

Domestic Violence: An LGBT issue

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It often comes as a shock to learn that domestic abuse occurs in LGBT relationships with the same frequency as in heterosexual relationships. The myths that women don't batter, or that the physically larger person is always the abuser further serves to obscure the truth. The fact is, domestic violence exists in as many as one out of every four relationships. It is systematic in nature, can happen to anyone and can end in death.

Intimate Partner Violence Defined:

A pattern of behavior in which a person coerces, dominates, and isolates their partner to maintain power and control.

The image of a cowering victim and a brutish abuser are also myths. Abusers are often charming; this is how they are able to attract a victim in the first place. It is also how they are able to keep the victim from leaving, and it is how they escape the scrutiny of friends, family and bystanders. They also, however, tend to feel they are justified in their actions. They do not necessarily see their behavior as wrong, and in fact blame the victim, or just about anything else, for the abuse.

Victims, on the other hand, can take any form. They are not, as a group, weak or submissive. They do not provoke the abuser. They do not like being abused. Actually, they do not have any common characteristics, except to have had the unfortunate luck to get mixed up with an abuser.

The "Cycle" of Violence

At the risk of oversimplifying, there are three main phases that cycle over and over in an abusive relationship. There is the honeymoon phase, where everything is rosy, followed by a tension-building phase where the victim can feel a sense of impending violence and finally, there is the explosion where some form of violence occurs. This might include breaking a treasured object, punching a wall, or some form of substantial damage to the victim's financial safety or reputation or, of course, some physical attack on their partner. Whatever, it is, it is frightening and harsh. The cycle then re-sets at the honeymoon stage. Sometimes, this cycle takes months; other times, it happens in a day or even several times on a day.

Further, the violence almost always escalates the longer the relationship lasts. However, the "honeymoon" stage is a tool to allow the abuse to continue. It is a time during which the batterer can appear remorseful or convince the victim that he or she is taking responsibility for the abuse, or any number of controlling strategies based upon the relationship. It is also the point at

Forms of Abuse

- Verbal abuse such as name calling
- Emotional manipulation
- Isolation, including limiting or prohibiting a partner's contact with family or friends
- Stealing, limiting access to or destroying a partner's property
- Withholding or otherwise controlling or restricting access to finances
- Depriving partner of shelter, food, clothing, sleep, medication or any other life sustaining mechanism
- Limiting or prohibiting a partner from obtaining or keeping employment, housing or any other station, benefit or service
- Harming or attempting to harm a partner physically
- Harming or threatening harm to partner's family, friends, children and/or pets
- Sexually assaulting or raping a partner
- Using intentional exposure to sexually transmitted and other diseases
- Threatening suicide or harm to self, if a partner tries to end a relationship or does not comply with an abuser's demands
- Stalking or harassing a partner
- Using of facets of abuser or survivor's identity including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, national origin, physical ability, religion, level of education, occupation, or legal immigration status, etc., to demean, insult, endanger, isolate, or otherwise oppress.

which the victim is indeed made to feel hope that the batterer may change, and that the relationship is worth staying in.

Survivors

Regardless of their gender identities or orientation, survivors often need help to leave the relationship, and to process the harm inflicted upon them by batterers once they are free. However, the types of harm they experience as well as the types of assistance they may need can be unique to their situation. Batterers often use homophobia – threatening to reveal the victim's orientation, gender identity or HIV status to family or employers - - and other tools of oppression to inflict harm. When such tactics are used, this compounds the effects of the violence and need for help. Historically, because the mainstream domestic violence movement has focused on straight victims, LGBT survivors have often had difficulty finding the full range of services. Take heart! You are just as deserving of help as the next person – keep going until you find someone who understands and can help.

Make It Stop!

If you would like to be part of the solution, there are things you can do. First, you can learn about the warning signs, and also about what services are available in your area. You can attend a fundraiser or volunteer at a domestic violence program. If you know someone who you suspect is being abused, you can let them know that you are a safe person to talk to. Tell them how you feel about the way they are being treated, and above all, believe them. Know also that, even when the victim of an abuser makes the decision to leave, they are often drawn back again and again. This is very common. Last, know that the most dangerous time for a victim is immediately after they have left their abusive partner.

If you are being abused, you can get in touch with the Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence (see our Resources Section) or visit any of the Web sites listed below.

