

## **MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: Breaking the Silence**

October is widely known as Breast Cancer Awareness Month and the color pink is everywhere as individuals share their support for this important cause. An awareness campaign that is often in the shadows is Domestic Violence Awareness and Prevention Month, which is also held in October, with purple as the designated color. Both campaigns are valid and important, yet speaking on domestic violence can often be a sensitive subject.

Domestic violence is often associated with violence that takes place in households. However domestic violence (DV), also known as intimate partner violence (IPV), has been defined by PAHO as “behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors.” Domestic violence is not limited by gender or sexual orientation; however, DV is more commonly perpetrated by men against women. In fact, research has shown that approximately “one in four women and one in nine men in the United States have reported experiencing sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking in their lifetime,” noting that statistical data is limited in the Caribbean. The World Bank once reported that, “Globally, 1 in 3 women have suffered physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime...and nearly half of Caribbean women surveyed in 5 Caribbean countries face at least one form of violence: physical, sexual, economic, or emotional.” The limited data regarding domestic violence is often a result of those experiencing it being afraid to tell anyone, reach out for help, and/or ultimately report it.

It is important to be aware that domestic violence can affect one’s mental health, potentially causing depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and more. The prevention aspect of Domestic Violence Awareness and Prevention Month is to help the public recognize the signs of the person who harms *and* the person experiencing domestic violence. Some of the common signs or red flags to look for in an abusive relationship are yelling, shifting the blame, isolating their partner from loved ones, gaslighting, controlling finances, angry outbursts, and insulting or demeaning their partner in front of others. It is important for the public to also recognize that it is not always easy for someone experiencing domestic violence to report it or leave their abusive partner. Some of the reasons for not leaving include fear of societal blame or discrimination, fear of not being believed, and financial instability. Thus, attitudes must change, and stereotypes must be eradicated to decrease domestic violence in our communities. Education must be more prevalent to raise awareness to prevent domestic violence not just in the month of October, but daily.