

Domestic Violence: The Public Secret We Cannot Ignore

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While its prevalence is widely acknowledged, domestic violence is frequently minimized or hidden, leaving profound, unaddressed impacts on individuals, Families and even entire organizations. This disparity between perception and action is especially critical within high-stress environments like the Army, where domestic violence not only affects individual health and family dynamics but also has far-reaching consequences for organizational readiness and culture.

Despite its devastating effects, domestic violence often remains hidden due to societal stigma, fear of repercussions, and the normalization of certain harmful behaviors. Victims may view domestic violence as a private matter, discouraging them from seeking support, while societal attitudes frequently downplay nonphysical forms of abuse, such as psychological and emotional manipulation.

Research shows that victims of domestic violence are often blamed or questioned for remaining in abusive relationships, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and discouraging victims from coming forward (Ben-David & Renick, 2008). This lack of understanding reinforces silence, leading to missed opportunities for early intervention and support. Within organizations like the Army, where strength and resilience are highly valued, discussing domestic violence can feel stigmatizing, creating additional barriers to disclosure.

Unique Pressures Faced by Army Families

Army Families may experience unique stressors that exacerbate the complexities of domestic violence. The constant demands of deployment cycles, frequent relocations and the hierarchical structure of the Army can add layers of pressure that impact family dynamics. Long separations and reintegration periods can create emotional strain, while the tightly knit Army community may discourage individuals from coming forward for fear of judgment or repercussions on their career or family stability.

Army spouses, in particular, may be reluctant to report domestic violence because of concerns about their partner's career and the potential impact on their Family's financial security, housing arrangements, or social standing within the community. This interplay between personal and professional concerns creates a heavy burden for many spouses, highlighting the need for confidential and supportive reporting systems tailored to Army life.

The Role of Leadership in Domestic Violence Prevention

Leadership plays a critical role in setting the tone for how domestic violence is addressed within Army settings. Leaders who take a firm stance on zero tolerance for domestic violence send a clear message that this issue is taken seriously. Trauma-informed leadership training can equip leaders to recognize signs of domestic violence, respond empathetically and prioritize safe, confidential reporting mechanisms. Leaders who model supportive behaviors and advocate for domestic violence prevention create a culture of trust, encouraging individuals to seek help without fear of judgment or career repercussions.

The Impact of Domestic Violence on Organizational Readiness and Health

Domestic violence has a direct impact on organizational health, particularly in the Army, where domestic violence can affect mission readiness. Research indicates that domestic violence erodes an individual's mental health, focus and well-being, which in turn affects their performance and interactions within the

unit. Soldiers struggling with the effects of domestic violence —whether as victims or perpetrators—may experience absenteeism, impaired decision-making and increased stress, all of which reduce unit cohesion and operational effectiveness.

When the Soldier involved in domestic violence is the perpetrator, the repercussions extend even further. Perpetrators may bring unresolved anger and control issues into their professional environment, creating a tense or unsafe atmosphere for their peers. This can lead to distrust within the unit, reduce morale, and even compromise safety during missions. These behaviors not only threaten team cohesion but also place others at risk, particularly in high-stakes situations where stable, predictable behavior is essential. Investing in comprehensive, trauma-informed interventions is therefore essential for preserving both organizational health and operational readiness.

Transgenerational Trauma: Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence

One of the most profound, long-lasting impacts of domestic violence is the way trauma reverberates across generations. Transgenerational trauma—the passing of unresolved trauma from one generation to the next—affects not only individual behavior but also family dynamics, emotional regulation and mental health. Children exposed to domestic violence often carry this trauma into adulthood, where it influences their relationships, coping mechanisms and overall resilience. Studies indicate that unresolved trauma in one generation can manifest in symptoms of depression, anxiety and poor emotional regulation in the next, perpetuating a cycle of dysfunction (Danieli, 1998).

Bowen’s Family Systems Theory further illustrates this process, suggesting that trauma and dysfunctional patterns persist across generations, affecting indicators like relational success, educational attainment, and financial stability. Without intervention, these indicators deteriorate, establishing cycles of trauma that affect physical, emotional, and social health. In cases of domestic violence, unresolved trauma often leads to poor coping mechanisms, increased risk of perpetuating or enduring abuse, and reduced quality of life for future generations. Addressing transgenerational trauma through family counseling and community support is essential for breaking this cycle and fostering long-term healing.

Addressing Training Gaps Across Professions

To create meaningful change, we must address training gaps across the professions most likely to interact with domestic violence cases, including law enforcement, family advocacy, educators, health care providers and Army leadership. Current research supports a tailored, trauma-informed approach for each profession:

- **Law Enforcement:** Training should include trauma-informed response and cultural sensitivity, teaching officers to recognize and respond to trauma in ways that de-escalate tension and foster cooperation. Collaboration with the family advocacy social workers and advocacy groups can further enhance support for victims.
- **Family Advocacy Professionals:** Training should emphasize risk assessment, longitudinal support, and safety planning, using evidence-based tools like the Danger Assessment Tool to evaluate risk levels and guide individualized safety plans.

- **Educators and School Counselors:** Teachers should learn to identify signs of trauma in children, employing trauma-informed classroom management strategies that minimize triggers and promote emotional safety.
- **Health Care Providers:** Routine screening for domestic violence and trauma-informed care in medical settings can identify abuse early and connect patients with advocacy services and resources. Traumatic brain injuries are a great example where there is a gap in protocol and policy.
- **Commanders and Army Civilian Leaders:** Leadership training should focus on establishing safe reporting mechanisms, psychologically safe workspaces, understanding domestic violence's impact on organizational health, and fostering a culture that supports domestic violence prevention and intervention.

A comprehensive training approach is essential for cultivating a supportive, informed response to domestic violence, ensuring that each profession contributes effectively to prevention and intervention efforts.

A Call to Action: Preventing Domestic Violence

The Army community is uniquely positioned to lead by example in preventing domestic violence through policy, support systems and proactive initiatives. Clear policies on confidentiality and accountability, combined with accessible resources, help create an environment where individuals feel safe seeking help. Continued education on trauma and transgenerational trauma, coupled with leadership development, is essential for building a zero-tolerance culture. By fostering an environment that supports domestic violence prevention and intervention, the Army can make a lasting impact—not only within its ranks but also as a model for broader societal change.

Domestic violence is not only a personal or familial issue; it's a societal challenge that requires a coordinated, trauma-informed approach. By addressing the hidden nature of domestic violence, supporting victims and Families, and breaking the cycle of transgenerational trauma, we can create safer, healthier communities. The responsibility to prevent domestic violence belongs to all of us—together, we can make a difference.

If you need help, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), speak with a responder via their chat at www.thehotline.org or contact the [Family Advocacy Program](#) for support.