How to end domestic violence? The answer is not so easy, but it is clear that change needs to occur at societal levels through legislation,

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training, education, and the creation of viable and effective options for survivors. ▼

24-hour victims of crime helpline:
1-800-494-8100

NCADV
(National Coalition Against Domestic Violence): www.ncadv.org

NCAVP
(National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs): www.ncavp.org

GMDVP
(Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project)
1-800-832-1901 www.gmdvp.org

When Kevin had been dating Scott for a few months, they went out to a party together. On the way home, Scott began criticizing Kevin and accusing him of flirting with other men at the party. When Kevin tried to defend his innocence, Scott suddenly slammed on the brakes of the car, coming to a complete stop on I-95. Kevin was terrified and apologized to Scott for his behavior in an attempt to get out of this dangerous situation. Scott started the car and drove on.

The next day, Scott called Kevin at work and offered his own apology, telling Kevin how embarrassed he was for pulling the stunt on the highway the night before. He told Kevin how much their relationship meant to him, and that Kevin was everything he'd ever wanted in a partner. He said the thought of losing Kevin made him "a little crazy." He begged Kevin to forgive him, and asked Kevin to move in with him. "Just think about it," he said.

As the days went on, Kevin gradually forgot about the frightening incident and fell more and more in love with Scott. A few months later, he accepted Scott's offer and moved into Scott's condominium. All was well until one night when Scott came home aggravated from a bad day at the office - some sort of power struggle. As he told the story of the day's events, Kevin suggested that maybe Scott was being too hard on his co-workers. Scott flew into a rage, turning on Kevin and accusing him of "siding with everyone else." "Why would you stick up for them?" he ranted, "Do you really think so little of me? Well, guess what? I think you care more about your precious coffee table than you do about me." And with that, he hit Kevin's glass table with a wine bottle, causing the table to shatter.

As Kevin jumped up, Scott pushed him into the wall, saying, "It's true! You don't care about me at all!!!" Scott grabbed his car keys and left, slamming the front door and leaving Kevin to

*clean up the mess. As Kevin waited for Scott to come home, he began to go over the events of the evening in his mind. Scott's behavior seemed extreme, but maybe he was too judgmental. He probably should have let it go; after all, Scott had had a terrible day. By the time Scott got home, Kevin was asleep. Scott shook him awake, hitting him in the head and ranting about having seen a friend at a bar who, it turns out, is one of Kevin's exes. "Why didn't you tell me you f*cking slept with him! Do you know how embarrassing that was for me? I suppose you compare us too. Who's better, me or him, a**hole? How many of my other friends have you been with?" Scott then passed out in the bed, until the next morning, when he again apologized, explaining that he had been cheated on before - his boyfriend had had sex with someone he considered a real friend. He pleaded with Kevin, asking for his understanding. "You are so kind, Kevin," he said, "Teach me how to be kind like you." Kevin looked at the handsome man, standing before him with tears in his eyes. "Please Kevin," Scott implored, "I feel so safe with you. I've never felt this way. Let me make it up to you tonight."*

That night they went out to a stylish restaurant and the next weekend bought a new coffee table at an upscale furniture store. Everywhere they went, Scott was constantly complimenting Kevin, admiring him for his way with people, his great taste in clothes and his sense of humor. Kevin was careful not to appear to be flirting with anyone, as he knew this was a sensitive issue for Scott.

On Sunday evening, Kevin announced that he was going to run over to his friend Brad's house for a little while. He knew Scott did not much care for Brad - Scott did not seem to like any of Kevin's friends -- and so he figured Scott would be just as glad not to go. "Oh, do you have to go?" asked Scott, playing with the collar of Kevin's shirt. "I was thinking it would be so nice if we

Domestic Violence: An LGBT issue

just stayed in tonight.” As Scott began to kiss Kevin’s neck, Kevin thought that he really wanted to see Brad – he hadn’t seen much of his friends since he’d moved in with Scott -- and that Brad was expecting him. “Come on, stay with me,” Scott whispered in Kevin’s ear. Reluctantly, Kevin agreed to stay home, and called Brad to cancel. “Sure, that’s cool,” said Brad, “but you are getting to be a stranger, Kevin!”

One year later: Brad was visiting Kevin in the hospital, where he has landed after suffering a broken arm and several lacerations that required stitches. Kevin was embarrassed to talk about what really happened – that Scott flew into a rage and attacked him violently, and that Scott had held a gun to Kevin’s head at one point, and even pointed it at his own head, threatening to blow his brains out all over the floor if Kevin ever left him.

Kevin does not know how he got into this mess, and is just about to talk to Brad about it when Scott walks in. They each say a stiff hello to one another and Brad finds an excuse to leave. As he goes out the door, he hears Scott asking Kevin what they had been talking about.... ▼