

Abuse In Lesbian Relationships

This section explores some of the myths and stereotypes as well the realities of abuse in lesbian relationships. The term "intimate partner abuse" will be used rather than "domestic abuse" to be inclusive of couples who do not live together.

Are there differences between lesbian and heterosexual domestic violence?

Lesbian relationships involving domestic violence are not about two women "mutually fighting". Intimate partner abuse (regardless of the gender of the individuals involved) is about power & control. All the types of abuse that occur in heterosexual relationships can also occur in relationships between two women including (but not limited to) emotional, psychological, economic, physical and sexual.

In a lesbian relationship, there are also unique issues and considerations.

- The abuser may threaten to "out" her partner if she tries to leave or get help. Outing is a serious issue in a society that denies lesbians full rights and recognition. A lesbian who is outed to her employer may lose her job; being outed to friends or family may result in the loss of significant relationships; the fear of losing her children by court order can also keep an abused lesbian in an unsafe relationship.
- Misconceptions about characteristics of abusers and victims. The abuser is not necessarily the partner who is bigger, butch or more economically independent.
- Lesbians may lack of support from traditional networks such as family, church and coworkers.
- Lack of understanding or hostility from law enforcement, the criminal/civil justice system, health care providers and domestic violence agencies can make it difficult for lesbians to go for help.

SOME FACTS

- Abuse in same-sex relationships can be just as serious as abuse in heterosexual relationships.
- Homophobia (perceived and real) among law enforcement often keeps battered lesbians from reaching out to police for assistance.
- Support groups specifically for battered lesbians allow lesbians to speak more freely and comfortably about their relationships but are rarely available.
- Staff at crisis lines and shelters for battered women often unwittingly ostracize lesbians by automatically using "he" when referring to the batterer and by not providing literature that includes information for battered lesbians.
- Some judge may refuse to grant protection orders to battered lesbians.
- The lesbian community itself has been reluctant to acknowledge abuse in women's relationships.

WHY DOESN'T SHE LEAVE?

There are many factors involved in a woman's inability to leave an abusive relationship – whether opposite- or same-sex. In an abusive relationship, there is often a cycle of behavior that includes periods of connectedness and calm as well as periods of abuse which can create confusion about whether the abusive partner is really, in fact, abusive.

Other factors may include:

- Economic Dependence: A victim who is unable to live independently because of financial constraints will be reluctant to leave the relationship. Abuse in Lesbian Relationships cont.
- Keeping the Family Together: When children are involved, the victim may believe that having two parents is important or be unable to support the children on her own. If the children are not biologically hers, she may fear losing contact and the ability to protect them. If they are her biological children, she may fear loss of custody if she reveals the abuse and the relationship to law enforcement and/or criminal/civil justice systems.
- Guilt: Victims often assumes the blame for the abuse and expend energy trying to determine how to avoid provoking the abuser.
- Promises of change: The victim believes the abuser when she promises never to do "it" again. Victims often love their abusers and want the relationship to succeed.
- Isolation: Victims of abuse often lose contact with friends and family because their partner objected to, criticized or minimized these relationships. The more isolated the victim becomes the more dependent she is on her partner.
- Lack of Support: Victims who are alienated from family, church and the broader community because of their sexual orientation may feel they have no one to go to for help. Friends may refuse to acknowledge the abuse or give up on the victim if she doesn't leave (or leaves and then goes back to the abuser), and the victim may be unaware of community resources and/or fear that they will be homophobic and unwelcoming.

Sometimes victims are reluctant to report abuse fearing that their partner will be arrested. This can be a particularly difficult issue for women of color and low-income women who experience discrimination on the part of police based on race and class. Women with disabilities who are dependent on their partners for daily care may hesitate to do anything that would result in the loss of that support and assistance.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Acknowledging that intimate partner abuse happens in lesbian relationships is a first step towards helping both the victim and the perpetrator.

Groups of people who are discriminated against often have a strong impetus to protect their "community" from scrutiny and criticism by others. This often means that lesbians who batter are never confronted or challenged about their behavior. Indeed, some lesbian batterers may be well known within the lesbian or feminist community but are able to continue their behavior because others fear being perceived as destroyers of the "community" by revealing this "secret".

While agencies and other systems serving victims of abuse have a responsibility to raise awareness among and educate their staff to provide more competent services to women who are abused by female partners, it is also the responsibility of friends, acquaintances and the community as a whole to identify and effectively respond to abusive relationships.

BECOMING PART OF THE SOLUTION

If you are interested in becoming part of the solution, contact the Community Center Anti-Violence Project coordinator at 414-292-3072 for information about what you can do.