

Myths about Abusers

By Lundy Bancroft

1. He was abused as a child.

Multiple research studies have examined the question of whether men who abuse women tend to be survivors of childhood abuse, and the link has turned out to be weak. A bad childhood doesn't cause a man to become an abuser, but it can contribute to making a man who is abusive especially dangerous.

2. His previous partner hurt him.

Lundy Bancroft recommends applying the following principle to assertions that an angry or controlling man makes about past women in his life: *"If it is an excuse for mistreating you, it's a distortion"*. A man who was genuinely mistreated in a relationship with a woman would not be using that experience to get away with hurting someone else. It is fine to commiserate with a man about his bad experience with a previous partner, but the instant he uses her as an excuse to mistreat you, stop believing *anything* he tells you about that relationship and instead recognize it as a sign that he has problems with relating to women. Whether he presents himself as the victim of an ex-partner, or of his parents, the abuser's aim is to play on your compassion, so that he can avoid dealing with his problem.

3. He abuses those he loves most.

The abuser would like us to accept the following simple but incorrect formula: *"Feelings cause behaviour."* Although our feelings can influence how we wish to act, our choices of how to behave are ultimately determined more by our *attitudes* and our *habits*. Most abusive men have close relationships with people other than their partners. Do they abuse their other loved ones? Rarely. It isn't the love or deep affection that causes his behaviour problem.

4. He holds in his feelings too much.

Actually the majority of abusers express their feelings more than some nonabusive men. Rather than trapping everything inside, they actually tend to do the opposite. They have an exaggerated idea of how important their feelings are and they frequently talk about them and act them out. It is not *his* feelings the abuser is too distant from; it is his *partner's* feelings.

5. He has a violent and aggressive personality.

The great majority of abusive men are fairly calm and reasonable in most of their dealings that are unrelated to their partners. In fact, a professional or college educated man has roughly the same likelihood of abusing women as anyone else. Women who live with abusers know that abusers come in all styles and from all backgrounds. Sometimes the more educated an abuser, the more knots he knows how to tie in a woman's brain, the better he is at getting her to blame herself, and the slicker in his ability to persuade other people that she is crazy. The more socially powerful an abuser, the more powerful his abuse can be – and the more difficult it can be to escape.

6. He loses control of himself.

When a man is on an abusive rampage, verbally or physically, his mind typically maintains awareness of his actions. An abuser almost never does anything that he himself considers morally unacceptable. He may hide what he does because he thinks *other* people would disagree with it, but he feels justified inside. He typically has a reason that he considers good enough. In short, the abuser's problem lies above all in his belief that controlling or abusing his partner is *justifiable*.

7. He is too angry. He needs to learn anger-management skills.

When people conclude that anger causes abuse, they are confusing cause and effect. Everybody gets angry. In fact, most people have at least had occasional periods when they are *too* angry, out of proportion to the actual event or beyond what is good for their health. But they don't necessarily abuse their partners. *A man is not abusive because he is angry, he is angry because he is abusive.*

8. He is mentally ill.

The majority of abusive men are psychologically “normal.” *Their value system is unhealthy, not their psychology.* In fact, the most recent research shows that even in physically violent abusers, the rate of mental illness is not high.

9. He hates women. His mother or some other woman must have done something terrible to him.

Most abusers don't hate women. They often have close relationships with their mothers, sisters or female friends. A fair number are able to work successfully with a female boss and respect her authority, at least outwardly. Some men use the *excuse* that their behaviour is a response to being victimized by women, because they want to be able to make women responsible for men's abuse. It is important to note that research has shown that men who have abusive mothers do not tend to develop especially negative attitudes toward females, but men who have abusive *fathers* do; the disrespect that abusive men show their female partners and their daughters is often absorbed by their sons.

10. He is afraid of intimacy and abandonment.

Abusive men are often jealous and possessive, and their coercive and destructive behaviours can escalate when their partners attempt to break up with them. But *many people*, both male and female, are afraid of abandonment and may reel from panic, heartbreak or desperation when being left by a partner. If a person's panicked reaction to being left could cause threats, stalking or murder, our entire society would be a war zone. But postseparation homicide of intimate partners are committed almost exclusively by men, and there is almost always a history of abuse *before* the breakup.

