

# EFFECTIVE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRAINING TECHNIQUES WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

*National Bulletin on Domestic Violence Prevention (Three-part series,  
October, November and December 1997)*

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## **Part One of a Three-Part Series (October 1997)**

My worst training experience took place in a Louisiana parish. As the sole domestic violence trainer before 30 sheriff deputies, all from the same parish, I had arranged for a domestic violence survivor to speak before the group about her experiences. I had done this many times before at seminars throughout the country because the insight these survivors presented was always stirring – and effective as a training tool. I had scheduled this presentation to lead off the training, leaving me with the class for the remaining seven hours.

I remember distinctly the first two sentences this woman spoke; the rest of what she said is just one big horror. She began, “I can’t tell you how glad I am to be here.” Next she said: “Now I’m going to tell you what you should NEVER do or say to other victims of domestic violence.” She then proceeded to chastise, castigate, and otherwise scold this group of deputies, many of whom had responded to her numerous calls for help. When she finally took a breath after a 20-minute diatribe, I interrupted, thanked her profusely for her time, and nearly pushed her out the door. Once she was gone, I came back to my class, which by this time had, metaphorically, turned into stone.

Why tell you this? Because I learn from my experiences as a domestic violence trainer, and this episode taught me two valuable lessons:

1. Try to assemble a class from a variety of agencies.
2. Never use a domestic violence survivor from the same jurisdiction as the class.

Delivering training on domestic violence is always a chancy situation, because the crime is so laden with emotional baggage and other irrelevancies that have little bearing on the issues and compete with your time as you try to deliver the facts. Also, because domestic violence is such a seemingly illogical crime – Where else do you have a crime where someone professes love of another, then beats that person? Where else do you have a bullying, terrifying abuser break into tears when the victim announces that “it’s over”? – trying to explain its dynamics requires the class to make difficult imaginative leaps.

But the key to effecting training is to make the dynamics of domestic violence very, very clear. When your class can understand why the victim doesn't leave, for instance, or why the batterer keeps upping the control ante, it can use that understanding to listen better when responding to a domestic violence call and begin to read between the lines of what the victim and batterer are and aren't saying. Perhaps most importantly, this new understanding will lessen the class's considerable frustrations that typically occur in response to these calls.

And the key to engaging a class is to "hook" them at the very beginning of the training:

- If you have domestic violence survivors or former batterers who are willing to speak, put them on first.
- Use videos (no more than two in an eight-hour training day and no more than 30 minutes each in length.)
- Use handouts and flipcharts.
- Assign a class member as a "scribe" to write people's responses.
- Don't make your training all lecture: encourage participation. Let your class feel comfortable enough to talk to you, to ask questions, to engage in dialogue with you and with each other.

If you capture your class's attention from the start, and follow that with honesty, fairness, respect, and real interest in your participant's responses, you will be a good – and successful – trainer. You have my personal guarantee.

## **Part Two of a Three-Part Series (November 1997)**

You've designed a lesson plan, developed handouts, arranged for videos, and now you're finally ready to teach a class on law enforcement response to domestic violence. What's first? What's next? What works? What doesn't? In Part One we examined some keys to effective training, such as engaging in meaningful and realistic conversation. In Part Two, we look at how to introduce your subject, lay out the ground rules for the day, and address potential problems right away.

One of the biggest problems a trainer faces is establishing a good relationship with participants. (Keep in mind though, that a "good" relationship does not preclude disagreements or corrections.) You presumably know a great deal about this subject, which is why you're standing in front of everyone. When I teach, I do not minimize the extent of my knowledge about domestic violence. I give a quick overview of what I've done in the field and for how long. But I'm not a sworn officer, and I also make that clear. (Hint: If you bring up the fact first, you preclude anyone from using it as a negative later.) I tell the class I am here to help them understand the dynamics of domestic violence and to help them

improve their response to these calls. I then state that I am *not* here to tell them how to do their jobs, and that they will be surprised at how much information they already have.

So, as part of this introduction and as an icebreaker, I ask the class to introduce themselves by stating their name, rank, agency, and years in law enforcement, and I ask for a volunteer to add up these years. Because classes usually have people with a range of experience, you'll often have rookies sitting next to chiefs. This is an effective icebreaker, with the class spontaneously cheering for a brand new officer or groaning good naturedly after someone announces 35 years with a department.

When the introductions are over, ask the counter for the results. Most classes have more than 100 collective years of law enforcement experience in a room. When you announce the years collectively, the class immediately feels a bond, and you have the opportunity both to stress and acknowledge the considerable amount of law enforcement knowledge in the room. To paraphrase Sally Field at Oscar time: This icebreaker works. It really works.

