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Myth Debunked: Men Do Experience Domestic Violence

Domestic violence can happen to men, not only to women, according to research by [Group Health's Center for Health Studies](#) published in the June 2008 American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

"Domestic violence against men is under-studied and often hidden — much as it was in women 10 years ago," said study leader Robert J. Reid, MD, PhD, an associate investigator at the Group Health Center for Health Studies. "We want abused men to know they're not alone."

Dr. Reid's findings confirm some common beliefs but also debunk five myths about abuse in men.

Myth 1: Few men experience domestic violence.

Many do. In-depth phone interviews with more than 400 randomly sampled adult male Group Health patients surprised Dr. Reid and his colleagues:

- 5 percent experienced domestic violence in the past year
- 10 percent experienced domestic violence in the past five years
- 29 percent experienced domestic violence over their lifetimes

The researchers defined domestic violence to include nonphysical abuse — threats, chronic disparaging remarks, or controlling behavior — as well as physical abuse — slapping, hitting, kicking, or forced sex.

Myth 2: Abuse of men has no serious effects. The researchers found that domestic violence is associated with serious, long-term effects on men's mental health. Women are more likely than men to experience more severe physical abuse, said Dr. Reid. "But even nonphysical abuse can do lasting damage."

Depressive symptoms were nearly three times as common in older men who had experienced abuse than in those who hadn't, with much more severe depression in the men who had been abused physically.

Myth 3: Abused men don't stay, because they're free to leave. In fact, men may stay for years with their abusive partners. "We know that many women may have

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trouble leaving abusive relationships, especially if they're caring for young children and not working outside the home," said Dr. Reid. "We were surprised to find that most men in abusive relationships also stay, through multiple episodes, for years."

Myth 4: Domestic violence affects only poor people.

The study actually showed it to be an equal-opportunity scourge. "As we found in our previous research with women experiencing domestic violence, this is a common problem affecting people in all walks of life," said Dr. Reid. "Our patients at Group Health have health insurance and easy access to health care, and their employment rate and average income, education level, and age are higher than those of the rest of the U.S. population."

Myth 5: Ignoring it will make it go away. Not so. "We doctors hardly ever ask our male patients about being abused, and they seldom tell us," said Dr. Reid. "Many abused men feel ashamed because of societal expectations for men to be tough and in control."

Younger men were twice as likely as men aged 55 or older to report recent abuse. "That may be because older men are even more reluctant to talk about it," he added.

This study extends Group Health's research on domestic violence, also referred to as intimate partner violence. The team's previous publications have documented the prevalence, persistence, and health effects of domestic violence on women.

In the current study, they asked men the same questions that they had asked of women. "Our team is concerned about abuse of people: of women as well as men," Dr. Reid added. "We do not want to downplay the seriousness of domestic violence as experienced by women."

Dr. Reid said more research is needed to determine the best ways for doctors to ask men if they have experienced domestic violence, and how best to help getting them into couples counseling, leaving their partners, or getting protection orders. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is toll-free 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

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