



NFL and Domestic Violence Policy Statement

Contact

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Commission Roger Goodell has set out a commitment that the NFL will respond to the problem of domestic violence in the league with the highest standard of “getting it right.”

After twenty years of working in the movement to end violence against women and girls, the last ten of which were spent working with adult male domestic violence perpetrators, I have learned that “getting it right” is not a simple nor easy proposition.

Domestic violence is a messy and complex problem. Effective response and intervention for the NFL, and all of us, requires evidence-based knowledge, clarity of purpose, and courage.

In regard to the *evidence*, here’s what we know—babies do not come into this world intent upon growing-up to hurt those they love. **Domestic violence is learned.** Tragically, the primary school for most children’s education in violence is their own homes.

- **Domestic violence perpetrators are the little boys who grew-up with serious childhood trauma.** They have witnessed domestic violence in their own homes, received inconsistent care from a parent struggling with drug or alcohol addiction, been the victims of child abuse, neglect or parent absenteeism, or lived day-to-day in neighborhoods and environments rife with violence, victimization, injury and death.
- **Such adverse experiences matter; in fact, they matter a great deal.** Compelling new research in brain science and psychology has provided abundant and clear evidence that without healing intervention (professional or informal), adverse childhood experiences have a profound and lasting impact on a person’s physical, emotional and psychological development. In essence, the prolonged, repeated and unpredictable physical and emotional “war zones” inside children’s homes and neighborhoods create a response similar to that of PTSD in war veterans.

- **Trauma and adverse experiences create a child's view of the world as unsafe, uncaring and unprotected, and lead the child to adapt his or her attitudes and behaviors to survive in this kind of world.** The child may develop issues with trust, feeling and expressing emotions, personal boundaries, respect for rules and authority, focus and attention, and other adaptive strategies which can create serious challenges in overall life functioning, most directly and specifically in interpersonal relationships.
- Research further shows that **childhood trauma has gender specific impact**, with girls and women tending toward internal symptoms leading to ongoing or repeat victimization, and boys and men tending toward external symptoms such as outward rage, aggression and violence.

The evidence should not be interpreted as saying that all boys who experienced trauma and adversity in childhood will grow-up to become domestic violence perpetrators. Many children in such environments find people or experiences which help them to resolve their pain and heal their emotional or psychological wounds, while others manifest the impact of trauma outside of their interpersonal relationships, through anxiety, addiction, or perfectionism, for example. It is to say, however, that people who use violence, abuse, or control toward their intimate partner, or other family, have a personal history of trauma or adversity and are acting from their own unresolved pain.

It is hurt people, who hurt people.

The limited bits of information we know about the early life of Ray Rice document multiple and serious adverse childhood experiences. Ray Rice's father was violently murdered in the first year of his life. Ten years later, Ray Rice suffered another violent loss when his older cousin who had become his male role model, was killed by a drunk driver. Can a child have such traumatic experiences and heal from the emotional and psychological pain? -- Of course. But in the life of Ray Rice we now know healing from these experiences, and most likely other trauma, has not happened. The fact that Ray Rice punched and knocked his then-fiancée unconscious in an elevator and unemotionally dragged her limp body out of the elevator demonstrates unequivocally that he has not resolved his own pain and trauma. An emotionally healthy and connected person cannot, and does not, harm another human being in this way. Period.

Just to be clear, **trauma is not an excuse** for Ray Rice's, or anyone else's, violent or abusive behavior. The choice to use violence is entirely within the control of the perpetrator, and the perpetrator alone is responsible for this decision. Trauma impacts the use of violence--both as an adaptive strategy for retaining power and control, and because a person's unhealed emotional or psychological wounds are their triggers, or "buttons" in the more commonly used term. It is true that someone's "buttons can get pushed," but even here it is never the fault of the person who triggers the buttons, whether the action be purposeful or inadvertent. The responsibility lies absolutely with the person who has the buttons—the person who carries unhealed emotional or psychological wounds, but who fails or refuses to heal them, whatever the reason—lack of awareness, blame, fear, or a myriad of others. Trauma happens to a person, but the person is not the trauma. **At any time the person can choose to heal, to learn new interpersonal skills and to de-activate buttons.**

Trauma is a root cause, but not the only cause, of domestic violence. **Men's violence toward women and girls is also predicated on sexist, patriarchal and misogynist attitudes toward women.** While much progress has been made in overcoming our historical legacy of oppression toward women in recent times, we continue to be a culture that undervalues, restricts and objectifies women and girls in our social norms, public policies, media and entertainment, and public and private institutions. Here too trauma matters.

- The boys and men who grew-up with trauma and adversity are primed for de-humanization and oppression of others through their experiences, and are thereby the most vulnerable to accepting and embracing sexist, patriarchal and misogynist cultural teachings. These boys and men are also the most susceptible to embodying destructive myths of masculinity which continue to connect “manhood” with aggression, toughness, dominance over girls and women, and perpetration of violence.

In summation of the evidence, then, we know that domestic violence is learned and multi-causal, with roots in childhood trauma and adversity, and attitudes toward women. We also know that anything learned can be unlearned. **Domestic violence can be changed.**

With over ten years experience working with abusive men through evidence-based intervention programming, I have learned that in order to change, men who use violence in their relationship must first identify, understand, and make peace with the trauma they have experienced in their own lives. Only then will they be able to challenge and transform their attitudes toward women, and acquire new skills and understanding to become respectful partners and nurturing fathers. **Trauma-informed methods of intervention work.** Completion of Alma Center programming is associated with an 86% reduction in recidivism for domestic violence.

For many of us, our gut reaction is strong, and it tells us that punishment, shaming, and severe consequences somehow work to deter and to change behavior. But the evidence indicates this equation is simply not true. **Healing, education and rehabilitation are the agents of change.** When we view the video of Ray Rice punching and knocking-out his then-fiancée in the elevator, it is much easier and more comfortable for many of us to see Ray Rice as an unredeemable monster than it is for us to see him as hurt person who perpetrates violence out of out of his own pain. But if we want to affect real and lasting change in the problem of domestic violence--**if we want to prevent violence, deter repeat violence and keep victims and children safe, the approach we need to take is one of compassionate accountability.**

The reality is that most domestic violence victims and perpetrators have deeply interconnected lives—sharing children, residences and family resources. And more often than not, for varied and complicated reasons, the victim and perpetrator choose to continue in a relationship together despite the violence, and regardless the severity of the punishment and sanctions administered. Even if the current relationship ends, the abuser will still be a father and will be involved in new intimate relationships whether or not he learns to change his behavior. I have come to believe that the in order to create true safety for victims and children in violent families, and to break the cycle of violence--**the perpetrator must change.**

Compassionate accountability demands absolute personal responsibility and appropriate and meaningful consequences for one’s actions, within a context of hope, support and assistance for change.

How compassionate accountability can be crafted and implemented in the NFL’s new response to domestic and family violence remains to be seen. But with many eyes now upon the NFL for the purposes of response to domestic violence and not the game on the field, it is clear that the **NFL can indeed be a courageous leader and, “set an example which makes a positive difference in our society.**

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