

Understanding the Effects of Domestic Violence

By Psych Central Staff

Domestic violence physically, psychologically and socially affects [women](#), men and their families.

Initially, the abuse usually is an attempt by one partner to exert control through intimidation, fear, verbal abuse or threats of violence. Victims of domestic violence may be isolated from friends, family and neighbors and lose their network of social support. With time, the abusive partner, or batterer, may use increasingly severe methods to maintain control. Eventually the violence may lead to serious injury and can result in hospitalization, or death.

Domestic violence robs victims of their fundamental right to maintain control over their own lives. Individuals who are abused live in fear and isolation in the one place they should always feel safe, their home. With tremendous courage and strength, they struggle each day to keep themselves and their children safe.

Child abuse and domestic violence often occur in the same family. Researchers have found that 50 percent to 70 percent of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children.

Children are 1,500 times more likely to be abused in homes where partner abuse occurs. Domestic violence may result in physical injury, psychological harm or neglect of children. There is a definite relationship between family violence and juvenile delinquency. These children have a six times greater chance of committing suicide, 24 percent greater chance committing sexual assault crimes and a 50 percent greater likelihood of abusing drugs and alcohol.

One of the most tragic outcomes of domestic violence is that well more than half of the young men between the ages of 11 and 22 who are in jail for homicide have killed their mother's batterer. Children growing up in violent homes do not need to be physically abused to take on violent and delinquent behavior—it is enough to witness their mother's abuse.

Signs of Abuse

Individuals involved in an ongoing abusive relationship are more likely to have multiple injuries, repeated bruises and broken bones. They are more likely to have frequent doctor visits, frequent headaches, chronic generalized pain, pelvic pain, frequent vaginal and urinary tract infections, gastrointestinal (stomach and intestine) problems and eating disorders. They may also exhibit more physical symptoms related to stress, [anxiety](#) disorders or [depression](#). The locations of

injuries in women most commonly include the head, chest, breasts and arms. During pregnancy, the most common locations are the abdomen and the breast.

Are You a Victim?

If you answer yes to any of the questions below, you may be a victim of domestic violence. You may take action and stop abuse by referring to the Guidelines for Victims of Domestic Violence section.

1. Are you in a relationship in which you have been physically hurt or threatened by your partner?
2. Has your partner ever hurt your pets or destroyed your clothing, objects in your home or something special to you?
3. Has your partner ever threatened or abused your children?
4. Has your partner ever forced you to have sex when you did not want to or does your partner ever force you to engage in sex that makes you feel uncomfortable?
5. Do you ever feel afraid of your partner?
6. Has your partner ever prevented you from leaving the house, seeing friends, getting a job or continuing your education?
7. Has your partner ever used or threatened to use a weapon against you?
8. Does your partner constantly criticize you and call you names?

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior characterized by the intent to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner or other family members. The abuse can be established over time and in most cases, it begins subtly with insults, a shove or by alienating the survivor from family and friends. With time, the abusive behavior can be more frequent and severe. Domestic violence can take many forms such as:

- **Physical.** Any use of force that causes pain or injury, such as hitting, kicking or slapping.
- **Sexual.** Abuse can include sexual harassment, sexual assault or manipulating a person into having sex by using guilt or threats
- **Emotional and/or verbal.** Constant criticism, threatening to hurt loved ones or harassment at school or in the workplace
- **Economic.** Controlling a person's income or financial assistance, misusing one's credit or making it difficult for a person get or maintain a job
- **Psychological.** Minimizing or blaming a person for the abuse, intimidation and/or threats or destroying property

Domestic violence is characterized by violent actions or threats of violent actions, including behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure or wound a partner.

Domestic violence is the most commonly used term for this kind of violence, but it is also known as intimate partner violence, family violence or battering. These definitions vary between states, countries and organizations, but they are all based in the same premise—the abuse of power and control in familial, co-habiting or intimate relationships.

What are the Roots of Domestic Violence?

Many factors can contribute to domestic violence, but **none excuse hurting another person.** Partners who are in healthy relationships respond to problems by talking things out together—or sometimes by seeking therapy—and do not turn to controlling or abusive behavior. You have a right to be respected in all aspects of your relationship.

The roots of domestic violence and other types of violent relationships are linked to power and control.

If one partner feels the need to dominate the other in any shape or form, whether it is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological, then it is significantly more likely a relationship will turn violent. Research has shown that people with abusive tendencies generally turn violent when they feel out of control. The Power and Control Wheel, originally developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota, shows the elements of power and control that interact that create a pattern of violence and abuse. It can be viewed it [here](#).

