



Experts: Anybody can be an abuse victim



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It can happen to anyone. Your best friend, your sister, the people next door and even you.

Domestic violence can happen in any family or relationship, whether the victims are wealthy, struggling financially, white, black, Hispanic, older, younger, gay, straight, Catholic, Jewish, atheist, liberal or conservative.

Heather De Stefano has worked as an assistant district attorney for Cayuga County for almost seven years, specializing in domestic violence, sexual assault and sex offender violations.

"Anybody can be a victim," she said.

Cayuga County Sheriff David Gould agreed.

"It doesn't matter if you're rich, poor, white, black — it does not matter where you come from," he said.

Rhonda Stanford-Zahn, a therapist for more than 12 years, primarily works with victims of sexual abuse, but said there are similarities between sexual abuse and domestic violence situations.

Zahn said since most victims of domestic violence are women, the characteristic they have in common could be just that — that they are women.

"What do the females have in common? We're socialized to be accommodating, helpful, caring ... to give people the benefit of the doubt," she said. "In society, doesn't a good person look like this?"

Zahn said the qualities of a good, acceptable person can be detrimental to women in an abusive relationship.

"Women end up rationalizing the irrational behavior of the abuser," she said. "It's in the best interest of the abuser if the woman believes these things."

Dr. Michael Lynch, a Buffalo-area, board-certified psychiatrist who has been certified since 1994 and practicing for 50 years, believes that although anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, there could be a correlation between past exposure to the violence and being involved in domestic violence in adulthood.

He said female victims of domestic violence often come from homes where they witnessed domestic abuse as children.

"They tend to become victims," he said. "They have a need to replace their earlier roles in their home."

Lynch said domestic violence is something that is a learned environment and people who were raised in that environment are more likely to be in domestic violence situations as adults.

He said anyone can be abused, but some are more likely to stay in the abusive relationship, and those who stay have a higher incidence of having been abused as children.

Gould said some victims of domestic violence don't know any other kind of relationship, and may have witnessed domestic violence as a child or in several relationships.

"A victim, sometimes that's all he or she's ever known, as a victim of domestic violence, whether it be growing up, in multiple relationships, whatever it may be," he said. "Some of these people just know no other life."

Gould said although victims often stay in domestic violence situations for a long time, it is not an indication that they want to be in that situation.

"I am so sick of police officers and other people saying, 'Well, she must like it or she would leave.' I can't stand that phrase," Gould said. "It's absolutely untrue. Victims of domestic violence are scared to death. ... They want to be protected. They don't want to be in a domestic violence relationship."

Zahn said it is very difficult psychologically for a victim to just pack up and leave.

She referenced "accommodation syndrome," which can explain why victims don't tell or seek help.

"The whole thing is shame-based, so you have this secrecy," she said. "They hold you hostage, in a sense. ... When a person feel helpless, it's very hard to function."

The victims end up trying to accommodate the situation, hoping that will make it more bearable. This leads to delayed disclosures for both sexual abuse and domestic violence victims.

"After you live with this intimidation for so long, it changes your perceptions of the environment or the situation or your reality," she said. "Abusers are invested in keeping that reality distorted."

De Stefano agreed that it's difficult for a victim to get away from an abuser — not because the victim wants to stay, but more because the abuse builds up gradually, making it less apparent that it's occurring at first.

The relationship always seems OK in the beginning, and then slowly grows into an abusive situation over time.

Also, not every victim recognizes himself or herself as a victim of domestic violence, De Stefano added.

"A lot of people don't realize they're in this situation because what they think of as a domestic violence victim is someone who's been physically abused," she said. "It can be verbal, it can be emotional."

Lynch, based on his experience, believes that some people have an easier time leaving domestic abuse situations than others. He said people with a healthier level of self esteem often have a better chance of making the decision to leave an abuser.

However, many times, according to Gould, leaving and angering the abuser is the most dangerous time for a victim.

Both Gould and Zahn said victims can get help to remove themselves from a domestic violence relationship, but it's going to require therapy and support.

"The only way a victim can do this is not alone," Gould said. "They need family, they need friends, they need professionals to be by their side every minute. And the only way they can help themselves is by getting help from someone else."

Zahn said this is the case because a victim's reality has been altered by the abuser. Therapists need to dissect victims' experiences to determine where their reality was distorted.

"It's a process," she said. "These folks have a distorted reality. You can't think your way out of it."

Statistics on victims

National domestic violence statistics

- One in four women has experienced domestic violence in her lifetime.

(The Centers for Disease Control and The National Institute of Justice, Extent, Nature and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence, July 2000; The Commonwealth Fund, Health Concerns Across a Women's Lifespan: 1998 Survey of Women's Health, 1999)

- Women ages 20 to 24 are at greatest risk for nonfatal domestic violence.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics, Intimate Partner Violence in the U.S. 1993-2004, 2006)

- Separated and divorced males and females are at greater risk for nonfatal domestic violence.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics, Intimate Partner Violence in the U.S. 1993-2004, 2006)

- Women of all races are equally vulnerable to domestic violence.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics, Violence Against Women: Estimates from the Redesignated Survey, August 1995)

- Domestic violence affects people of all incomes, but people with annual income lower than \$25,000 are three times more likely to be involved in domestic violence than people with an annual income of more than \$50,000.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics, Intimate Partner Violence in the U.S. 1993-2004, 2006)

- Between 1993 and 2004, urban residents experienced the highest level of nonfatal domestic abuse — 20 percent more than suburban and rural residents.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics, Intimate Partner Violence in the U.S. 1993 - 2004, 2006)

- In 2000, 1,247 women were killed by a domestic partner and 440 men were killed by a domestic partner.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief, Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001, February 2003)

- 37 percent of women who sought emergency room treatment for violence-related injuries in 1994 were injured by a current or former spouse, boyfriends or girlfriend.

(U. S. Department of Justice, Violence Related Injuries Treated in Hospital Emergency Departments, 1997)

- In 2009-10, 9.7 women in 1,000 were domestic violence victims between the ages of 18 and 24; 12.1 women in 1,000 were domestic violence victims between the ages of 25 and 34; 9.6 women in 1,000 were domestic violence victims between the ages of 35 and 49; and 1.3 women in 1,000 were domestic violence victims age 50 or older.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1993 - 2010)

- One of 14 men has been physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, boyfriend, girlfriend or date at least once in his life.

(National Coalition Against Domestic Violence)

- 40 percent of gay and bisexual men will experience abuse at the hands of an intimate partner.

(National Coalition Against Domestic Violence)

- In 2004, 5.5 percent of male homicide victims were murdered by a spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend.

(Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004)