11. He has low self esteem.

An abused woman tends to pour previous energy into supporting her abusive partner and massaging his ego, hoping against hope that if he is kept well stroked his next explosion might be averted. How well does this strategy work? Unfortunately, not very. You can't manage an abuser except for brief periods. Praising him and boosting his self-opinion may buy you some time, but sooner or later he'll jump back into chewing pieces out of you. When you try to improve an abuser's feelings about himself, his problem actually tends to get worse. An abusive man expects catering and the more positive attention he receives, the more he demands. The self-esteem myth is rewarding for an abuser, because it gets his partner, his therapist and others to cater to him emotionally. Think for just a moment about how your partner's degrading and bullying behaviour has hurt *your* self-esteem. Have you suddenly turned into a cruel and explosive person? If low self-esteem isn't an excuse for you to become abusive, then it's no excuse for him either.

12. His boss mistreats him.

Some of the worst abusers have been at the top of the management ladder – with no boss to blame. The more power these men have in their jobs, the more catering and submission they expect at home.

13. He has poor skills in communication and conflict resolution.

An abusive man is not *unable* to resolve conflicts nonabusively; he is unwilling to do so. Research studies conclude that abusers have normal abilities in conflict resolution, communication and assertiveness *when they choose to use them*. They typically get through tense situations at work without threatening anyone and they manage their stress when they spend Thanksgiving with their parents. But they don't *want* to handle these kinds of issues nonabusively when it comes to their partners.

14. There are as many abusive women as abusive men.

There are certainly some women who treat their male partners badly, berating them, calling them names, attempting to control them. The negative impact on these men's lives can be considerable. However, the reason we don't see men fleeing to shelters in fear for their lives, who try to get to a phone for help, but the women block their way or cut the line is because they're *rare*. Men *can* be abused by other men however, and women can be abused by women, sometimes through means that include physical intimidation or violence. If you are a gay man or lesbian who has been abused by a partner, or who is facing abuse now, most of this information will ring true. The “he” and “she” language described here may not fit your experience, but the underlying dynamics largely will.

15. His abusiveness is as bad for him as for his partner.

Certainly abusing one's partner is not a healthy lifestyle, but the negative effects don't hold a candle to the emotional and physical pain, loss of freedom, self-blame and numerous other shadows that abuse casts over the life of its female target.

16. He is a victim of racism.

A majority of abusive men are white; many of them are well educated and economically privileged, so discrimination is not a central cause of partner abuse.

17. He abuses drugs or alcohol.

Many men hide their abusiveness under the cover of alcoholism or drug addiction. However, alcohol cannot create an abuser and sobriety cannot cure one. The only way a man can overcome his abusiveness is by dealing with his abusiveness.

Key Points to Remember:

- An abusive man's emotional problems do not cause his abusiveness. He cannot be changed by figuring out what is bothering him, helping him feel better, or improving the relationship dynamics. Feelings do not govern abusive or controlling behaviour; beliefs, values and habits are the driving forces.
- The reasons that an abusive man gives for his behaviour are simply *excuses*. There is no way to overcome a problem with abusiveness by focusing on aspects such as self-esteem, conflict resolution, anger management or impulse control. Abusiveness is resolved by dealing with abusiveness.
- Abusers thrive on creating confusion, including confusion about the abuse itself.
- Abuse and respect are opposites. Abusers cannot change unless they overcome their core of disrespect toward their partners.
- Abusers are far more conscious of what they are doing than they appear to be. However, even their less-conscious behaviours are driven by their core attitudes.

Can a woman tell early in a relationship that a man may turn out to be abusive?

Psychologist Lundy Bancroft thinks you can. He has developed a list of red flags which can be found at this site:

http://www.lfcc.on.ca/Red_flags_for_unhealthy_relationships.pdf

Adapted from "Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men" by Lundy Bancroft (2002)

Liberty Lane Outreach Program