

## SCARING WOMEN TO DEATH: TWO DECADES OF NEGATIVE PSAS

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### ABSTRACT

Current public service advertising messages that are part of national campaigns surrounding the issue of intimate partner violence strive to create a positive overall effect on the general public. However, women in violent relationships are part of that general public. If you consider the mental and emotional state of these women, the effect on this segment is likely to be very different than the effect on other segments of the public. It is imperative to consider the range of effects of PSA emotional appeals, as some may differ significantly from those originally intended. If not considered, the potential exists to create unintended negative effects.

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For some social issues, the consequences of not considering the potential negative effects may only exacerbate the ill health for those segments of the general public who are most severely affected. Intimate partner violence is one of those issues.

The comments of intimate partner violence survivors who participated in focus groups in which they viewed both print and televised advertisements, suggest a negative reaction and may be an unintended effect of those campaigns. One hypothesis proposed that a majority of women who have experienced relationships reflective of intimate partner violence would report experiencing negative emotional effects, particularly fear and shame, when viewing specific elements of current public service advertising surrounding intimate partner violence. The responses of the participants in this research suggest not only these two emotional effects, but also possibly anger and other negative emotional reactions such as helplessness and hopelessness, about being portrayed in a certain way. To be specific, 100 percent of the women who participated gave at least one response that reflected at least one of these negative emotional effects as result of the print ads, as indicated by inclusion of words that reflected shame, embarrassment, fear, anger, or another general negative emotional effect. The television ads elicited an average 75 percent response that indicated at least one of these same emotional effects. There were no significant differences in responses based on geographic region, ethnicity, age, relationship stage, or length of relationship.

For intimate partner violence, realism may be a difficult element to capture in PSAs surrounding this issue without eliciting fear for the women most severely affected. While its good to have advertising that rings true, there are potential negative fear effects with that as well. Campaign designers need to present advertising that does not heighten fear, as this is one of the emotions most frequently reported by participants in this research. An empowering PSA might depict real-life female survivors speaking to an unseen and unheard person about the positive actions they took to resolve their relationship, without dwelling on terrifying, graphically violent episodes. This should help prevent danger control mechanisms from operating before women have processed the messages thoroughly, and should not further induce the already present state of fear.

With intimate partner violence PSAs, this potential to move on to other responses is heightened even further because there is no suggestion made to the women as to how to reduce their fear. The fear is instilled by replaying an explicit drama with a frightening scene that reminds them of the daily fear they must live with.

Unfortunately, there is no subsequent piece of the message with suggestions on how to reduce that fear. This creates an even greater potential for the women to move on to a secondary response, such as defensive avoidance. At this point, the defensive reaction that can assuage the fear is to deny that the scenario depicted is related to her life, or to simply block out or avoid the message entirely. This is a form of self-protection to eliminate experiencing further fear, and examination of the protection-motivation theory provides a more detailed understanding of the ramifications of this reaction.

The emotional effects of fear do not seem to produce positive effects, so campaigners must strive to either reduce or eliminate any elements in the combined drama and lecture structure presented that could elicit this emotion. Rather, a structure and emotional content that cause responses that are the opposite of fear should be incorporated. Hope, empowerment, and self-efficacy are the primary opposites of fear, defensive avoidance, and inhibition of motivation and action, and should be elements incorporated into current messages. The images of the story component should be those of women who have resolved their dilemma, and who no longer appear sad, battered, and helpless. Often one of the most difficult hurdles for women in violent relationships is to see beyond the hopelessness of their current situation. Showing women who are as trapped as they are, does not help them in seeing beyond their current environment. Stories should depict women who have taken action for themselves and have resolved the dilemma, and are now living in a happier, hopeful state. The messages should include a component that speaks directly *to* the women, rather than *around* her — as if she is completely helpless to initiate action for herself. Evaluating the potential for negative affective responses, such as a heightened sense of fear, should also improve current intimate partner violence PSAs.