Myths & Realities of Domestic Violence in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community

Myth

- Domestic violence is more/less common in heterosexual relationships than it is in LGBT relationships.
- Only heterosexual women are battered.

Reality

- Studies indicate that partner abuse occurs in 25-33% of LGBT relationships which is approximately equal to the prevalence of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships.

Myth

- Violence between LGBT partners is just “mutual combat” or a “lover’s quarrel.”
- It really isn’t violence when a same-gender couple fights. It’s a fair fight between equals.
- It isn’t violence when gay men fight. Its just “boys being boys.”
- LGBT persons are more likely to equally participate in the violence than are heterosexuals.

Reality

- Partner abuse/domestic violence involves one partner who is exerting power and control over another. It can include coercion, intimidation, physical and sexual violence. Labeling violence as “mutual” or as a “lover’s quarrel” only minimizes and denies the severity of the abuse in a relationship which can often lead to death.
- While LGBT survivors may be more likely to fight back in self-defense due to perceived equality, abuse in a relationship is not “mutual.”

Myth

- LGBT partner abuse is primarily found in relationships where partners are in “roles”.
- The batterer is usually more masculine, muscular and bigger, while the “victim” is usually more feminine, smaller and weaker.
- Women do not batter/men cannot be battered.

Reality

- Partner abuse is about one person exerting power and control over another. It can be through emotional abuse, economic control, use of weapons, threats, etc. Exerting power does not require that the batterer be more masculine or physically stronger. Partner abuse is not confined to “gender roles.”

Myth

- LGBT partner abuse occurs primarily among women and men who are poor and/or people of color, and those who frequent bars.

Reality

- On-going abuse occurs in approximately one-third of relationships regardless of sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, religious affiliation, etc. Domestic violence crosses all boundaries.

Myth

- Children are not an issue for battered lesbians and gay men.
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Reality

- Many LGBT families have children through prior relationships, adoption, artificial insemination, etc. Unfortunately, as with all families, children often witness violence exerted by one parent over the other.

Myth

- Since women are more likely to be equal in size, the damage inflicted by the lesbian batterer is typically less than that inflicted by the male batterer.
- The acts of violence perpetrated by gay men are more severe than the acts of violence perpetrated by female batterers.

Reality

- Women are capable of committing acts of severe violence. Some female batterers have stabbed, shot, brutally beaten and/or killed their partners. Dismissing the potential severity of female battering can be fatal.

Myth

- Violence occurs in the LGBT community because of the high rates of alcohol and drug use.

Reality

- Drinking lowers control over inhibitions which may prevent someone from being violent. However just as in heterosexual partner abuse, many batterers do not abuse substances and/or do not necessarily batter while drunk or high. Ultimately, relationship violence is about exerting one’s control over another. Substances do not cause violence but are a significant co-factor to it.

Myth

- The law does not/will not protect LGBT victims of partner abuse.

Reality

- There is no state statute that specifically includes same-gender domestic violence. While the California statute uses gender-neutral terms, it is applied inconsistently throughout the state and often is not applied in less urban areas. In Los Angeles and other metropolitan cities, law enforcement, service providers, and courts sometimes have more training in LGBT partner abuse/domestic violence.

Myth

- Battered LGBT men and women are as likely to identify themselves as victims as are heterosexual women.

Reality

- LGBT domestic violence often remains unseen or invisible, and therefore many individuals are overlooked and do not receive needed help. There is a lack of recognition and legal legitimacy for LGBT families and, because domestic violence is thought to occur most commonly in heterosexual relationships, those in the LGBT community may not even realize that they are experiencing it.
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Myth

• It is generally easier for LGBT victims of domestic violence to leave and abusive partner or seek help than it is for battered heterosexual women.

Reality

• It is more difficult for LGBT survivors to seek help than for heterosexual women. There are few LGBT specific resources available and many service providers are not trained to provide culturally competent services to LGBT individuals. LGBT individuals may fear how they may be treated and whether or not they will be believed or taken seriously. Seeking services for partner abuse forces someone to reveal their sexual orientation.
• Many LGBT persons have no support from their families because of the refusal of the family to accept the LGBT person’s sexual orientation or gender identity.
• There is only one domestic violence shelter in Los Angeles County that will accommodate male survivors (gay or straight), but there are no shelters in the area that are specific to the particular needs of LGBT domestic violence survivors. In addition, lesbian survivors may be followed into a women’s domestic violence shelter by their abusive partners. Many Transgender survivors are denied shelter everywhere.

Myth

• There is absolutely no difference between domestic violence in same gender relationships and domestic violence in heterosexual relationships.

Reality

• Many of the dynamics of partner abuse are the same in same-gender and opposite-gender relationships.
• LGBT domestic violence has unique factors that relate to homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism within society. LGBT persons are not afforded basic civil rights. As a result, there are often inadequate and insensitive supports or resources. LGBT persons may fear being “outed” after disclosing partner abuse; may be afraid of unfair treatment by law enforcement and service providers; may be concerned about the impact on child custody; etc. In addition, many LGBT persons may be struggling with their own internalized homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia.
• Many service providers are not adequately trained to address the special needs of LGBT clients. Domestic violence service providers who generally work with heterosexual survivors may have more difficulty screening and differentiating between the LGBT batterer and the survivor.