

What Hairstylists Know About Domestic Violence

By [Caitlin Moscatello](#)



Manhattan hairstylist Chris Mitchell says his clients talk to him about all sorts of things. Sometimes the conversation is light: what they should wear to an event that night or updates on family members. Other times, it's more serious. "I've had clients speak to me about somebody being verbally abusive to them, or even someone being physically abusive in the past," says the stylist of 20 years. In addition to cuts and colors, Mitchell acts as a sounding board for the women who frequent his salon—some two to three times a week.

"A lot of times, I feel like they can't talk to their girlfriends without being judged," he says. But helping people experiencing abuse can be a tricky area to navigate — a chapter not taught in beauty school. "They don't prepare you for the mental aspect of what you might deal with."

New York State Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal is looking to change that with a [bill](#) that, if passed, would require salon professionals to take a domestic-violence-and-sexual-assault-awareness course so if a client shares that he or she is being abused, stylists know how to react. The specifics of the training are still being developed, but if it mirrors a similar course in Illinois created by the domestic-violence-awareness campaign [Chicago Says No More](#), it will teach stylists the right way to support and



acknowledge a client who discloses abuse, and also how to delicately direct them to resources for help. For instance, **“You say things like, ‘I believe you. You are courageous to say this,’”** explains Sheila King, a member of the steering committee for **Chicago Says No More and the Task Force for Salon Professionals**.

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Statistically speaking, odds are high that at least some clients will be victims: [One in three women](#) experience physical abuse at the hands of an intimate partner in their lifetime, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence; and in New York City, almost half of all female homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner, according to reports from both [2008](#) and [2015](#). The thinking goes that if stylists can refer even a few clients to a hotline or program for victims, there’s potential to have an impact — even save lives.

Lawmakers are focusing on salons specifically, due to the close contact stylists have with clients. Part of this may seem like a stereotype — that people divulge their most personal secrets to their hairdressers. But the stylists interviewed for this article say that for clients they see regularly, that’s very much the case. There’s also a physical closeness that stylists have with the women who sit in their chair that’s different from, for example, a bartender lending her ear. “They are licensed to touch you. Not many people are,” says Rachel Molepske, director of leadership and charitable programs for the Professional Beauty Association, whose nationwide [Cut It Out](#) program has been teaching stylists how to spot the signs of domestic violence since 2003.

“I do think the salon is a space where we might hear something [about abuse], before somebody else would,” says Maria Alvarez, a hairstylist at [Fox and Jane](#) salon on the Upper West Side. “There’s something about human touch, where we are allowed to interact with our client’s head and hair — just think about that. I remember when I was first becoming a hairdresser, friends of mine would tell me stories I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t have told me otherwise. And I was like, *Huh? Something is really happening here.*”

“[The bill] takes advantage of a situation that happens all the time, which is clients confiding in their hair stylists,” says Rosenthal. “Some people are skeptical about that, but people confide all sorts of things in their stylists. They’re not family. They’re not a friend. But they are an acquaintance you have a bond with.”

The bill is similar to an [Illinois rule](#) that [went into effect](#) earlier this year, and if Rosenthal is successful in getting it passed, New York could become just the second state to formally treat beauty professionals as a resource for victims. (There are currently at least 12 other states also considering similar legislation.)

For now, only hairdressers would be required to undergo the training. For one thing, many manicurists in New York City are immigrants, which Rosenthal says may present a language barrier. But the biggest hurdle is alleviating concerns about over-regulation. As Michael Polenberg, VP of Government Affairs for [Safe Horizon](#), a New York–based nonprofit that assists victims of abuse, explains, “To the extent that this bill is seen as unfunded mandate on small businesses, there will be some pushback.” But, he adds, “Victims services is a fairly nonpartisan issue.”

State Senator Bill Cunningham, who worked with Chicago Says No More to develop the legislation in Illinois, says a similar concern came up when the rule was presented in his state last year. “We were able to argue back that it’s a very small measure of regulation, and there’s a much greater good involved,” he says. It passed the State Senate [unanimously](#) and only two lawmakers voted against it in the House.



Robert McMillen, co-owner of [Mildred](#) barbershop on the Lower East Side, doesn't see it as a major burden for employers. "If we are speaking about it logically, it's a one-hour course," he says. McMillen does, however, suggest that online training would be a better option for busy professionals. "[But] when it comes down to that date creeping up, we would probably be like, 'Man, this course, is it even worth going to?' And I think I'm someone who would be more receptive to it than most."

Another issue raised in Illinois came from professionals in the industry worried about liability: "They were afraid if a woman came into a salon, and told the salon professional about being a victim, and then that salon professional failed to take any action, that the professional could be in some way held responsible," says Cunningham. To address this, immunity language was added saying that workers don't need to get involved unless they want to — there's no punishment for saying silent. And the goal isn't for stylists to play detective.

Professionals are taught that, "You don't ask probing questions. You wait for someone to volunteer this information, and then you listen, provide sympathy, and if you want, provide them with some sort of referral," says Cunningham. "The idea is not to have the salon professional act as a therapist." Though the legislation relies heavily on clients disclosing that they're being abused, what if a stylist suspects abuse without receiving verbal confirmation?

Cut It Out addresses this scenario in its training, says Molepske; stylists are trained to go through what she calls the "three Rs" of domestic violence — recognizing signs of abuse, responding appropriately and safely, and referring a client to professional help. "We go through scenarios where [clients] tell us point blank they are abused, and we go through scenarios where you have an inkling," she says.

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The "inkling" factor is perhaps the most challenging. "I can think of a situation that's recent where I had a long-time client, a female client in a same-sex relationship, come in with a cast, cuts, and bruises," says McMillen. "I had a good enough relationship to say, 'Whoa, what happened?' She said she fell down a flight of steps, which can be a cause for concern. It's a run-of-the-mill explanation for what happened. However, noticing that and thinking that I could ever determine that those cuts and bruises seemed consistent with abuse? I think that's near impossible." Reading a situation wrongly, or interjecting when it's not welcome, are also concerns from a business perspective, he says. "The fear of overstepping a boundary, which could then be damaging to you as a professional, is difficult."

When it comes to domestic violence, "Salons are one of the places that people can go without their abuser, as well," says Molepske. In other words, the salon setting might be one of the few places a victim can be alone to ask for help, and from someone who isn't connected to her family or friends.

Lily Morales, a makeup artist and survivor living in New York City, says her abuser — a man she was romantically involved with for almost three years — was an exception. When she got her hair cut, "He would sit there until I was done," she says. This type of controlling behavior may be a red flag stylists can spot with the right training. In Morales's case, she never spoke up, and her abuser's controlling behavior escalated. Six days after she ended their relationship, he showed up at her apartment with a knife. "He stabbed me many, many times," she says. "He slashed my face. He slashed my throat."

Today, she still has scars from the attack, and she's open about her story on Facebook — which sometimes allows her own clients to open up to her about abuse in their lives. She also hopes that her story can serve as a lesson to others. "My hairstylist told me a story about a woman who went to her salon the other day to fix her hair, because her husband cut it off as a way of punishment," says Morales. "She mentioned what happened to me, that she should take action, that she should leave him. But if she had the information in her hands, maybe she could have said, 'You should think of calling this place and get some guidance on how to get out of this relationship.' Just telling her 'leave him,' sounds easy, but it's not. It's not easy."