

**HELP CHANGE THE  
CONVERSATION ABOUT  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
AND ABUSE**

**Language Matters**



**Fear****IsNot****Love**

# Introduction

Intentional and thoughtful words can make a difference. It is important that we consider the language we use and acknowledge that words, terms and phrases can have various meanings and interpretations. Language frames how we understand an issue and consequently how we work to address it.

Words are extremely powerful. Making small changes in how we talk about domestic violence (DV) and abuse, by avoiding misleading language, can make a difference.

Victims of domestic violence experience the impact of negative words every time someone questions their actions or doubts their experiences. Sometimes when we talk about the person who is accused of the violent actions, by attempting to stay neutral, we may inadvertently blame the victim. Although we have good intentions when we speak with victims, we sometimes use words that can be harmful; language that may blame the victim for the abuse, even though that's not what we mean. Or we may accidentally question the victim's choices.

The ideas in this document are based on the work of Dr. Allan Wade and colleagues, see; <https://www.responsebasedpractice.com/>







## Reporting on Domestic Violence in the Media

The way language is used to describe incidents of DV in the public discourse and the media has a significant impact on the public's understanding of this critical issue. The particular words which are chosen influence how people make sense of DV incidents, impact perspectives about who is responsible for the violence, and guide ideas about what should be done to solve the problem of DV. This understanding, also influences the "social responses" which are provided by formal and informal supporters to victims and perpetrators of DV. For victims of DV, social responses are often received as either powerfully positive - or powerfully negative.

Positive social responses are empowering and validating, while negative social responses can be harmful and may lead a victim to stop talking with others about the DV. Negative social responses can also lead victims to doubt themselves, and question whether they are perhaps responsible for the DV they experienced.

Unfortunately, language which has been used to describe DV has often been unintentionally problematic and misleading, which has in turn contributed to negative social and institutional responses to victims and perpetrators of DV.

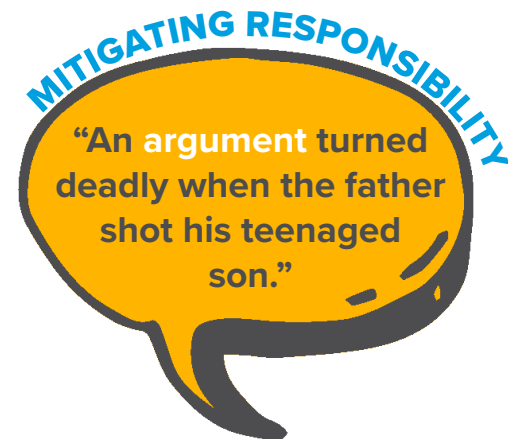
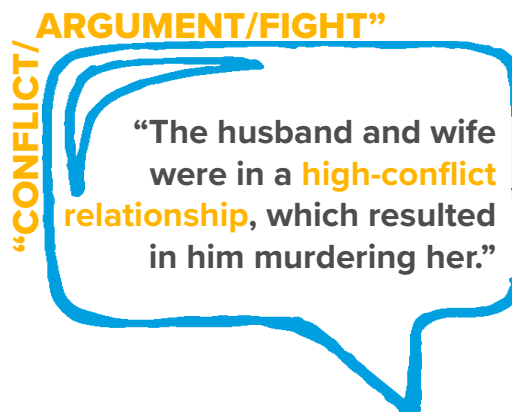
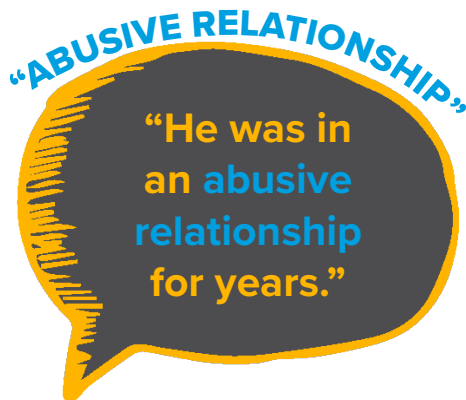
# Misleading Language

The following are some of the misleading words, ideas and phrases which are commonly used in the public discourse and in the media, when describing incidents of DV.

