

## **Domestic Violence and the Doula**

*Excerpted from The Doula Business Guide, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition by Patty Brennan*

*Note: Because most victims of domestic violence are women, we are using the term “woman” throughout this discussion. However, it is important to keep in mind that anyone can be a victim of domestic violence.*

### **Doula Observations**

Following are some of the signs of an abusive relationship that doulas might observe:

- Pattern of injuries with incompatible explanation (e.g., objects that leave an imprint, but she says that she fell)
- Repetitive psychosomatic complaints
- Prone to “accidents”
- Depression and suicide attempts
- Multiple injuries in various stages of healing
- Any injury during pregnancy
- Inter-relationship between the couple; their demeanor is “off.”
- Woman may be evasive, ashamed, avoid eye contact.
- Woman defers to her husband; he does all the talking, makes all the decisions.
- He’s overly concerned, demonstrative and protective; sits too close to her; has his arm around her.
- He never leaves the doula alone with the woman.
- He ensures that the doula does not have independent access to her client; the woman doesn’t have her own phone, is completely dependent upon him, etc.

### **Barriers to Leaving the Relationship**

A woman may have good reasons for staying in relationship with a batterer. She may love him and want the relationship to work out. She may rightly fear he will follow through on his threats to harm her, himself, her children, or her family if she leaves him. The most serious assaults occur when a survivor has left her batterer, called “separation violence.” This makes sense if we think about it. If the batterer’s agenda is about exerting absolute power and control, then the woman who has decided to leave is the biggest possible threat to that agenda. When he feels he is losing control, he is quite likely to escalate his efforts to regain it.

Additionally, she may be afraid of losing her children through custody battles or she might believe that she cannot parent her children alone and that they need their father/father figure. She might be financially dependent on her abuser and not have sufficient job skills to support herself and her children. Cultural and/or religious beliefs might dictate that she stay in the relationship. The woman’s self-esteem may have been so severely damaged from years of abuse that she believes him when he tells her she deserved or caused the abuse. She might feel too ashamed to tell anyone. The daily exhaustion from dealing with his abuse might leave her feeling unable to make a major change.

## Signs of a Lethal Situation

- Threats to kill survivor, himself, the children, or a member of the family.
- Threats to use weapons to harm or kill the survivor.
- Survivor states she has told him she is leaving.
- Separation has occurred (survivor has left the batterer).
- Stalking behavior (numerous messages/calls to her, following her, letting her know he knows where she is at all hours and who she sees, calling her work or school to make sure she is there, etc.).
- Survivor tells you he is obsessed with her.
- Depression or recent losses (jobs, death of loved one, accidents, etc.).
- History of assaulting her while he is intoxicated.
- Mutilating or killing a pet.
- Recent dramatic change in behavior.

Immigrant survivors have another whole range of reasons for staying. She might fear that if she reports him to the authorities, he will report her status and she will be at risk of deportation. She may not know where to access services. She might believe that agencies will not be able to help her because of language barriers and/or staff who are unfamiliar with her cultural beliefs. Or she may have a general distrust of government in any form.

## Appropriate Doula Responses

Things to avoid saying to someone you suspect might be living with domestic violence:

- *Are you a victim of domestic violence?* Most survivors will respond negatively to this question. It is better to ask, *“Have you ever been hit, punched, kicked, pushed, strangled, threatened or otherwise hurt by your partner?”*
- *What did you do to make him hurt you? What were you doing right before he attacked you?* These kinds of questions imply she is to blame for the assaults. She is never to blame, nor does she deserve the abuse.
- *Why haven't you left him? Why did you go back to him?* Because of all the reasons for her to stay, she might be reluctant to leave, or she may have left and returned. We know that leaving a relationship, for anyone, is a process. *On average, a survivor will leave her batterer seven times before the relationship is over.*

Strategies that work well to facilitate disclosure and discussion of domestic violence in a survivor's life include the following:

- *Listen to her.* This may be the first time she has talked to anyone. She might not talk again about the violence she is experiencing. Just listen to her without judging or telling her what to do.
- *Empowerment vs. intervention.* Avoid telling her what to do next or trying to solve her situation. She is the authority on her life and knows how to survive in her situation.

Telling her what she should do only results in one more person having control over her life.

If the woman does disclose that she is being abused, let her know:

- Battering is a common problem that happens to many, many people.
- She is NOT alone.
- The abuse is not her fault; she doesn't deserve to be treated like this.
- "I am concerned about your safety and the safety of your children."
- "I am here for you if you want to talk, regardless of whether you are ready to leave the relationship" (nonjudgmental).
- Listen, provide empathy, try to understand, validate.

The goal is to provide knowledge and support to the woman so she will do something about her situation. Listening allows her to identify what is happening and hopefully experience enough safety to take the next step. She needs to know her options. Leave the door open for her. **When she is ready to take the next step, she needs a safety plan.** Ask her what she has done in the past that worked (remember, she is a survivor). It is time to get a professional involved, such as a safety shelter! *Do not feel that you need to be the one that rescues her.* Doulas must guard against the desire to rescue the woman. If we see ourselves as rescuers, we continue to victimize her. *Rescuers need victims to rescue.* Be honest with yourself if you notice you are experiencing any of the following classic signs of rescuing behavior:

- Obsessive worrying
- Desire to take her children home with you
- Lending her money
- We're on pedestal and now she's angry that we let her down
- We hear what we want to hear; she lies to us
- Making excuses for her
- Daydreams of revenge on her assailant
- Feeling that she's not grateful enough for all you do (Can she do more for herself?)

## Being Responsible *TO* Others Versus Being Responsible *FOR* Others

From Polly Perez's book, *Doula Programs* (2010)

### When you feel responsible *to* others:

- You show empathy, encourage, share, confront, level, are sensitive, listen.
- You feel relaxed, free, aware, high self-esteem.
- You are concerned with relating person to person, feelings, and the person.
- You are a helper/guide.
- You expect the person to be responsible for themselves and their actions.
- You can trust and let go.

### When you feel responsible *for* others:

- You fix, protect, rescue, control, carry their feelings and fail to listen.
- You feel tired anxious, fearful, liable.
- You are concerned with the solution, answers, circumstances, details and being right.
- You are a manipulator.
- You expect the person to live up to your expectations.

### **"Safe House" or Shelter Policies for Battered Women**

- Assign an advocate.
- Keep all information confidentiality.
- Provide services in her language.
- Provide services regardless of citizenship status.
- Provide emotional support for her decision to stay with or leave her abusive partner.
- Refrain from pressuring her to enter the shelter.
- Work with others in the community to help keep her safe, *only if she requests this and after she has signed releases.*
- Domestic Violence Response Team—emergency intervention available.

### **Child/Elder Abuse and Neglect: Are Doulas Mandated Reporters?**

Child/elder protection laws are enacted to protect the health and welfare of vulnerable people, especially in instances where parents or other immediate family members are unwilling or unable to do so. To this end, statutes identify certain professions whose members are legally required to report abuse or neglect or suspected abuse or neglect. Those listed are the only professionals identified as having a legal obligation to report abuse. The standard statutory interpretation is that when a list is affirmatively delineated, that list is complete and omissions from it are intentional. Therefore, if doulas are not specifically mentioned, then they are, by definition, not considered to be mandated reporters. Statutes vary from state to state so you will need to research the wording of your state's law.

Although doulas are unlikely to be identified as mandated reporters, there is no prohibition against doulas making a report. So, while a doula is not legally liable for failing to report suspected abuse or neglect, she certainly may—and hopefully will—report it.