

# What Is Domestic Violence?

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Domestic Violence is when a family member or intimate partner uses tactics to control another family member or intimate partner.

**Physical Abuse:** slapping, punching, choking, or throwing

**Emotional Abuse:** yelling, making insults or threats

**Sexual Abuse:** unwanted touching, incest or rape

**Neglect:** withholding affection, money, food, health care or other needed care

**In depth Information on Domestic Violence – Knowledge is the KEY**

### **The Basics of Domestic Violence**

To establish a foundation for understanding child protection in families experiencing domestic violence, this chapter provides an overview of the definition, scope, and causes of domestic violence, along with the evolving societal responses. The chapter also provides a description of victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, highlighting prevalent misconceptions, common behaviors, and parenting issues.

### **What is Domestic Violence?**

Historically, domestic violence has been framed and understood

exclusively as a women's issue. Domestic abuse affects women, but also has devastating consequences for other populations and societal institutions. Men also can be victims of abuse, children are affected by exposure to domestic violence, and formal institutions face enormous challenges responding to domestic violence in their communities. The effects of domestic violence on victims are more typically recognized, but perpetrators also are impacted by their abusive behavior as they stand to lose children, damage relationships, and face legal consequences. Domestic violence cuts across every segment of society and occurs in all age, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, sexual orientation, and religious groups. Domestic violence is a social, economic, and health concern that does not discriminate. As a result, communities across the country are developing strategies to stop the violence and provide safe solutions for victims of domestic violence.

### **Defining Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is a "pattern of coercive and assaultive behaviors that include physical, sexual, verbal, and psychological attacks and economic coercion that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partner." Domestic violence is not typically a singular event and is not limited to only physical aggression. Rather, it is the pervasive and methodical use of threats, intimidation, manipulation, and physical violence by someone who seeks power and control over their intimate partner. Abusers use a specific tactic or a combination of tactics to instill fear in and dominance over their partners. The strategies used by abusers are intended to establish a pattern of desired behaviors from their victims. Certain behaviors often are cited by the perpetrator as the reason or cause of the abusive behavior, therefore, abusive verbal and physical actions are often intended to alter or control that behavior.

### **Some Statistics**

Currently, national crime victimization surveys, crime reports, and research studies indicate:

- An estimated 85 to 90 percent of domestic violence victims are female.
- Females are victims of intimate partner violence at a rate about five times that of males.
- Females between the ages of 16 and 24 are most vulnerable to domestic violence.
- Females account for 39 percent of hospital emergency department visits for violence-related injuries, and 84 percent of persons treated for intentional injuries caused by an intimate partner.
- As many as 324,000 females each year experience intimate partner violence during their pregnancy, and pregnant and recently pregnant women are more likely to be victims of homicide than to die of any other cause.
- Females experience the greatest assault rate (21.3 per 1000 females) between the ages of 20 and 24. This is eight times the peak rate for males (3 per 1000 males ages 25 to 34).
- Domestic violence constitutes 22 percent of violent crime against females and 3 percent of violent crime against males.
- Eight percent of females and 0.3 percent of males report intimate partner rape.
- Approximately 33 percent of gays and lesbians are victims of domestic violence at some time in their lives.
- Twenty-eight percent of high school and college students experience dating violence and 26 percent of pregnant teenage girls report being physically abused.
- Seventy percent of intimate homicide victims are female, and females are twice as likely to be killed by their husbands or boyfriends than murdered by strangers.
- On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in the United States every day. In 2000, 1,247 women were killed by an intimate partner. The same year, 440 men were killed by an intimate partner.
- An estimated 5 percent of domestic violence cases are males who are physically assaulted, stalked, and killed by a current

or former wife, girlfriend, or partner.

- Domestic violence victims lose a total of nearly 8.0 million days of paid work—the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs—and nearly 5.6 million days of household productivity as a result of the violence.
- The costs of intimate partner rape, physical assault, and stalking exceed \$5.8 billion each year, nearly \$4.1 billion of which is for direct medical and mental health care services.
- Males are significantly more likely to be victimized by acquaintances (50 percent) or strangers (44 percent) than by intimates or other relatives.
- Females experience over 5 to 10 times as many incidents of domestic violence than males. In comparison to men, women have a significantly greater risk for being a victim of domestic violence and suffering chronic and severe forms of physical assaults.