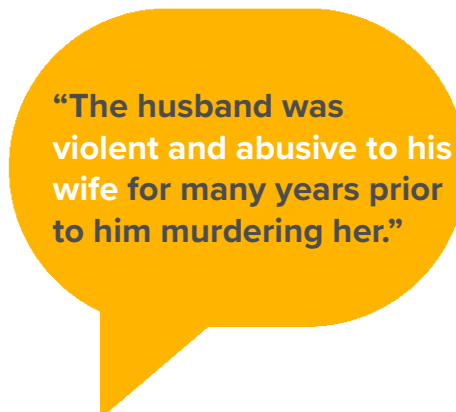
## 1. Language which misleads by suggesting both parties are responsible for the DV

Domestic violence and abuse are most often unilateral acts carried out by one person against another within a family - unlike mutual acts such as boxing matches or hockey fights. With DV, one person chooses to use abuse and violence against another person, who in no way chooses to be abused.

### Commonly Used Terms:



### More Appropriate Language:



"Abusive Relationship", "Conflict", "Fight" and "Argument" are terms which suggest that both parties are responsible for the DV.

All couples experience conflict, and in healthy relationships both parties are safe to openly voice their disagreement and to have direct conflict. When it comes to DV, it is not safe for the victim to engage in open conflict or arguments. The perpetrator uses abuse, intimidation and violence to try to exert control and power over the victim and to try to suppress the resistance to their abuse.

**These words minimize the insidious and dangerous nature of domestic violence – effectively concealing the violence and minimizing the harm and suffering experienced by the victim.**

## 2. Language which misleads by mitigating responsibility of the perpetrator for the DV

In most cases, DV is planned, deliberate behaviour on the part of perpetrators. This is not to suggest that perpetrators set out to destroy their relationships and families. However, there is ample evidence to support the intentionality of abuse, such as perpetrators hitting the victim in places where others will not notice; behaving violently and then stopping when someone comes to the door and resuming the violence after the person leaves; throwing cell phones away prior to behaving abusively in order to stop the victim from calling for help, etc..

In our experience, perpetrators often talk of the decision points where they chose to be abusive – and by the same token, have similarly made clear decisions to change. In our work we highlight their agency and their ability to control their behaviour. We believe people who use abuse can choose to change at any point in time.

**Language is often used to mitigate the responsibility of perpetrators. For example:**

“The perpetrator **lost control.**”

“She **exploded** like a cork.”

“He was so **overcome by the stress** of losing his job, he **didn't mean to** hurt his wife.”

“The perpetrator **was suffering from a decline** in mental health and **did not intend** to harm his family”.

**It is generally more accurate and respectful of perpetrators to simply describe the actions of the perpetrator without seeking to find a quick explanation as to why they acted the way they did.**





### 3. Language which misleads by implying that victims are damaged and deficient, and, therefore, the “source” of the problem of DV.

For decades, there has been a focus in academia and public discourse on the “effects” of DV on victims, such as depression, learned helplessness, co-dependency, post-traumatic stress disorder etc. This focus helped to highlight the enormous problem of DV and helped to rally support for programs such as women’s shelters and outreach programs. However, there have been unintended consequences of this spotlight on the “effects” on victims.

- Firstly, it has resulted in the skewed notion that in order to stop DV we must intervene primarily with victims, whilst ignoring the people who perpetrate the DV. In effect, this has blamed the victim for DV.
- Secondly, the focus on “effects” has failed to notice that victims always resist violence. In fact, these “effects” can often be understood instead as “responses” to the violence. For example, depression is commonly described as an effect of violence, however, in the context of violence, may instead be understood as a refusal to be happy with being abused by an intimate partner. Or, the “effect” of a dissociative disorder, can often be understood instead as the refusal by the victim to endure the pain of DV by going elsewhere in one’s mind.

Language is often used to blame and pathologize victims as follows.

#### Commonly used phrases which risk blaming victims for the DV.

“She ignored the red flags.”

“He was co-dependent and could not leave the abuser.”

“They let the abuse happen to them.”

“Abuse was all she had ever known so she was attracted to abusive men.”

It is more accurate to assume that the victim has resisted the abuse, stood up for their dignity, and to focus instead on the actions of the perpetrator as the person who needs to stop the abuse and violence.

## Guidance for asking questions about DV

- Ask for accurate descriptions of what happened – i.e. who did what to whom?
- Avoid language which minimizes or conceals the violence (i.e. calling it a fight or conflict)
- Avoid terms which mutualize the violence – i.e. which make it the responsibility of both parties (i.e. they were in an abusive relationship)
- Avoid seeking quick explanations for why a perpetrator acted the way they did (i.e. he was an upstanding member of the community- what happened to make him suddenly explode)
- Contest assumptions that victims are damaged and deficient and responsible for the DV perpetrated upon them.