It is important to note that abuse is a learned behavior, which, in some cases could have been learned early on in childhood. An abuser may have witnessed domestic violence in his or her home and understood that violence was a means of maintaining control in the family unit.

Significant life changes, such as pregnancy or a family member's illness, can also increase the risk for domestic violence to occur. In these cases, the perpetrator may feel left out or neglected and may seek to regain control over the survivor.¹

Additionally, in economic downturns, incidents of domestic violence increase exponentially. Factors associated with economic downturns such as job loss, housing foreclosures or debt can contribute to higher stress levels at home, which can lead to increased violence. Financial difficulties can also limit options for survivors to seek safety or escape and may have a more difficult time finding a job to become financially independent of abusers.²

Attempts to leave the abusive relationship can also place a survivor at a greater risk for further abuse and, in some severe cases, may increase the likelihood of homicide. The increased sense of abandonment or insecurity can lead an abuser to have a heightened desire to control the survivor. This may make it even more challenging to find a window of opportunity in which he or she can get away from the abuser. For many, staying in the abusive relationship can be safer than attempting to leave at the wrong moment.

Who Does Domestic Violence Affect?

One in every four women and one out of every seven men have experienced severe physical violence from an intimate partner at some point in their lifetimes.¹

It doesn't matter how long a couple has been together, how successful one or both of the partners is or how loving the relationship used to be, domestic violence can happen to anyone. It can span age, sexual orientation, religion and gender, and affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels. It can happen in opposite-sex and same-sex relationships and can happen to intimate partners who are married, living together, dating or somehow estranged. A person does not have to be married to be experiencing domestic violence.

Domestic violence also has a substantial effect on family members, especially children. Understanding domestic violence and being able to support survivors can also impact the 15.5 million children who are exposed to violence in the home each year.²

Each child is unique and may respond differently to the abuse, but there are common short and long-term effects that can impact a child's day-to-day functioning. Short-term effects can include academic and behavioral problems, sleep disturbances and/or difficulty concentrating. Long-lasting effects can persist even after a child has grown up, like difficulty trusting others and establishing relationships or ongoing depression. For more information on how domestic violence can affect children and how to break the cycle, click here.³

It can be difficult to know if a loved one is being abused—or in some cases, abusing others. It is natural for family members, friends, co-workers and bystanders to want to help a survivor leave the abuser, which can take an emotional toll. However, we must consider that even though we would like our loved one to end the abusive relationship, he or she may not be ready and may be afraid of the consequences of leaving the perpetrator. It can be challenging to understand why the person decides to stay with the abuser, but it is important to let her or him make that decision.

Many reasons can contribute to a person deciding to stay in a relationship. If the person is in love with the abuser, he or she may hold hope that the abuser will change. This can be especially true if there were once good times in the relationship. A survivor may long to have them back and feel that with time, things will get better. A person may also be in denial of the situation and may minimize or attribute the abuse to something he or she did wrong. The fact is that there is no reason for the abuse, despite how a person may have contributed to the conflict.

When children are involved a survivor may decide to stay for the sake of the children. It is common for a mother to feel that it is more important for the children to continue having a father figure in their lives. However, continued exposure to violence can place the children at a much greater risk of being abused themselves and/or experiencing direct effects from the abuse. Also, if a person has a limited support system it may be frightening to break up the family they do have and may also experience guilt about conceiving these thoughts.

Although it is estimated that one in every four women will experience domestic violence within her lifetime, most incidents are never reported to the police. People may not report these incidents for a variety of reasons, including:

- Financial dependency
- Shared space
- Protecting children
- Emotional attachment
- Shame
- Fear of being hurt further and/or being killed
- Unaware that they have rights, especially if the survivor's immigration status is illegal

Financial dependence and immigration status are also reasons that can contribute to a person's decision to stay in an abusive relationship. Not knowing one has rights regardless of immigration status can change a person's outlook and create a sense of hopelessness.

It is important to note that over recent years the scope of domestic violence and its impacts have become better understood and acknowledged by society. Though the pace of change has not yet caught up to the quantity of abusive incidents, the overarching shift in mentality and understanding of domestic violence has greatly improved. Each state has acknowledged this is not just a family issue, but a crime and a significant legal and public health problem. They have helped bring awareness to domestic violence by putting laws on

the book that make it illegal in every state to abuse a spouse or family member. Continuing down this path of acknowledgment will ensure that fewer people are affected by violence in the future, and help bring healing to those who have survived.

Know the Signs

Domestic violence is often more than just physical abuse. It encompasses sexual, emotional, economic and psychological violence. Initially, identifying the signs of an abusive relationship can be difficult, especially if the abuser uses subtle tactics to gain power and control. It is very common for survivors to recognize the beginning of the abuse as the first time the abusers hit them, but really the cycle of violence may have started early on in the relationship. Perpetrators tend to be charming and very convincing when exerting power and control tactics. However, understanding common occurrences or patterns in an unhealthy relationship and being able to begin an informed conversation is a major step to healing and helping others to join in understanding why and how domestic violence occurs.

Common signs of an abusive relationship are if one or both partners:

- Prevents contact and communication with friends and family
- Controls money and important identification, such as driver's licenses and passports
- Causes embarrassment with bad names and put-downs
- Critical about survivors appearance and/or behavior
- Attempts to control what partner wears
- Has unrealistic expectations, like partner being available at all times
- Threatens to take away or hurt the children
- Acts like abuse is not a big deal, or denies it's happening
- Plays mind games to place blame on the survivor
- Destroys property or threatens to kill pets
- Intimidates with guns, knives or other weapons
- Shoves, slaps, chokes, hits or forces sexual acts
- Threatens to commit suicide

Often, it can be difficult to identify what types of abuse are and what constitutes each type of abuse. These are some telltale signs of physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological abuse:

- **Physical.** any use of force that causes pain or injury such as, hitting, slapping, shoving, grabbing, pinching, biting, hair pulling, etc.. This type of abuse also includes the use of weapons, denying a partner medical care or forcing alcohol and/or drug use upon him or her.
- **Sexual.** Coercing or attempting to coerce any sexual contact or behavior without consent. Sexual abuse includes, but is certainly not limited to, marital rape, attacks on sexual parts of the body, forcing sex after physical violence has occurred, or treating one in a sexually demeaning manner.

- **Emotional.** Any pattern of behavior that causes emotional pain that can include, but is not limited to constant criticism, diminishing one's abilities, name-calling, being unfaithful, or damaging one's relationship with his or her children. Perpetrators may also be emotionally neglectful, such as not expressing feelings or respecting the survivor's feelings and opinions.
- **Economic.** Making or attempting to make an individual financially dependent by maintaining total control over financial resources, withholding one's access to money, or forbidding one's attendance at school or employment. Forcing a survivor to use his or her credit to rack up debt is also very common and can present problems in the future when attempting to obtain credit.
- **Psychological.** Elements include—but are not limited to—causing fear by intimidation; threatening physical harm to self, partner, children, or partner's family or friends; destruction of pets and property; and forcing isolation from family, friends, or school and/or work.

Effects of Domestic Violence

Families or individuals who have experienced domestic violence are in the process of healing both physically and emotionally from multiple traumas. These traumas can have various effects on the mind, body and spirit. It is natural to experience these, and acknowledging the effects can be an important first step in embarking on a process towards restoration and healing.

People who are exposed to domestic violence often experience physical, mental or spiritual shifts that can endure and worsen if they are not addressed. According to a study done by the Centers for Disease Control, nearly **three in every 10 women**—about 32 million—and **one in 10 men** in the United States who experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner reported at least one measured impact or effect related to forms of violent behavior in that relationship.¹

Even though survivors may experience similar types of abuse, the response to trauma may vary from person to person. Many factors can influence how a person responds to short- and long-term effects of the abuse, such as the frequency of abusive incidents, degree of severity and the effects on physical health. The overall impact of domestic violence also depends on the individual's natural reactions to stress and ways of coping with stressful situations. Other factors can include age in which the trauma occurred, previous exposure to unrelated traumatic incidents and extent of therapy or timing of intervention.

It's important to know that the effects of domestic violence can be overwhelming to experience, and even to learn about. It's common for someone in an abusive relationship to not recall many aspects of their personality before being abused, especially if they have been exposed to violence for an extended period of time. Sometimes, it may seem as if the violence defines their identity. But know the effects of domestic violence are possible to overcome, and it is possible to break the cycle of violence. Recovery from exposure to domestic violence is possible, and although it requires addressing painful realities, it also entails discovering new inner strengths, a process that needs time, space and safety to begin.

Trauma in the Body

When a physical danger threatens our control, ability to escape, or is something we can't stop, we enact a natural instinct for survival. This includes the body summoning a tremendous amount of energy to fight or flee—short circuits. These short circuits ricochet through a person's body and mind. This can result in shock, dissociation and many other kinds of involuntary responses while the violence is happening.

The short circuit stays with us long after the violence ends, and is the origin of the mental, physical and spiritual effects of domestic violence.

Many people who go through traumatic events may find that it can take some time to re-adjust and cope for a period after the event. The residual mental, physical and spiritual effects of domestic violence can permeate the daily lives of survivors, which make it difficult to heal. For some, there are severe effects in the immediate aftermath of an assault that may or may not last. For others, the effects come in waves and are not felt until the shock of the event wears off.

