

Why We Must Believe Survivors

In April 2017, Kendall Brown and her sister, Kayla, were murdered by Kendall's husband, George Earl Muhammad. Both were shot multiple times outside Kendall and Muhammad's Memphis, Tenn. home. The couple's five children, ages 2 to 12, were inside at the time.

It wasn't the first time Muhammad had been violent. Five years prior, he had been charged with assault after pushing a then six-month-pregnant Kendall to the ground and punching her in the face. He was convicted and served just one day in jail.

Unfortunately, Kendall's story isn't unique. Before someone dies at the hands of an abuser, there are **often warning signs**—canaries in the coal mines, if you will. They signal that things are getting worse, that the abuse is escalating.

Often times, however, those signals are ignored, not by the survivor, but by those around her—the public, the courts, the lawmakers. Survivors often feel they're left to fight their own battles, alone, hoping they can get out before things get really, really bad.

It Starts with Believing

Every day in the U.S., three women are murdered by intimate partners. In 2015, intimate partners were responsible for 64 percent of female murders. These statistics underscore why women must be believed when they disclose abuse of any type.

"When a woman reports domestic violence and her report is discredited or dismissed, it not only takes away from her pain, but it sends a message to the aggressor that the action is acceptable," says Penelope Hefner, principal and family law attorney at Sodoma Law Union.

"With prevailing views stigmatizing domestic violence, a woman's fear that she will not be believed prevents her from reporting it," says Hefner. A disproportionate number of women reporting abuse then skews the data—only 25 percent of intimate partner assaults on women are reported to police each year—making it appear as though domestic violence isn't as much of a concern as it actually is.

"It makes it nearly impossible to stop the behavior or commit resources to doing so," she adds. Until the stigma is gone, experts encourage women to keep detailed logs of abuse for evidentiary purposes.

"Prepare, prepare and document," says Jagdish Khubchandani, a community health education professor in Ball State's College of Health who studies domestic violence. "Understand that this will not be an easy battle, and evidence is key. Collect as much evidence as possible and find ways to prove your experience."

But First, Safety Plan

Whether or not you plan to report abuse, and whether or not people believe you when you do, your ultimate goal should be to protect yourself and your children by getting away from the abuser.

“Know that you may be alone at times in this struggle, but this is about your right and dignity, so continue the fight. No one deserves to be ill-treated,” Khubchandani says.

No matter where you are in your journey to leave, you must have a safety plan, as abuse can turn deadly in an instant. The majority of murders by intimate partners occur during an argument, most often after a survivor tries to leave.

“The most important part of escaping domestic violence is having a plan for physical, emotional, legal and financial safety,” Hefner says.

Physical safety. A survivor needs to know where they can go quickly at any time of day or night. This means looking into domestic violence programs, shelters and safe houses.

Emotional safety means reaching out to other victims and supporters of victims for the confidence to know you can actually get away.

Legal safety is knowing how, when and where to get a protective order, how to work with the police as a credible witness, how to understand custody laws, how to represent yourself in court and how to protect yourself in court.

Financial safety means setting aside some money or determining what funds are accessible is important as well.

A domestic violence advocate can help you create a safety plan specific to your situation and needs. Get started by contacting the Family Crisis Center at 309-582-7233.