### **Domestic Violence Tactics**

The types of domestic violence actions perpetrated by abusers include physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological tactics; threats and intimidation; economic coercion; and entitlement behaviors. Examples of each are provided below. Some of the behaviors identified in the following lists do not constitute abuse in and of themselves, but frequently are tactics used in a larger pattern of abusive and controlling behavior.

Physical Tactics:

- Pushing and shoving;
- Restraining;
- Pinching or pulling hair;
- Slapping;
- Punching;
- Biting;
- Kicking;
- Suffocating;
- Strangling;

- Using a weapon;
- Kidnapping;
- Physically abusing or threatening to abuse children.

#### Sexual Tactics:

- Raping or forcing the victim into unwanted sexual practices;
- Objectifying or treating the victim like a sexual object;
- Forcing the victim to have an abortion or sabotaging birth control methods;
- Engaging in a pattern of extramarital or other sexual relationships;
- Sexually assaulting the children.

#### Verbal, Emotional, and Psychological Tactics:

- Using degrading language, insults, criticism, or name calling;
- Screaming;
- Harassing;
- Refusing to talk;
- Engaging in manipulative behaviors to make the victim believe he or she is “crazy” or imagining things;
- Humiliating the victim privately or in the presence of other people;
- Blaming the victim for the abusive behavior;
- Controlling where the victim goes, who he or she talks to, and what he or she does;
- Accusing the victim of infidelity to justify the perpetrator’s controlling and abusive behaviors;
- Denying the abuse and physical attacks.

#### Threats and Intimidation:

- Breaking and smashing objects or destroying the victim’s personal property;
- Glaring or staring at the victim to force compliance;
- Intimidating the victim with certain physical behaviors or gestures;
- Instilling fear by threatening to kidnap or seek sole custody of the children;

- Threatening acts of homicide, suicide, or injury;
- Forcing the victim to engage in illegal activity;
- Harming pets or animals;
- Stalking the victim;
- Displaying or making implied threats with weapons;
- Making false allegations to law enforcement or CPS.

#### Economic Coercion:

- Preventing the victim from obtaining employment or an education;
- Withholding money, prohibiting access to family income, or lying about financial assets and debts;
- Making the victim ask or beg for money;
- Forcing the victim to hand over any income;
- Stealing money;
- Refusing to contribute to shared or household bills;
- Neglecting to comply with child support orders;
- Providing an allowance.

#### Entitlement Behaviors:

- Treating the victim like a servant;
- Making all decisions for the victim and the children;
- Defining gender roles in the home and relationship.

#### **Who Is the Victim?**

Victims of domestic violence do not possess a set of universal characteristics or personality traits, but they do share the common experience of being abused by someone close to them. Anyone can become a victim of domestic violence. Victims of domestic violence can be women, men, adolescents, disabled persons, gays, or lesbians. They can be of any age and work in any profession. Normally, victims of domestic violence are not easily recognized because they are not usually covered in marks or bruises. If there are injuries, victims have often learned to conceal them to avoid detection, suspicion, and shame.

Unfortunately, an array of misconceptions about victims of

domestic violence has led to harmful stereotypes and myths about who they are and the realities of their abuse. Consequently, victims of domestic violence often feel stigmatized and misunderstood by the people in their lives. These people may be well-intended family members and friends or persons trained to help them, such as social workers, police officers, or doctors. Some victims of domestic violence experience a decrease in self-esteem because their abusers are constantly degrading, humiliating, and criticizing them, which also makes them more vulnerable to staying in the relationship.

### **Barriers to Leaving an Abusive Relationship**

The most commonly asked question about victims of domestic violence is “Why do they stay?” Family, friends, coworkers, and community professionals who try to understand the reasons why a victim of domestic violence has not left the abusive partner often feel perplexed and frustrated. Some victims of domestic violence do leave their violent partners while others may leave and return at different points throughout the abusive relationship. Leaving a violent relationship is a process, not an event, for many victims, who cannot simply “pick up and go” because they have many factors to consider. To understand the complex nature of terminating a violent relationship, it is essential to look at the barriers and risks faced by victims when they consider or attempt to leave. Individual, systemic, and societal barriers faced by victims of domestic violence include:

- **Fear.** Perpetrators commonly make threats to find victims, inflict harm, or kill them if they end the relationship. This fear becomes a reality for many victims who are stalked by their partner after leaving. It also is common for abusers to seek or threaten to seek sole custody, make child abuse allegations, or kidnap the children. Historically, there has been a lack of protection and assistance from law enforcement, the judicial system, and social service agencies charged with

responding to domestic violence. Inadequacies in the system and the failure of past efforts by victims of domestic violence seeking help have led many to believe that they will not be protected from the abuser and are safer at home. While much remains to be done, there is a growing trend of increased legal protection and community support for these victims.