Effects of Domestic Violence

Abuse can have a serious impact on the way a person thinks and interacts with the world around them. The chronic exposure to domestic violence—and the stress fear resulting from this exposure—can cause not only immediate physical injury, but also mental shifts that occur as the mind attempts to process trauma or protect the body. Domestic violence affects one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors and can significantly impact one's mental stability. Increased anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms are commonly observed among survivors of domestic violence.

PTSD. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event. Some common symptoms associated with PTSD are flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety and uncontrollable thoughts about the event. Many people who go through traumatic events have difficulty adjusting and coping for a while. But with time and support, such traumatic reactions usually get better.

Depression. Depression is more than common feelings of temporary sadness. Symptoms can include prolonged sadness, feelings of hopelessness, unexplained crying, changes in appetite with significant weight loss or gain, loss of energy or loss of interest and pleasure in activities previously enjoyed. Depression can affect a person's outlook, which can lead to feelings of

hopelessness. This, in turn, can impact his or her thought process and ability to make decisions. In extreme cases of depression, people may even experience suicidal thoughts and/or attempts. If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, refer them to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK.

Depression remains the most common symptom exhibited by survivors of domestic violence. According to a study done in 2000, 60 percent of battered women reported feeling sad or depressed for extended periods of time.² For a full list of symptoms, click [here](#).

Dissociation. Dissociation usually refers to feeling like one has “checked out” or is not present. In some instances of dissociation, people may find themselves daydreaming. But in situations where dissociation is chronic and more complex it may impair an individual's ability to function in the “real” world, such as not being able to focus on work related duties or being able to concentrate on schoolwork.³

One in seven people who have experienced domestic violence sustain a physical injury.⁴ Given the nature of the crime, it is extremely common to retain bruises on the arms from being gripped, broken bones or other physical injuries from abusive incidents. People experiencing domestic violence often cover up their injuries to avoid being questioned by others. Oftentimes injuries are explained by stating one tripped and fell, or breaking something that resulted in an injury. A survivor may avoid speaking openly about his or her injuries due to feelings of shame or because speaking openly about the injuries can place the person at a greater risk of being abused. If you or someone you know is experiencing physical injuries frequently, it might be indicative of an abusive relationship. There are resources to help you here.

Common physical evidence of domestic violence includes:

- Bruises or that look like they came from choking, punching or defending oneself
- Black eyes
- Red or purple marks at the neck
- Sprained or broken wrists

There are also physical effects of domestic violence that affect a person's overall health. These result from trauma and can manifest immediately after an incident of abuse or later after the abuse has ended. Common physical effects of trauma include:

- Chronic fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle tension
- Involuntary shaking
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Sexual dysfunction
- In women, issues with menstrual cycle or fertility

Coping with the effects of domestic violence can be overwhelming, often because the survivor's control over the situation has been taken away by the perpetrator. When this has occurred, a

survivor may have the need to self-medicate or use drugs or alcohol to help him or her cope with the overwhelming feelings. Engaging in self-injurious behaviors can also bring a sense of control over a person's environment and serve as a release of tension. It is an action that is not always performed with suicidal intent, although occasionally it can result in severe harm or death. These are temporary coping strategies that can lead to deeper issues in the future.

In addition, domestic violence can change one's worldview and outlook on life. Being in a situation where a person is being controlled by another can create feelings of hopelessness. A survivor may develop a negative outlook in which he or she may feel "damaged" or unworthy of a better life. A perpetrator can chip away at a person's self-esteem with constant criticism or insults, which can lead the survivor to question her sense of self in relation to the world. A faulty belief system can contribute to feeling discouraged and apprehensive about the future. Domestic violence can also take away a person's sense of safety and security, influencing his or her ability to trust others. Conflicts with spirituality are also common, especially in situations where the perpetrator used the person's faith to control him or her. Survivors might feel unmotivated, empty or like reaching out is not worth the effort.

But know that the effects of domestic violence are possible to overcome. Although it often requires addressing painful realities, it also entails discovering new inner strengths, a process that needs time, space and safety to begin. With time spent healing, developing strong positive coping mechanisms and taking care of oneself, such reactions tend to become less severe and it is possible to reclaim positive relationships with others and yourself.

[Next section: Resources](#)

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¹ Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R, The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report, (2011), Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov.

² Barnett, (2000).

³ National Alliance on Mental Illness, via rainn.org, "Dissociative Identity Disorder," (2000). www.nami.org.

⁴ Black, M.C. et al, (2011).