Here are a few more suggestions:

- *Discuss gender.* Explain at the beginning of the session that while victims and batterers are both male and female, the preponderance of the time victims are female and batterers are male. Therefore, to avoid time constantly saying “he or she” and “his or her” throughout the day, tell the class you will henceforth refer to victims as female and batterers as male, secure in the knowledge YOU WILL HOLD that such locutions are strictly an exercise in verbal efficiency.
- *Defuse animosity.* You are not in front of this class to fight with them or to criticize their past behavior. You have a limited amount of time to engage their interest and help them change their actions. Don't point fingers and accuse the participants of a bad response in prior domestic violence calls. Don't ask why they didn't make arrests when victims were clearly in need. Remember, it's only within the last decade that police actually could make arrests based on probable cause. In years past, I've had many officers tell me privately that they were often frustrated and heartsick that they could not arrest a batterer under the existing laws. Some even confided in me that, as a last resort, they would stand in a batterer's way so that he would inadvertently touch them – and could then be arrested for assaulting an officer.
- *Dispel myths.* Develop a list of typical myths and misconceptions people hold about domestic violence, such as that domestic violence is found primarily in poor families and victims could leave easily if they wanted to. Distribute the list with “yes” and “no” check offs, then collect the lists and use the responses as jumping off points for class discussion. I usually ask the class as a whole to give their responses. That way, even if the responses are wrong, I don't single anyone out. Remember, this topic is difficult enough to teach without alienating people from the start by belittling them publicly.

By the way, having delivered this type of training over a 20-year span I can tell you emphatically that officers today are much more knowledgeable about this topic than might be

expected. Regardless, you should be prepared and know the answers solidly. After all, if you show hesitancy, how can you expect to change anyone's thinking?

An important point to remember – every trainer has a different style. These approaches and techniques work for me because I have had many opportunities of trial-and-error to discover how to make them most effective. My discussion about gender, to list but one example, evolved after too many classes accused me of bashing men and favoring women. Your training style, therefore, determines how you present information. Perhaps when discussing gender, rather than stating it once, you might choose to print that information on a flipchart, direct the class to read it, then leave it posted on a wall throughout the training day.

I believe that as law enforcement officers increase their knowledge about the dynamics of domestic violence, they respond better while markedly decreasing their level of frustration. Their empathy for the victim grows, as does their ability to read between the lines when faced with a very calm batterer. Thus, the more parameters you provide, the better your class will wrap themselves around the specific information you teach. For instance, if you explain up front that batterers can be both male and female, when you talk later in the day about the characteristics of a batterer, the class will not automatically think of men.

Your goal throughout this training is to explain the many issues connected to the crime of domestic violence. This is not an easy task. Be prepared, for instance, to alter your lesson plan order, provide numerous descriptions and analogies concerning why victims remain with their batterers, and engage in rigorous discussions with trainees carrying extensive emotional baggage. Also, don't intuit that you've taught what you set out to do, leaving it up to the participants to prompt you. Ask the class directly.

- Do you understand the dynamics of domestic violence?
- Have I answered all the questions you brought with you?
- Are you clear about why the victim stays with the batterer?

If the answers to these and other questions are in the affirmative, you've met your goal. Time to go home.

### **Part Three of a Three-Part Series (December 1997)**

Delivering training is a lot like following a recipe: Some people alter the recipe, creating a tasty but slightly different dish; others follow it to the letter, creating clones of the printed recipe's words.

Neither approach is wrong, but they point out that whether the subject is tasty treats or teaching, you can all start with the same material, but where you finish depends on your individual touch – your style, your delivery, and your knowledge of the subject.

The experts who contributed to this part of the series are longtime domestic violence trainers with dramatically different styles. Some of their suggestions will most likely appeal to all, such as steps to take when answering a call. Other suggestions, which focus on lesson delivery, may or may not be a good fit depending on your individual manner and approach. So, as the ubiquitous sports announcers often say: “You make the call.”

### Make a Connection

What’s most important in training? Connecting with your audience, say the experts. “The point is to bring down the ‘us vs. them’ wall,” says Colleen McGrath, a veteran New York State domestic violence advocate and trainer. She stresses that those being trained must “get over the notion that somehow ... victims of domestic violence behave in ways that we can detach ourselves from – assuring ourselves that we would never be in their predicament.”

