

Special Issues for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Patients

Domestic violence is increasingly being recognized in same-sex relationships. The majority of the issues that apply to people in abusive heterosexual relationships also apply to those in abusive same-sex relationships. People in same-sex relationships may face extra issues and barriers that make the situation even more difficult than it is in heterosexual relationships.

Challenges to The Person Experiencing the Abuse

- Prevailing images of domestic violence make it difficult for victims to recognize the abuse.
- The batterer can threaten to disclose the victim's sexual orientation to those who are not aware of it. Such disclosure may potentially cause the victim to lose his or her job, or may destroy important relationships with family and friends.
- The victim and perpetrator are both likely to be part of an already small community, making it difficult or dangerous for the victim to discuss the situation with others. Leaving the partner may mean losing everyone in the victim's circle of friends.
- It is easier for the batterer and society to discount violence as a "lover's quarrel" amongst equals in a same-sex relationship than it is in a heterosexual relationship, even though all the same power and control issues exist.
- Most resources are directed at heterosexual women, barring gay and bisexual men from having access to them, and alienating lesbian and bisexual women.
- Homophobia amongst police officers, health care workers, counselors, or other professionals involved in domestic violence can cause victims in same-sex relationships to receive less effective assistance than heterosexuals seeking the same help.
- Legal protections are less well defined for people in same-sex relationships who experience domestic violence.

Challenges to The Response System

- Prevailing images of domestic violence make it difficult for members of the health-care system, the legal system, and the domestic violence to community recognize the abuse.
- It is harder to protect a victim from a female batterer because the batterer may have easier access to shelters and other safe areas than a man would.
- It is harder for those responding to the abuse to detect who is the batterer and who is the victim. The larger or more "butch" partner is NOT always the batterer.

Challenges to The Domestic Violence, Gay, and Lesbian Communities

- Acknowledging abuse may feed into homophobic beliefs that same-sex relationships are abnormal.
- Same-sex domestic violence challenges beliefs in the domestic violence community that all batterers are men and all victims are women.
- Same-sex domestic violence challenges images in the lesbian community of a "lesbian utopia."

Special Issues Concerning Race, Ethnicity, or Disability

Societal racism adds to the already difficult issues faced by people of color who are in abusive relationships. Ethnic and cultural factors may make it even harder for victims to discuss the situation or access support.

- Health care workers' images of "cultural norms" may make them less likely to spot controlling or abusive relationships in members of ethnic groups who are presumed to have sexist gender-roles.
- Patients who do not speak English may face greater barriers to discussing their situation or accessing support, especially if they are interpreters who are personal friends or well known in their community.
- Deaf patients are particularly at risk because they may be relying on their partners for communication, even during an assault.
- Patients with other disabilities may be especially dependent on one of their partners for physical and economic support.
- Patients with mental illness may have their complaints discounted as part of their psychological problem.
- Chemically dependent patients are at risk for increased severity of injuries and greater lethality rates. They are frequently blamed for the violence directed against them and often leave treatment against medical advice or are denied access to victim services such as shelters.

OUR CHALLENGE IS TO WORK TO OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS!