

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

FACT SHEET

Is there a connection between substance abuse and domestic violence? Most of the research done on this subject shows that there is a relationship between the two but that substance abuse does not cause domestic violence. The relationship between the two is that alcohol may be involved (the batterer may have been drinking prior to the incident or directly after the incident) but that the alcohol is not what drives the abuse.

“[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” (Substance Abuse Treatment and Domestic Violence, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997). Domestic violence and substance abuse need to be addressed by the court but they need to be handled differently. The defendant should be held accountable for the domestic violence. Blaming the violence on the addiction or the alcohol shifts the accountability from the defendant to the drugs or alcohol. A domestic violence court must work to hold the defendant accountable for the domestic violence incident while recognizing both that there may be legitimate substance abuse problems but that the alcohol does not cause the abuse.

The following comparisons may be helpful in recognizing some of the most crucial differences between substance abuse and domestic violence. (This chart is based on information from the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence.)

Substance Abuse

1. Loss of control: The alcohol or drug is in control and the user is a victim of that substance, unable to stop drinking or using drugs by him/herself.
2. “Disinhibition”: Alcohol causes suppressed feelings of violence to surface and this is out of the control of the user.
3. Disease: Alcohol is a disease which takes over a person; the person is a helpless victim to that disease. Alcoholism can be cured through treatment. The individual is sick and harming him/herself.
4. Treatment: A 12-step treatment program focusing on giving up control and admitting you are helpless to the disease, counseling or medical treatment.
5. Harming self: Focus on the individual as harming self or as a danger to self.

Domestic Violence

1. Control: Domestic violence is an act of power and control by one partner over the other. Each act of violence is chosen by the abuser to gain more control over the victim.
2. Aware of Actions: The abuser is in complete control. Abuser is controlling when drinking and when sober. Substance abuse is used as an excuse for the abusive behavior.
3. Choice: Domestic violence is a choice. Domestic violence is not a disease or medical-psychological problem. The individual is choosing violence and harming others.
4. Accountability and Education: Therapeutic interventions have not worked. Court ordered programs should be used that focus on individual accountability and control over violent and abusive behavior.
5. Harming others: The primary target is the abuser’s partner, not the abuser.

For more information, please contact 212.373.8092.