

Snakebite Awareness Training

Part 2: Lesson 1 - Myths and Misconceptions

OPENING: *Start the lesson with asking the participants to share about things that they have heard or beliefs they have about snakes. You might hear things like “snakes can sting with their tails” or “snakes are evil”. At this stage, just let the participants share - don’t try to prove them right or wrong. Make note of these ideas people have about snakes so that you can try and address them in this lesson or later in the course.*

There are many beliefs about snakes, and many of them are myths and misconceptions that humans have to help them understand the world around them. Many of the beliefs we have about snakes came from religion. For example, some African religions believe that snakes are evil, and are associated with witchcraft. Other African religions believe that snakes are good, and worship gods that are in the form of a serpent. In fact, killing a python in some West African religions was considered a death sentence.

Let’s explore some of the beliefs that people have about snakes that persist today. I am going to ask you to make yourself vulnerable by telling the group what you think about these beliefs. But remember, this is a safe space, and we can be honest and truthful with each other and still be treated with respect.

[THIS WOULD BE A REALLY GOOD PLACE TO DO EITHER THE TRUE OR NOT TRUE OR THE THIS-OR-THAT ACTIVITY FOUND IN THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES LESSON]

From one of those activities - If you believe this statement, do this _____. (thumbs up or move to the end of a line) If you do not believe this statement, do this _____. (thumbs down or move to other end of line).

All snakes are dangerous or poisonous

Myth: there are far more snakes that are harmless than there are dangerous or poisonous ones. In Africa, there are 500 different kinds of snakes, and of these only 137 are considered dangerous to humans in some way. That is just higher than 25% or ¼ of all kinds of snakes in Africa.

Snakes are cold and slimy

Myth: snakes are not slimy; they feel like leather. Snakes cannot maintain their body temperature, so their body is the same as the environment around them. When they sit in the sun, they are warm. When they are in the shade or it is cold outside, they are cold.

Snakes have no bones

Myth: snakes are animals that have a backbone and ribs

Snakes are deaf

Myth: while snakes do not have external ears, they are able to sense vibrations in the ground - that is why if you walk with heavy footsteps, snakes will often slither away to avoid you.

Snakes stare at people OR snakes have hypnotic powers

Myth: snakes appear to stare at people because they have no eyelids and cannot blink. Snakes are not able to hypnotize anyone on their own.

Snakes go blind in the heat of summer

Myth: snakes shed their skin, and when they do, their eyes turn white because the clear scale that is about to come off gets cloudy as it moves away from the old one. This temporarily affects the snake's vision.

Snakes can grab their tail and roll away like a wheel or hoop.

Myth: there is no truth to this at all. There has never been a reliable report of this happening.

Snakes seek revenge when their mate is killed

Myth: snakes have limited amounts of energy, and cannot waste what little they have finding the person that killed their mate; they have to use it to find food or they will die. Furthermore, snakes do not mate for life, so most snakes have no idea who their mate is unless it is mating season.

Angry snakes attack people

Myth: snakes are more afraid of you than you are of them. When startled by a human, a snake would much rather escape from you than stand and fight. However, if you are in the way of a snake's only escape route, they may come towards you. Some cobras and mambas do come forward if their intention is to bite.

Young snakes are more dangerous (poisonous) than adults

Myth: young or juvenile snakes have less venom to inject than adults, however the degree of poison is the same. The amount of venom delivered by young and old snakes varies, so it is hard to predict whether one snake will deliver more venom than another. It depends on the circumstances.

Snakes have the ability to sting you with their tail

Myth: although some snakes have tails that end in a point, there is no stinger in the tail of a snake, so they cannot sting you.

There are some kinds of snakes with a head at each end of the body

Myth: some of the snakes in Kenya look like they have a head at each end - these are generally called blind snakes or worm snakes and they tend to live underneath the ground surface. However, there is a distinct head and tail in these snakes.

Milk attracts snakes

Myth: milk does not attract snakes. In fact, most veterinary scientists say that reptiles cannot digest dairy products.

The best way to get rid of snakes is to burn tires or pour oil around my property

Myth: neither of these will keep snakes away, and there is no snake repellent that will work either. Burning tires or spreading oil is actually not good for humans either, as it can cause problems for your lungs. Oil can also pollute water sources.

If I am bitten by a snake, I should tie a piece of cloth tight above the wound to keep the venom from going to my body (tourniquet).

Myth: tourniquets should never be used on a snakebite, especially from a viper, adder, or spitting cobra bite. The bite of these snakes causes considerable swelling, and a tourniquet could (1) shut off circulation, and (2) keep the poison in the affected limb where it could cause more damage.

If I am bitten by a snake, I should have someone suck out the poison.

Myth: once venom is injected, it is impossible to suck out all of the venom, and if the person has a cut in his/her mouth, the venom can get in their bloodstream and start to affect them. Venom extractors in first aid kits do not work either.

A snake in your house means you are cursed

Myth: a snake in your house means that your house is not very safe and you will need to take precautionary steps to make sure there are no snakes in your house or your compound. However, snakes are animals with no power to curse you.

Anyone who handles snakes practices witchcraft

Myth: While it is true that snakes can be used by those that practice witchcraft, there are many people who handle snakes that are not witches. Some people use snakes in their religious services - even some churches. Others love to handle snakes because they find them to be fascinating creatures. It is how snakes are used that makes the evil - in and of themselves they are God's creatures and are good.

All snakes are evil

Myth: this generally comes from a misunderstanding of Genesis chapter 3 in the Bible. There it says that Eve was tricked by a snake ("serpent") into eating from the tree that God said was not allowed. In this case, the snake or serpent represents the devil or Satan. However, if you also believe the creation story, snakes were among the creatures that God created and said that they were very good. David wrote in the Book of Psalms that God has love and compassion for all he has made, and that would include snakes. And there are many positive references to snakes in the Bible. So, no, snakes are not evil - they are just one type of animal

on this planet that is perfectly adapted for its lifestyle and has a right to eat and to defend itself. It just so happens that some of them catch their prey and defend themselves with venom that has the potential to harm a human - just like humans have the potential to harm, and have killed a lot of snakes in defense of their families.

So there are a lot of things that we have been taught since childhood, or taught by our religions, that are not true about snakes. Because of these things, our actions toward snakes are generally driven by fear. In your village, and throughout Africa, people have fear of snakes for a good reason - there are many snakes that can cause harm or death to you or a family member, or can cause you to lose your financial or food security when you have to pay a lot of money for treatment. However, not every snake is dangerous - in fact, many are beneficial to have around because they help to control rodent populations that cause disease and eat your food supplies or seeds.

So as we go into our training, we need to consider these points:

- 1) We can replace our fear with respect - we can recognize a snake, keep our distance, avoid the places where snakes may be hiding,, and know what to do if there is an unfortunate incident where you are bitten by a snake
- 2) We should regard every snake as dangerous unless we can be 100% accurate every time about its identification
- 3) We can be sure that some dangerous snakes are not found in our area - for example, there are no green mambas in western Kenya.
- 4) We can learn to recognize the dangerous snakes so we know to stay away from them

- 5) If a venomous snake is in a place where it might cause harm to our families, especially children, then unless there is a snake removal service nearby to remove the snake, it may be necessary to kill it
- 6) We can learn how to recognize snakes that are not dangerous so we will not kill them unnecessarily

In order to accomplish these things, we need to learn more about snakes and why they are important, and how to recognize some of the more common dangerous snakes in our community.