered support to reduce fear, work constructively with safeguarding processes, and keep children safer.

No one can force change in others

- Abusers may never change.
- Even if an abuser wants to change, it is challenging to change embedded beliefs, behaviours and automatic responses without specialist help and much effort. But everyone is capable of change.
- Victim-survivors may not be able to change the abuser, but they can change their responses to domestic abuse by seeking help to resolve the situation.

Victim-survivors have options and choices

- There are a range of support services, legal and housing options available – people do not have to stay in abusive situations.
- Thousands of people leave abusive and dangerous situations every day. Without minimising the potential risks, most exits can be safely managed with the right support.
- For the vast majority of people there is life, safety and happiness after domestic abuse.

