

Tribune Voices

Rihanna, Chris Brown incident spotlights lessons on domestic violence, especially choking

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March 10, 2009

Anyone who yearned for a national conversation about domestic violence now has one.

The talk about Chris Brown's alleged attack on Rihanna is buzzing through the pop culture air. Tabloids are bursting with stories on the couple's reported reconciliation. Bloggers are opining profusely. More than 260,000 visitors to TMZ.com have voted on whether reconciliation is a bad idea (87 percent said yes).

"The Oprah Winfrey Show" weighed in Friday. Winfrey's panel talked about the story as an important teachable moment, and she offered a warning to Rihanna: If a man hits you once, he will hit you again.

As an educational tool, the case has several valuable aspects. It illustrates the reach of domestic violence into all sorts of lives. It shatters the notion that a successful woman cannot be a victim. It has people wondering why victims return to partners who beat them, a question that, if treated seriously, gets to the complex, manipulative nature of abuse. And it suggests that we also ask a different question: Why do abusers beat their partners in the first place?

But one element of the story has a particularly crucial lesson to teach.

Brown allegedly choked her. According to a police affidavit, he put her in a headlock between his forearm and bicep and choked her until she almost lost consciousness.

To domestic violence experts, choking is not just another element in a brutal attack. It is a harbinger of potential murder.

Domestic violence victims who are choked are at significant risk for being killed. The Chicago Women's Health Risk Study, which examined how to predict domestic violence homicide, found that 12 percent of women whose partners choked them were later killed, compared with 6 percent of women who had been attacked but not choked.

A 2002 study of domestic violence murders in Minnesota's Hennepin County came to a similar conclusion.

"An act of strangulation was often a precursor to a domestic homicide," said Marna Anderson, executive director of WATCH, a Minneapolis-based domestic violence court monitoring organization.

She uses the word "strangle" deliberately, even for attacks that are not fatal. The word

"choking," she said, fails to capture the act's viciousness.

"It's intended to cause death or to instill enough fear for the victim to realize that this person could actually kill her," she said. "And there's something very intimate about it, when you think of how close you have to be. You don't see a lot of acts of strangulation in bar fights or stranger assaults."

There is something particularly chilling about choking, said Carolyn Rebecca Block, senior research analyst with the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority and principal investigator for the Chicago study.

"If somebody can look you in the eye and squeeze the breath of life out of you ... what kind of person could do that to someone else?" she said. "You're talking about the ultimate degree of power and control."

The incidents themselves posed a serious risk. Five percent of domestic violence attacks that involved choking were fatal, compared with 1 percent of other attacks.

And they weren't rare. Of the 550 women in the study who had experienced domestic violence, 325 women had been choked.

Choking's role as a warning sign is often overlooked.

"A lot of people don't realize how dangerous it is," Block said. Most police departments, including Chicago's, do not collect separate statistics on strangulation.

Strangling leaves few visible signs of injury. The Chicago Police Department has been training officers on the symptoms — wobbly legs, broken blood vessels in the eyes, vomiting days later.

In Hennepin County, Anderson said, the absence of "substantial bodily harm" in attempted strangulation cases was leading police to charge offenders with lesser crimes that were often reduced or dismissed.

But in 2005, Minnesota changed its laws to make choking in connection with domestic violence a felony. Idaho has passed a similar law.

"The law went into effect on Aug. 1, 2005. The first call [reporting a domestic violence attempted strangulation] was made at 12:10 a.m.," Anderson said. Within six months, 59 domestic violence strangulation felony charges were filed in Hennepin County alone.

Robyn Rihanna Fenty, 21, may wish that her private life were not so public. Brown, 19, who was charged last week with two felonies, may not appreciate the way his case will be followed and reported in detail.

But the spotlight that shines on celebrities can also light the way to knowledge. May this teachable moment educate us all, but particularly those trapped in darkness who need the lesson most.

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