

# **Domestic Violence and Abuse: Types, Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Effects**

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All too frequently the media bombards us with news about a high-profile domestic violence case, where a man or woman is suspected of murdering their wife or husband, with or without a previous history of domestic abuse. Violence. How can a person turn from loving and living with a person to beating them up or murdering them? What kind of a person resorts to domestic violence against their spouse or domestic intimate partner? What kind of person thinks it is okay to continually humiliate or talk down to their life intimate partner? What kind of a person has sex with their partner without the person's consent and desire to participate?

A common pattern of domestic abuse is that the perpetrator alternates between violent, abusive behavior and apologetic behavior with apparently heartfelt promises to change. The abuser may be very pleasant most of the time. Therein lies the perpetual appeal of the abusing partner and why many people are unable to leave the abusive relationship.

## **Domestic abuse is most often one of the following:**

- child abuse
- abuse of a spouse or domestic intimate partner
- elder abuse

In this article, we discuss domestic abuse between spouses and intimate partners: the types of domestic abuse, signs and symptoms, causes, and effects. Domestic violence and abuse are common. The first step in ending the misery is recognition that the situation is abusive. Then you can seek help. See the related Helpguide article: Domestic Violence and Abuse: Help, Treatment, Intervention, and Prevention.

## **What is the definition of domestic abuse between intimate partners?**

Domestic abuse between spouses or intimate partners is when one person in a marital or intimate relationship tries to control the other person. The perpetrator uses fear and intimidation and may threaten to use or may actually use physical violence. Domestic abuse that includes physical violence is called domestic violence.

The victim of domestic abuse or domestic violence may be a man or a woman. Domestic abuse occurs in traditional heterosexual marriages, as well as in same-sex partnerships. The abuse may occur during a relationship, while the couple is breaking up, or after the relationship has ended.

Domestic abuse often escalates from threats and verbal abuse to physical violence. Domestic violence may even end up in murder.

**The key elements of domestic abuse are:**

- intimidation
- humiliating the other person
- physical injury

Domestic abuse is not a result of losing control; domestic abuse is intentionally trying to control another person. The abuser is purposefully using verbal, nonverbal, or physical means to gain control over the other person.

In some cultures, control of women by men is accepted as the norm. This article speaks from the orientation that control of intimate partners is domestic abuse within a culture where such control is not the norm. Today we see many cultures moving from the subordination of women to increased equality of women within relationships.

**What are the types of domestic abuse?**

The types of domestic abuse are:

- physical abuse (domestic violence)
- verbal or nonverbal abuse (psychological abuse, mental abuse, emotional abuse)
- sexual abuse
- stalking or cyberstalking
- economic abuse or financial abuse
- spiritual abuse

The divisions between these types of domestic abuse are somewhat fluid, but there is a strong differentiation between the various forms of physical abuse and the various types of verbal or nonverbal abuse.

**What is physical abuse of a spouse or intimate partner?**

Physical abuse is the use of physical force against another person in a way that ends up injuring the person, or puts the person at risk of being injured. Physical abuse ranges from physical restraint to murder. When someone talks of domestic violence, they are often referring to physical abuse of a spouse or intimate partner.

Physical assault or physical battering is a crime, whether it occurs inside a family or outside the family. The police are empowered to protect you from physical attack.

**Physical abuse includes:**

- pushing, throwing, kicking
- slapping, grabbing, hitting, punching, beating, tripping, battering, bruising, choking, shaking
- pinching, biting
- holding, restraining, confinement
- breaking bones
- assault with a weapon such as a knife or gun
- burning
- murder

**What is emotional abuse or verbal abuse of a spouse or intimate partner?**

Mental, psychological, or emotional abuse can be verbal or nonverbal. Verbal or nonverbal abuse of a spouse or intimate partner consists of more subtle actions or behaviors than physical abuse. While physical abuse might seem worse, the scars of verbal and emotional abuse are deep. Studies show that verbal or nonverbal abuse can be much more emotionally damaging than physical abuse.

**Verbal or nonverbal abuse of a spouse or intimate partner may include:**

- threatening or intimidating to gain compliance
- destruction of the victim's personal property and possessions, or threats to do so
- violence to an object (such as a wall or piece of furniture) or pet, in the presence of the intended victim, as
- a way of instilling fear of further violence
- yelling or screaming
- name-calling
- constant harassment
- embarrassing, making fun of, or mocking the victim, either alone within the household, in public, or in front of family or friends
- criticizing or diminishing the victim's accomplishments or goals
- not trusting the victim's decision-making
- telling the victim that they are worthless on their own, without the abuser
- excessive possessiveness, isolation from friends and family
- excessive checking-up on the victim to make sure they are at home or where they said they would be
- saying hurtful things while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and using the substance as an excuse to say the hurtful things
- blaming the victim for how the abuser acts or feels
- making the victim remain on the premises after a fight, or leaving them somewhere else after a fight, just to "teach them a lesson"
- making the victim feel that there is no way out of the relationship

## **What is sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a spouse or intimate partner?**

### **Sexual abuse includes:**

- sexual assault: forcing someone to participate in unwanted, unsafe, or degrading sexual activity
- sexual harassment: ridiculing another person to try to limit their sexuality or reproductive choices
- sexual exploitation (such as forcing someone to look at pornography, or forcing someone to participate in pornographic film-making)

Sexual abuse often is linked to physical abuse; they may occur together, or the sexual abuse may occur after a bout of physical abuse.