Cpl. David Thomas, a founder of the Montgomery County (Md.) Police Department’s newly formed domestic violence unit, agrees. “One of the things I like to do as much as possible is to make the audience feel what the victim in these types of situations feels. I try to use scenarios or a story so that they can perhaps feel the hurt and rage a victim might have.” After he puts the class through the exercise, he asks the participants how they would feel if their mother, sister, daughter, or granddaughter were in a situation where they were being abused and nobody did anything about it.

### Love Preconceptions at Home

“Definitely don’t make any preconceived notions about your audience,” says Thomas, “whether they are in support of the domestic violence ‘movement’ or against. I find that sometimes I have females in the class who are objecting to many of the things being taught; at the same time I find males who are more receptive than I thought they would be.”

### Encourage Your Class to Speak Up

One method is to ask the class if any of them grew up in violent homes. “I then ask how many of them thought the police were the good guys and hoped they would come in and help them and their families,” even though they usually didn’t, says Joan Zorza, a board member of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. She conveys to the class members that no matter what their perceptions might have been, things have changed in law enforcement today.

Donald B. Pfouts, a retired 21-year veteran of the Baltimore County Police Department and co-founder of the department’s spousal abuse unit, knows that everyone in every class has had some experience with domestic violence – either directly or indirectly.

“I focus on trying to get them to assess their views to find out how accepting they are to violence” because that will affect how they respond to calls, he says. He adds, “Before you know where you’re going, you’ve got to know where you came from.”

Julie Blum, executive director of My Sister's Place, a Washington, D.C., shelter for battered women, views the training room as a place for police to vent their frustrations. "Hear what they have to say and be open. Whatever their opinion is, I validate it. If I can't, then they're not going to be able to hear what I have to say," she says.

### Use Relevant Terms and Don't Use Statistics

"Take some time to learn the occupational language," says Pfouts. Be familiar with such terms as "shift work" and "computer-aided dispatch." Know about various protocols and procedures, particularly concerning arrest and crime scene investigation.

Watch your statistics. According to Sgt. Scott Gibson, domestic violence coordinator for the Alexandria (Va.) Police Department, "Everybody starts off in the beginning with statistics ... I think you can go overboard and everybody glazes over."

### Use Your Time Wisely

Pfouts suggests that you don't spend too much time on the legal aspects of domestic violence because "that's black and white and real easy to understand. Learn their perspectives on violence first, then go to the dynamics."

### Think – and Train – Differently About Victims

McGrath suggests telling the audience that when talking to victims, "do it without using the word 'why.'" If you ask why, she says, it makes the victim perceive you as blaming her for what happened. "You need only ask 'what' and 'how.'" Also important is to understand the victim's perspective – that she's been deprived of making choices on her own.

Pfouts instructs his classes to let the victim know that she can make decisions. "Say to the victim, 'If you decide not to do what I've suggested, that's O.K.'"

Zorza points out that "when you compare domestic violence victims to other crime victims, it turns out they are somewhat braver." For example, she cites the length to which prosecutors will go for victims who are willing to testify against organized crime, from putting them up in hotels to obtaining new identities for them through the Witness Protection Program.

In contrast, Zorza notes that most domestic violence victims are instructed by the courts to be nice to their batterers, make the children available, and attend joint counseling. "We still simply don't see how vulnerable these people are," she says.

### Think – and Train – Differently About Batterers

"It isn't that victims of domestic violence behave differently from other victims. It's that batterers behave differently from other perpetrators. Robbers, for instance, don't continue to threaten and harass," says Zorza. She urges trainers to focus more on batterers and their

bullying behavior, “so that people see this as a real weakness in the perpetrator and stop focusing on the victim.”

There you have it – from the experts: connect with your class, make them think, and hear their thoughts. Is this all the information you need to be an effective domestic violence trainer? Obviously not. But using it can certainly help you do your job better. And that’s the whole point.

### **CRITICAL DOs**

Here are some tips to share with your audience:

- *DO call the shelter from the scene.* Gibson trains his officers to immediately make contact with the shelter then hand the phone over to the victim “because [shelter staff] are the experts in what happens between now and in court.” According to Gibson, establishing such contact “has made a profound impact in guilty pleas and convictions.”
- *DO look for multiple charges.* “If you can charge several crimes, such as domestic violence, child abuse, and violation of protection orders, it gives the district attorney something to work with,” says Gibson. He adds that by using this approach, it often relieves victims and their children from testifying in court.
- *DO serve as role models.* Because male leaders will change society in this area, says Pfouts, “policemen must set an example for other men in society by speaking out against domestic violence.”
- *DO talk to the children.* “They make great witnesses,” says Gibson. “Everyone seems to forget them. Officers get the radio calls for domestic violence and get a preconceived notion in their heads of [only] husband and wife. They don’t ask the children what happened.”

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