

Fact Sheet: Substance Abuse and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence offenders' use and misuse of alcohol and drugs is a common concern and complicating factor for domestic violence courts.

What, exactly, is the relationship between substance abuse and domestic violence perpetration? What we know from research and practice is that the two issues are correlated, and that substance abuse is a risk factor for more severe domestic violence. However, substance abuse does not cause domestic violence. Most abusers do not have substance use problems¹, and of those who do, many continue to abuse their partners even after they have stopped using drugs and alcohol. Additionally, most persons who abuse substances are not violent toward others.

Because of the close association, though, courts do need to address both domestic violence and substance abuse when they co-occur – but the two issues need to be handled differently. The defendant should foremost be held strictly accountable for the domestic violence. Blaming

the violence on the substance inappropriately shifts responsibility from the defendant to the substance or the addiction. "...[T]he societal view of substance abusers as morally weak and controlled by alcohol or other drugs actually serves some batterers. Rather than taking responsibility for their actions, they can blame their violent acts on the substance(s) they are abusing."² As such, one recommended court practice is to mandate defendants to substance abuse treatment in addition to, rather than as an alternative to, a batterers intervention program so there remains a specific message about the offender's responsibility for stopping the violence.

The following table³ delineates some of the differences between substance abuse and domestic violence, with implications for domestic violence court response.

Substance Abuse

Loss of Control—The alcohol or drug is in control and the user is beholden to that substance, unable to stop drinking or using drugs by him/herself.

Disinhibition—Alcohol and drugs cause suppressed feelings of anger to surface, and reduce judgment, inhibitions and decision-making ability.

Disease—Addiction is a disease that can render one helpless. The addict is considered to be sick and directly harming him/herself, and may be indirectly harming loved ones as well. However, addiction can be effectively treated.

Treatment—Substance abuse treatment often focuses on surrendering control and admitting that one is helpless to the disease of addiction. Treatment may include individual and/or group counseling, self-help approaches, and medical treatment. Relapse is anticipated as a known part of the rehabilitation process.

Domestic Violence

Control—Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior with the intent of asserting power and coercive control over one's partner. Each act of abuse is deliberately chosen by the abuser to gain more control over the victim.

Awareness of Actions—The abuser is abusive and violent both when sober and when under the influence. Intoxication and addiction are used as excuses for the abusive behavior.

Choice—Domestic violence perpetration is a choice, not a disease or mental health/psychological problem. The individual is choosing to be violent and harm others in order to get his way, and because he thinks he is justified in doing so.

Accountability and Education—Therapeutic interventions with abusers have thus far not been proven effective in preventing re-offending. Court-ordered programs should focus on accountability and changing violent attitudes and behavior. All re-offending is viewed as unacceptable, as it inherently harms the victim and children.

It is worth noting that victims of domestic violence may also struggle with substance abuse issues that predate the abuse, were worsened by the abuse, or arose as a result of the abuse as a way of coping with trauma reactions. Standardized screening should be conducted by victim advocates and referrals to voluntary substance abuse treatment made when indicated.

For more information, contact:

Liberty Aldrich
(646) 386-4180
aldrichl@courtinnovation.org

References

1. Researchers have found that one fourth to one half of men who commit acts of domestic violence also have substance abuse problems (Gondolf, 1995; Leonard and Jacob, 1987; Kantor and Straus, 1987; Coleman and Straus, 1983; Hamilton and Collins, 1981; Pernanen, 1976).
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997.
3. This chart is based upon information obtained from the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence.