

Domestic violence toward women: Recognize the patterns and seek help

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of age, economic status, race and educational background. Find out how to recognize an abusive relationship and what resources are available to help.

He says he's sorry and that it won't happen again. But you fear it will. Angry outbursts, hurtful words, and sometimes a slap or a punch. You may start to doubt your own judgment, or wonder whether you're going crazy. Maybe you think you've imagined the whole thing.

But you haven't. Domestic violence can and does happen to people of all ages, races, and socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Domestic violence happens to men and to same-sex partners, but most often domestic violence involves men abusing their female partners. In fact, the Department of Health and Human Services estimates that as many as 4 million women suffer abuse from their husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends or intimate partners in the United States each year.

Domestic violence — also called domestic abuse, intimate partner violence or battering — occurs between people in intimate relationships. It takes many forms, including coercion, threats, intimidation, isolation, and emotional, sexual and physical abuse.

Without help, abuse will continue and could worsen. Many resources are available to help you understand your options and to support you. No one deserves to be abused.

An abusive relationship: It's about power and control

Though there are no typical victims of domestic violence, abusive relationships do share similar characteristics. In all cases, the abuser aims to exert power and control over his partner.

"A lot of people think domestic violence is about anger, and it really isn't," says Diana Patterson, a licensed social worker and violence prevention coordinator at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. "Batterers do tend to take their anger out on their intimate partner. But it's not really about anger. It's about trying to instill fear and wanting to have power and control in the relationship." But anger is just one way that an abuser tries to gain authority. The batterer may also turn to physical violence — kicking, punching, grabbing, slapping or strangulation, for example. The abuser may also use sexual violence — forcing you to have sexual intercourse or to engage in other sexual activities against your will.

In an abusive relationship, the abuser may use varying tactics to gain power and control, including:

- **Children as pawns.** Accuses you of bad parenting, threatens to take the children away, uses the children to relay messages, or threatens to report you to children's protective services.
- **Coercion and threats.** Threatens to hurt other family members, pets, children or self.
- **Denial and blame.** Denies that the abuse occurs and shifts responsibility for the abusive behavior onto you. This may leave you confused and unsure of yourself or make you feel like you're going crazy.
- **Economic abuse.** Controls finances, refuses to share money, makes you account for money spent and doesn't want you to work outside the home. The abuser may also try to sabotage your work performance by forcing you to miss work or by calling you frequently at work.
- **Emotional abuse.** Uses put-downs, insults, criticism or name-calling to make you feel bad about yourself.
- **Intimidation.** Uses certain looks, actions or gestures to instill fear. The abuser may break things, destroy property, abuse pets or display weapons.
- **Isolation.** Limits your contact with family and friends, requires you to get permission to leave the house, doesn't allow you to work or attend school, and controls your activities and social events. The abuser may ask where you've been, track your time and whereabouts, or check the odometer on your car.
- **Power.** Makes all major decisions, defines the roles in your relationship, is in charge of the home and social life, and treats you like a servant or possession.

Violence against Women: Survivors and the Media

The movement to end domestic violence is comprised of advocates from all over our state, nation and world; each with varying stories. Many of these individuals are survivors themselves. Survivors are victims of domestic violence who continue to live productive lives beyond the abuse. In the process of healing, many survivors find strength in telling their stories to others, hoping to provide the type of insight and inspiration that can save lives. Survivors typically share their stories when doing so will not put them in danger, although there are exceptions. It is essential that the media consider a survivor's safety when reporting her story.

Researchers at the National Domestic Violence Hotline have collected stories from survivors across the nation. In doing so, we exercise caution not to expose a survivor's full name and/or location if her abuser remains a threat. Here are some survivors' stories:

*The names have been changed to protect anonymity

Jane's Story*

At twenty-five, I managed a gift shop, owned my own car, established good credit and maintained a very active social life. At twenty-seven, I married a man from a small country town. Being so swept away, I ignored the other side of "Prince Charming". As time passed, the abuse became more frequent and more intense. Each time I found employment, he would become unbearable, including phoning me at work and yelling obscenities.

Six years of marriage took us to a rented house in the country. I was not allowed to use his car, even to take our two children to the doctor for emergency care.

February 1987, he pinned me down and began choking me. Our five-year-old son ran to the phone, dialed "0" and cried, "My Dad's killing my Mom, please help!" The operator traced the call and sent a county sheriff's deputy to the house. Despite the bruises and visible marks, the police were not able to help me.

During the next year, I obtained a car and began planning my escape. He had the phone disconnected. April 1988, the abuser flew into a rage, so I took our two children and drove 15 miles to a pay phone. Every shelter I contacted was full. I had nowhere else to turn because over the years, I had become alienated from my family and friends. After walking around the grocery store for 4 hours, I returned home.

Three days later, after the abuser's usual early morning rage, our son left for school and our three year old daughter was hiding under blankets, shivering and crying because she was so frightened of her own father. My husband left for work and I took our daughter, drove to a phone and called a domestic violence shelter. I was told to take my son out of school, pack what I could in my car, and I drove 30 miles to the nearest city.

In the three weeks my children and I were at the shelter, we began to restructure our lives. I found employment, housing, childcare, counseling and legal advice.

Because the domestic violence shelter was there, my children and I are alive.

Joan's Story*

My story begins when I was 21 years old. I met a guy that seemed to be a good man. He was very friendly, and for me, that was the most important thing to have in a relationship.

We met in September and by the following January, we were living together. The abuse began immediately, he became very jealous and accused me of cheating on him with another man. I did not understand why he was treating me that way.

By the end of the month, I was pregnant and my baby was to be born in late October. I thought that my being pregnant would change him, but that was not the case, everything remained the same. The abuse continued. Everytime he

hit me, I would leave and go to my sister's house or sometimes to my mother's house.

I left him many times, but I always returned to be by his side.

Then one night in October, shortly after my daughter was born, he became very violent and kicked the crib. Fortunately, the baby was not in the crib. At that moment I began thinking: What would have happened if my baby had been in the crib? I became so scared. That was when I made my final decision to leave him. I left so that he could not continue to hurt me or begin to hurt my daughter. I did not want her to live in a violent home and suffer the consequences.

When I made my decision, my family was very understanding. They helped me by giving me support.

I left him, but this time it was forever.

Now my daughter is 13 years old and I no longer have any contact with him.

Abuse in America

- 4 million American women experience a serious assault by a partner during an average 12-month period.¹
- On the average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends every day.²
- 92% of women say that reducing domestic violence and sexual assault should be at the top of any formal efforts taken on behalf of women today.³
- 1 out of 3 women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused during her lifetime.⁴
- 1 in 5 female high school students reports being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. Abused girls are significantly more likely to get involved in other risky behaviors. They are 4 to 6 times more likely to get pregnant and 8 to 9 times more likely to have tried to commit suicide.⁵
- 1 in 3 teens reports knowing a friend or peer who has been hit, punched, slapped, choked or physically hurt by his/her partner.⁶
- Women of all races are equally vulnerable to violence by an intimate partner.⁷
- 37% of all women who sought care in hospital emergency rooms for violence-related injuries were injured by a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend.⁸
- Some estimates say almost 1 million incidents of violence occur against a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend per year.⁹
- For 30% of women who experience abuse, the first incident occurs during pregnancy.¹⁰
- As many as 324,000 women each year experience intimate partner violence during their pregnancy.¹¹
- Violence against women costs companies \$72.8 million annually due to lost productivity.¹²
- 74% of employed battered women were harassed by their partner while they were at work.¹³

- Ninety-four percent of the offenders in murder-suicides were male.¹⁴
- Seventy-four percent of all murder-suicides involved an intimate partner(spouse, common-law spouse, ex-spouse, or boyfriend/girlfriend). Of these, 96 percent were females killed by their intimate partners.¹⁴
- Most murder-suicides with three or more victims involved a "family annihilator" -- a subcategory of intimate partner murder-suicide. Family annihilators are murderers who kill not only their wives/girlfriends and children, but often other family members as well, before killing themselves.¹⁴
- Seventy-five percent of murder-suicides occurred in the home.¹⁴

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Get Educated

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure or wound someone.

Domestic violence can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion or gender. It can happen to couples who are married, living together or who are dating. Domestic violence affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels.

You may be in an emotionally abusive relationship if your partner:

- Calls you names, insults you or continually criticizes you.
- Does not trust you and acts jealous or possessive.
- Tries to isolate you from family or friends.
- Monitors where you go, who you call and who you spend time with.
- Does not want you to work.
- Controls finances or refuses to share money.
- Punishes you by withholding affection.
- Expects you to ask permission.
- Threatens to hurt you, the children, your family or your pets.
- Humiliates you in any way.

You may be in a physically abusive relationship if your partner has ever:

- Damaged property when angry (thrown objects, punched walls, kicked doors, etc.).
- Pushed, slapped, bitten, kicked or choked you.
- Abandoned you in a dangerous or unfamiliar place.
- Scared you by driving recklessly.
- Used a weapon to threaten or hurt you.
- Forced you to leave your home.
- Trapped you in your home or kept you from leaving.
- Prevented you from calling police or seeking medical attention.
- Hurt your children.
- Used physical force in sexual situations.

You may be in a sexually abusive relationship if your partner:

- Views women as objects and believes in rigid gender roles.
- Accuses you of cheating or is often jealous of your outside relationships.
- Wants you to dress in a sexual way.
- Insults you in sexual ways or calls you sexual names.
- Has ever forced or manipulated you into having sex or performing sexual acts.
- Held you down during sex.
- Demanded sex when you were sick, tired or after beating you.
- Hurt you with weapons or objects during sex.
- Involved other people in sexual activities with you.
- Ignored your feelings regarding sex.

If you answered 'yes' to these questions you may be in an abusive relationship.

How is your relationship?

Does your partner:

- Embarrass you with put-downs?
- Look at you or act in ways that scare you?
- Control what you do, who you see or talk to or where you go?
- Stop you from seeing your friends or family members?
- Take your money or Social Security check, make you ask for money or refuse to give you money?
- Make all of the decisions?
- Tell you that you're a bad parent or threaten to take away or hurt your children?
- Prevent you from working or attending school?
- Act like the abuse is no big deal, it's your fault, or even deny doing it?
- Destroy your property or threaten to kill your pets?
- Intimidate you with guns, knives or other weapons?
- Shove you, slap you, choke you, or hit you?
- Force you to try and drop charges?
- Threaten to commit suicide?
- Threaten to kill you?

If you answered 'yes' to even one of these questions, you may be in an abusive relationship.

Pregnancy is a particularly perilous time for an abused woman. Not only is your health at risk, but also the health of your unborn child. Abuse can begin or may increase during pregnancy.

Are You Abusing?

Not all men are abusive, how do you measure up?

Abuse is:

- Calling bad names or putting someone down
- Shouting and cursing
- Hitting, slapping and/or pushing
- Making threats of any kind
- Jealousy and suspicion
- Keeping someone away from family and friends
- Throwing things around the house

Domestic violence is a crime.

- It destroys relationships and families.
- It passes from generation to generation.
- It doesn't have to be this way.

If you abuse, you can choose to stop.

Breaking the cycle: Difficult, but do able with help

Domestic violence is part of a continuing cycle that's difficult to break. If you're in an abusive situation, you may recognize this pattern:

- Your abuser strikes using words or actions.
- Your abuser may beg for forgiveness, offer gifts or promise to change.
- Your abuser becomes tense, angry or depressed.
- Your abuser promises to stop but repeats the abusive behavior.

Typically each time the abuse occurs, it worsens, and the cycle shortens. Breaking this pattern of violence alone and without help is difficult.

"When you live in an environment of chaos, stress and fear, you start doubting yourself and your ability to take care of yourself," says Patterson. "It can really unravel your sense of reality and self-esteem."

So it's important to recognize that you may not be in a position to resolve the situation on your own. You may need outside help, and that's OK. Without help, the abuse will likely continue. Leaving the abusive relationship may be the only way to break the cycle.

Getting ready to leave: Use a safety plan

Leaving an abuser can be dangerous. You're the only person who knows the safest time to leave. Make sure you prepare a safety plan so that you can act quickly when the time is right. Consider taking these precautions:

- Arrange a safety signal with a neighbor as an alert to call the police if necessary.
- Prepare an emergency bag that includes items you'll need when you leave, such as extra clothes, important papers, money, extra keys and prescription medications.
- Know exactly where you'll go and how you'll get there, even if you have to leave in the middle of the night.
- Call a local women's shelter or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-7233 to find out about legal options and resources available to you, before you need them.
- If you have school-age children, notify the school authorities about custody arrangements, warn them about possible threats and advise the school on what information to keep confidential.

As part of a safety plan, avoid making long-distance phone calls from home because the abuser could trace the calls to find out where you're going. And the abuser may be able to intercept your cell phone conversations using a scanner. Switch to a corded phone if you're relaying sensitive information. Also, be aware that the abuser may be able to monitor your Internet activities and access your e-mail account. Change your passwords, get a new e-mail account or access a computer at a friend's house or a local library.

Friends & Family

Yes, it is your business

Maybe he's your friend, your brother-in-law, your cousin, co-worker, gym partner or fishing buddy. You've noticed that he interrupts her, criticizes her family, yells at her or scares her. You hope that when they're alone, it isn't worse.

The way he treats her makes you uncomfortable, but you don't want to make him mad or lose his friendship. You surely don't want to see him wreck his marriage or have to call the police. What can you do?

Say something. If you don't, your silence is the same as saying abuse is ok. He could hurt someone, or end up in jail. Because you care, you need to do something... before it is too late.

What Can You Say or Do?

Draw attention to it.

"Do you see the effect your bad words have on her?"

"When you do that, it makes her feel bad."

"Did you mean to be so rough? That's not cool."

Tell him what you think.

"I'm really worried about her safety."

"I'm surprised to see you act that way. You're better than that."

"I care about you, but I won't tolerate it if you abuse her."

"This makes me really uncomfortable. It's not right."

Express ideas about loving behavior.

"Loving her doesn't mean abusing her."

"Good husbands and partners don't say or do those kinds of things."

Offer suggestions or solutions.

"Men should never hit or threaten the women they love."

"Kids learn from their parents. Is this how you want your son to treat women?"

"How would you feel if your daughter chose someone who acted like this?"

"Call me if you feel like you're losing control."

"Maybe you should try counseling."

"You should talk to your faith leader and see what he/she suggests."

If his behavior is criminal, tell him so.

"Domestic violence is a crime. You could be arrested for this."

"You could end up in jail if you don't find a way to deal with your problems. Then what would happen to you and your family?"

He May Not Like It

He may not listen. He may get enraged, deny it, ignore you or make excuses. He may want to talk about what she did to him. He may even laugh it off or make fun of you. Still, you need to say something. Your silence is the same as saying you approve.

Or He May Take You Seriously and Decide to Change

If men learn to put down and abuse women from other men, they can also learn from other men how to respect women. When you decide that violence against women is unacceptable and choose to lead, other men will begin to think twice before they strike with their words or fists.

It isn't easy or comfortable, but men must step up to the plate because next time, it could be your sister, mother, friend or co-worker. It's the right thing to do.

Web Resource

www.medlineplus.com