

## **Standing in the Need of Care: Domestic Violence in African American Families**

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### **Goals**

The overall goals of this training are to:

- Challenge participants to examine the beliefs, values, and attitudes that can impact their ability to understand Black victims of DV.
- Provide participants with knowledge and skills that will enable them to respond to those victims more sensitively and successfully.

### **Objectives**

As a result of the training, participants will have the skills and knowledge to:

- Recognize domestic violence in Black intimate relationships.
- Understand their responsibility as service providers to identify and provide referrals for Black survivors of domestic violence.
- Access information and resources for Black survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence.
- Identify challenges and risk factors that can increase the probability of victimization.
- Identify resilience and protective factors.
- Identify challenges and other social and demographic factors that make domestic violence more complex for Black women and their families.
- Identify psychological consequences of abuse.

## Cultural Barriers to Services for Black Women

In addition to understanding how prejudice, myths, and stereotypes can limit services to Black women, service providers should strive to become more familiar with the major cultural barriers that Black women may face when trying to access a domestic violence program. They should know how to diffuse these barriers as well. Such barriers include cultural sensitivity concerns, a lack of community support, sense of duty, and feelings of shame.

*Limited Community Support.* Some Black women find little support in their community or among family members or friends when they disclose their stories of abuse. The stigma of being a victimized Black woman can be a hindrance to help-seeking. For example, the fear of being labeled, ridiculed, criticized, and/or belittled by family and friends for being in an abusive relationship can make some Black women hesitant to broach the topic in their networks.

The community may deny that domestic violence is a problem among its families. In fact, there may be a “political gag order,” which is a self and community imposed silence to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about the Black community. As a result, there may be a scarcity of services and resources in the Black community. It is emotionally difficult for Black women to free themselves from violent relationships if they risk losing community support or being ostracized by her relatives and neighbors (see Morrison et al., 2006).

To assist Black women who may feel completely isolated from their traditional sources of support, staff can do the following:

- Help Black women look for alternative resources if no programs are available in the Black community. These resources could include other battered women they meet through your program, support groups, counselors, or employers.
- Recognize that the process of distancing oneself from a community identity is difficult.
- Respect that the client may not be ready to leave her batterer and face potential public humiliation from her community. Remind her that your services will always be available to her and offer to assist her with safety planning.
- If the client has friends and/or relatives who recognize the danger of domestic violence and are willing to help her, offer to provide information to these individuals. The more they know about the dynamics of domestic violence, the more effective and understanding they will be as support persons.

*Religious and Social Expectations.* Black women may face religious and social expectations that their duty as wives, partners, and mothers is to keep the family together, regardless of the emotional and physical cost to themselves. If they grew up in abusive homes and saw their mothers fulfill this role, there may be additional pressure on them to do so. If a staff member encounters this situation, it is recommended that she:

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- Learn how to explore the cultural roots of these beliefs and explain to clients that no culture inherently supports violence. Rather, it is the attitudes and behaviors of individual members of a culture that keep domestic violence in existence.
- Respect Black women ambivalence about violating the “political gag order” that compels them to be silent about domestic violence in their community. Strive to understand their desire to protect Black men from the police and negative stereotypes. It is important to avoid vilifying Black men.
- If appropriate, seek religious resources which will address their beliefs and provide needed services. However, before doing so, be certain that you are aware of the place of worship’s views on domestic violence. Sending a battered Black woman to seek support from a minister or religious leader who does not handle domestic violence issues appropriately can increase the danger to her. Agency outreach efforts to groups that serve Black women in your community should include outreach to and education on domestic violence for religious groups in your area as well.

*Stereotypes about Black women.* For example, that image of the “Strong Black Woman,” who is able to survive challenges without assistance is still very pervasive and may be internalized by the survivor. As a result, survivors may see reaching out for help as a sign of weakness. This is especially the case if they saw their mothers silently endure domestic violence. Training sessions should teach staff to respond to this issue in the following manner:

- Remind battered Black women that seeking help is a sign of strength and commend them for taking the courageous step of coming to the shelter or seeking services
- Make sure that clients with these feelings are given the opportunity to participate in culturally competent therapy or support groups that work through these issues.
- Remind Black women that it is acceptable and their right to ask for help if they or their children are in danger.

Morrison, K. E., Luchok, K. J., Richter, D. L., & Parra-Medina, D. (2006). Factors influencing help-seeking from informal networks among African American victims of domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 21*, 1493-1511.

## Suggested Readings

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