- **Isolation.** One effective tactic abusers use to establish control over victims is to isolate them from any support system other than the primary intimate relationship. As a result, some victims are unaware of services or people that can help. Many believe they are alone in dealing with the abuse. This isolation deepens when society labels them as “masochistic” or “weak” for enduring the abuse. Victims often separate themselves from friends and family because they are ashamed of the abuse or want to protect others from the abuser’s violence.

- **Financial dependence.** Some victims do not have access to any income and have been prevented from obtaining an education or employment. Victims who lack viable job skills or education, transportation, affordable daycare, safe housing, and health benefits face very limited options. Poverty and marginal economic support services can present enormous challenges to victims who seek safety and stability. Often, victims find themselves choosing between homelessness, living in impoverished and unsafe communities, or returning to their abusive partner.

- **Guilt and shame.** Many victims believe the abuse is their fault. The perpetrator, family, friends, and society sometimes deepen this belief by accusing the victim of provoking the violence and casting blame for not preventing it. Victims of violence rarely want their family and friends to know they are abused by their partner and are fearful that people will criticize them for not leaving the relationship. Victims often feel responsible for changing their partner’s abusive behavior or changing themselves in order for the abuse to stop. Guilt and shame may be felt especially by those who are not commonly recognized as victims of domestic violence. This may include



men, gays, lesbians, and partners of individuals in visible or respected professions, such as the clergy and law enforcement.

- **Emotional and physical impairment.** Abusers often use a series of psychological strategies to break down the victim's self-esteem and emotional strength. In order to survive, some victims begin to perceive reality through the abuser's paradigm, become emotionally dependent, and believe they are unable to function without their partner. The psychological and physical effects of domestic violence also can affect a victim's daily functioning and mental stability. This can make the process of leaving and planning for safety challenging for victims who may be depressed, physically injured, or suicidal. Victims who have a physical or developmental disability are extremely vulnerable because the disability can compound their emotional, financial, and physical dependence on their abusive partner.

- **Individual belief system.** The personal, familial, religious, and cultural values of victims of domestic violence are frequently interwoven in their decisions to leave or remain in abusive relationships. For example, victims who hold strong convictions regarding the sanctity of marriage may not view divorce or separation as an option. Their religious beliefs may tell them divorce is "wrong." Some victims of domestic violence believe that their children still need to be with the offender and that divorce will be emotionally damaging to them.

- **Hope.** Like most people, victims of domestic violence are invested in their intimate relationships and frequently strive to make them healthy and loving. Some victims hope the violence will end if they become the person their partner wants them to be. Others believe and have faith in their partner's promises to change. Perpetrators are not "all bad" and have positive, as well as, negative qualities. The abuser's "good side" can give victims reason to think their partner is capable of being nurturing, kind, and nonviolent.

- **Community services and societal values.** For victims who are prepared to leave and want protection, there are a variety of

institutional barriers that make escaping abuse difficult and frustrating. Communities that have inadequate resources and limited victim advocacy services and whose response to domestic abuse is fragmented, punitive, or ineffective can not provide realistic or safe solutions for victims and their children.

- **Cultural hurdles.** The lack of culturally sensitive and appropriate services for victims of color and those who are non-English speaking pose additional barriers to leaving violent relationships. Minority populations include African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnic groups whose cultural values and customs can influence their beliefs about the role of men and women, interpersonal relationships, and intimate partner violence. For example, the Hispanic cultural value of “machismo” supports some Latino men’s belief that they are superior to women and the “head of their household” in determining familial decisions. “Machismo” may cause some Hispanic men to believe that they have the right to use violent or abusive behavior to control their partners or children. In turn, Latina women and other family or community members may excuse violent or controlling behavior because they believe that husbands have ultimate authority over them and their children.

Examples of culturally competent services include offering written translation of domestic violence materials, providing translators in domestic violence programs, and implementing intervention strategies that incorporate cultural values, norms, and practices to effectively address the needs of victims and abusers. The lack of culturally competent services that fail to incorporate issues of culture and language can present obstacles for victims who want to escape abuse and for effective interventions with domestic violence perpetrators. Well-intended family, friends, and community members also can create additional pressures for the victim to “make things work.”