

# Violent Language

## Violent Phrases That Are Used In Everyday Speech

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When push comes to shove	That slays me	Shooting holes in the
Adding insult to injury	Twist your arm	argument
Hitting on an idea	Break a leg	Armed with the facts
Deadbeat	Broken heart	Drop dead gorgeous
Take a stab at it	Breaks my heart	Gun the engine
Shot in the dark	Killing me softly	Hired gun
Push over	Knocked up	Shooting blind
To be brutally honest	Hit up	Shooting blanks
Soften the blow	At the end of my rope	Shooting ducks in a barrel
Beats me	The straw that broke the	You slay me
That really bombed	camels back	Ride shotgun
Pushed over the edge	Shoot from the hip	Traffic was murder
Blown away	Straight shooter	Moving target
Killer smile	Shoot yourself in the foot	Do a drive by
Kick the bucket	Blow up in your face	Bring out the big guns
Set the world on fire	She's a real pistol, that one	Went in with guns blazin'
Pick your battles	Give it a shot	Keep your powder dry
That really burned me	Take a shot at it	Hair-trigger temper
Overkill	Something to shoot for	Straight shot
Kicking around an idea	Right on target	Set your sights on the prize
Get away with murder	Need more ammunition	Locked and loaded
Killing time	Bullet points	Bang for your buck
Punch line	Take your best shot	Loose cannon
If looks could kill	Shot in the dark	Rally the troops
That kills me	Shoot off your mouth	Join the battle
Roll with the punches	Gun shy	On your radar screen
Jumped the gun	Gunning for trouble	Leading the charge
Kick in the pants	Under the gun	Had a blast
Bite the bullet	Whole shootin' match	He/she's dynamite
The beaten path	Shoot the breeze	Going ballistic
Hit the road	Son of a gun	Old habits die hard

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## Powerful Words

**The following are examples of ways to rephrase victim-blaming language:**

~~She provoked him.~~  
He made a choice.

~~He has an anger control issue.~~  
He uses abuse to have power and control over his partner.

~~Family violence, violent relationship~~  
Abuser, violent person

~~She is a battered woman.~~  
He is an abuser.

~~Why does she stay?~~  
Why does he batter?

Language, or word choice, has a tremendous impact on what we think of ourselves and each other. Think back to a time in your childhood when someone called you a name, or said something derogatory about you. You can probably remember the exact words they used to humiliate or degrade you. Words are extremely powerful.

Survivors of domestic and sexual violence experience the impact of negative words every time someone questions their actions or doubts their experiences. People often underestimate the importance of choosing appropriate language to discuss the issues of domestic and sexual violence.

For example, following a homicide/suicide in Sheridan, Oregon, a local newspaper headline read: "Couple leaves behind two small children."

To read the printed words, one might assume that the woman made a decision to abandon her children. In reality, this woman was murdered by her husband. A more accurate headline might have read: "Husband beats wife to death"

Today, many in our society want to ignore men's violence against women. It's not uncommon to read an entire article about domestic violence without encountering any gender-specific terms. When former President Clinton wrote a letter on the seriousness of domestic violence, he never referred to men as perpetrators. However, the truth is that 95% of the time that domestic violence takes place, it is male violence perpetrated against women.

Words are powerful. That's why at Mid-Valley Women's Crisis Service we are constantly evaluating our language to consider how we might best communicate the truth about violence against women and children and place the blame where it belongs - on the abuser.

We have changed the way we talk about violence against women and children. For example, we used to say, "Every nine seconds a woman is beaten in the U.S." Now we say, "Every nine seconds a man beats a woman in the U.S." We reframe "Why does she stay?" with the question, "Why does he batter?"

We avoid the terms *violent relationship* and *family violence* which suggest a relationship problem or that everyone in the family is violent. These terms miss the truth - they miss the opportunity to make it clear that one man is making the choice to be violent to a woman or a family.

A national columnist, Kathleen Parker, has devoted a lot of space in her column to address what she considers a travesty of justice: the false claims of domestic violence against men who are actually innocent. Parker claims that not only are women lying in their claims of abuse, but they are actually just as violent as men.

Parker's commentary (July 1999) insists that women often initiate the violence that leads to their injury or death. She states: "Though we can't ignore that men, owing to size and strength, are more dangerous than women *when provoked*, we also can't ignore that women may need to change their behavior", (emphasis added). Sentences like this one deliver a devastating message to victims of violence by insinuating that if a woman is beaten by her partner, she probably provoked him and therefore somehow needs to shoulder the blame for what happened to her.

However, empirical research simply does not support the concept that women are as violent as men. Our sources of information about domestic violence do not come from "radical feminists", or even domestic violence service providers. The statistics we use come from slightly less

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## Powerful Words

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controversial sources like the FBI and the San Diego Police Department! The SDPD made the commitment to speak with every child in the household when they were called to the scene of a domestic assault. The children reported that 95% of the time the male in the household was the abuser.

Parker asserts in her column a myth that seems to be extremely prevalent - that women lie about domestic violence in order to gain advantages during a divorce or custody hearing. This is a hard concept to agree with for several reasons:

Research suggests that false reports of domestic violence are made at about the same rate as other crimes - somewhere in the neighborhood of 2% of the time. In order to make false claims of domestic violence, a woman would have to go through an extreme amount of work and inconvenience - police interviews, countless questions from friends, family, co-workers, and social service agencies, piles of paperwork to file restraining orders and stalking citations, lost time from work, attorney's fees, etc.

Considering the amount of effort a woman would have to go through to lie about domestic violence, the payoff seems virtually nonexistent. A woman who tells the truth about domestic violence often receives no reprieve from the visitation rights of the father, no matter how severe the violence against her or the children. Victims rarely receive special consideration during divorce and custody proceedings; in fact, several women in Marion County have lost custody of their children, even though the violence was documented. In some cases, custody is granted to the father, even though there is documented child abuse. The reality is that telling the truth about domestic violence does not guarantee a woman that the judicial or social service systems will respond appropriately.

Unfortunately, Parker's words are powerful. Her voice speaks louder than most, because she communicates in a forum that is accessed by vast numbers of people. Words like Parker's do damage to the anti-violence movement; they perpetuate myths and stereotypes about victims that contribute to keeping victims silent.

But victims are not the only ones that are affected by words - language is often used to try to silence advocates, too. Women working in the antiviolence movement are called male bashers, man-haters and femi-nazis. Why? Because they work to call attention to some men's violence toward women. Men who are active in the anti-violence movement are often silenced by homophobic language - they are called "homos," "fags," etc. Jackson Katz, a man who writes and speaks out against men's violence toward women, notes the irony in the logic that "because we care about women we must want to have sex with men."

Women and men alike must be willing to address the stereotypes and oppressions that are used to keep violence against women and children in place. Words are powerful, and we each choose which words to use every day. Each person who understands the issues has the opportunity to help others understand as well, by choosing words that reflect the truth about domestic and sexual violence.