



Cathy Malchiodi PhD, LPCC, LPAT, ATR-BC, REAT Arts and Health

RELATIONSHIPS

Telling without Talking and Domestic Violence

Art breaks the silence of domestic violence.

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"Silence" from the collection of Cathy Malchiodi, PhD Source: © 2008 Cathy Malchiodi PhD

Speaking the truth about domestic violence is a step toward healing for all survivors. But when talking about violence brings shame, ambivalence, and fear, art therapy gives survivors not only a voice, but also is a way to raise consciousness about the profound effects of battering and all forms of abuse between partners.

While I have no explanation for the psychology behind the current financial crisis, as a therapist I am certain of one psychological effect of an economic downturn -- an increase in domestic violence. In this time of economic uncertainty, job loss, home foreclosures, and increased costs of living, pressures mount in families and frayed tempers inevitably will give way to an increase in battering and abuse.

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, domestic violence is a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person may all be part of the dynamics, including any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure or wound another individual.

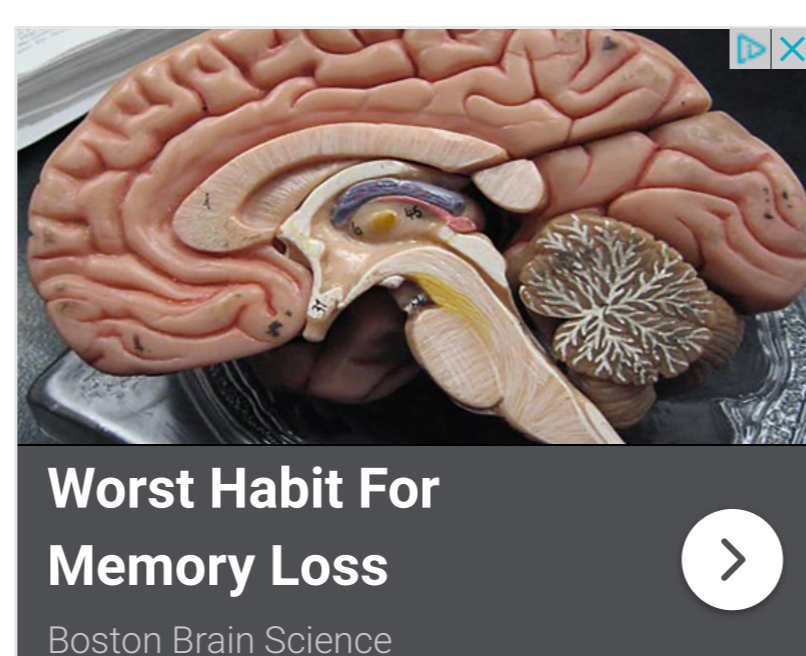
While domestic violence can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, or gender, for the past 25 years I have worked with adult women and child survivors and mostly those who have found refuge in shelters and safe houses. I

suspect that with the continuing economic rollercoaster, we will see a rise in not only reports of domestic violence, but also a strain on these community-based programs that help women and children leave abusive relationships.

Although personal safety and a violence-free life are the first and foremost issues for anyone who is the victim of domestic violence, the long term healing process involves recovery from cumulative trauma, often posttraumatic stress reactions, and almost always personal shame and loss of self. Art therapy, which formally began as a field and treatment shortly after World War II, continues to be widely adopted to help battered women and children deal with their physical and emotional scars. Art as a healing force does not come easy for those whose lives have been controlled, are accustomed to betrayal and punishment, and have learned self-hatred. But inevitably when it does, creativity and imagination restore a sense of possibility, identity, and reconnection with parts of the self that were silenced in order to survive the violence. While survivors often feel shame in talking about abuse, talking about their artworks is an experience of finally coming home.

The tradition of art as a voice for domestic violence survivors has spawned a number of well-known programs, including the Clothesline Project, a project to address violence against women. In 1990, visual artist Rachel Carey-Harper, inspired by the AIDS quilt, presented the concept of using shirts hanging on a clothesline as a way to raise consciousness. Since doing the laundry was always considered women's work and women often exchanged information

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over backyard fences while hanging their clothes out to dry, the concept of the clothesline became the vehicle. Each year thousands of women now tell their stories of survival—and commemorate victims who died from domestic violence—by using words and/or artwork to decorate a t-shirt to be exhibited on a clothesline. And programs such as A Window Between Worlds in Venice, CA, serve as models for how art helps both women and children develop a sense of hope, possibility, and safety.

In her seminal volume, Trauma and Recovery, Judith Herman echoes the very reason that violence must be transformed in some way in order for recovery to begin: "Certain violations are too terrible to utter out loud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable ...Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried." Domestic violence is one of those atrocities that continues to plague lives and for its survivors, is often too horrific to verbalize. Unfortunately, it may increase and intensify in these weeks and months if the expected financial crises continue. And while art is not the panacea for abuse, it is certainly a way through it and one that not only transforms the atrocities of violence, but also sends a powerful message that ultimately breaks the silence.

If you need help, please contact National Domestic Violence Hotline at http://www.ndvh.org/ or phone 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month.



About the Author



Cathy Malchiodi, Ph.D., is a psychologist, expressive arts therapist, trauma specialist, and author of 20 books, including Trauma and Expressive Arts Therapy: Brain, Body, and Imagination in the Healing Process.

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