### **What is stalking?**

Stalking is harassment of or threatening another person, especially in a way that haunts the person physically or emotionally in a repetitive and devious manner. Stalking of an intimate partner can take place during the relationship, with intense monitoring of the partner's activities. Or stalking can take place after a partner or spouse has left the relationship. The stalker may be trying to get their partner back, or they may wish to harm their partner as punishment for their departure. Regardless of the fine details, the victim fears for their safety.

Stalking can take place at or near the victim's home, near or in their workplace, on the way to the store or another destination, or on the Internet (cyberstalking). Stalking can be on the phone, in person, or online. Stalkers may never show their face, or they may be everywhere, in person.

### **Stalkers employ a number of threatening tactics:**

- repeated phone calls, sometimes with hang-ups
- following, tracking (possibly even with a global positioning device)
- finding the person through public records, online searching, or paid investigators
- watching with hidden cameras
- suddenly showing up where the victim is, at home, school, or work
- sending emails; communicating in chat rooms or with instant messaging (cyberstalking: see below)
- sending unwanted packages, cards, gifts, or letters
- monitoring the victim's phone calls or computer-use
- contacting the victim's friends, family, co-workers, or neighbors to find out about the victim
- going through the victim's garbage
- threatening to hurt the victim or their family, friends, or pets
- damaging the victim's home, car, or other property

Stalking is unpredictable and should always be considered dangerous. If someone is tracking you, contacting you when you do not wish to have contact, attempting to control you, or frightening you, then seek help immediately.

### **What is cyberstalking?**

Cyberstalking is the use of telecommunication technologies such as the Internet or email to stalk another person. Cyberstalking may be an additional form of stalking, or it may be the only method the abuser employs. Cyberstalking is deliberate, persistent, and personal.

Spamming with unsolicited email is different from cyberstalking. Spam does not focus on the individual, as does cyberstalking. The cyberstalker methodically finds and contacts the victim. Much like spam of a sexual nature, a cyberstalker's message may be disturbing and inappropriate. Also like spam, you cannot stop the contact with a request. In fact, the more you protest or respond, the more rewarded the cyberstalker feels. The best response to cyberstalking is not to respond to the contact.

Cyberstalking falls in a grey area of law enforcement. Enforcement of most state and federal stalking laws requires that the victim be directly threatened with an act of violence. Very few law enforcement agencies can act if the threat is only implied.

Regardless of whether you can get stalking laws enforced against cyberstalking, you must treat cyberstalking seriously and protect yourself. Cyberstalking sometimes advances to real stalking and to physical violence.

### **How likely is it that stalking will turn into violence?**

Stalking can end in violence whether or not the stalker threatens violence. And stalking can turn into violence even if the stalker has no history of violence.

Women stalkers are just as likely to become violent as are male stalkers.

Those around the stalking victim are also in danger of being hurt. For instance, a parent, spouse, or bodyguard who makes the stalking victim unattainable may be hurt or killed as the stalker pursues the stalking victim.

## **What is economic or financial abuse of a spouse or domestic partner?**

### **Economic or financial abuse includes:**

- withholding economic resources such as money or credit cards
- stealing from or defrauding a partner of money or assets
- exploiting the intimate partner's resources for personal gain
- withholding physical resources such as food, clothes, necessary medications, or shelter from a partner
- preventing the spouse or intimate partner from working or choosing an occupation

## **What is spiritual abuse of a spouse or intimate partner?**

### **Spiritual abuse includes:**

- using the spouse's or intimate partner's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate them
- preventing the partner from practicing their religious or spiritual beliefs
- ridiculing the other person's religious or spiritual beliefs
- forcing the children to be reared in a faith that the partner has not agreed to

## **How do I know if I am in an abusive relationship? What are the signs and symptoms of an abusive relationship?**

The more of the following questions that you answer Yes to, the more likely you are in an abusive relationship. Examine your answers and seek help if you find that you respond positively to a large number of the questions.

Your inner feelings and dialogue: Fear, self-loathing, numbness, desperation

- Are you fearful of your partner a large percentage of the time?
- Do you avoid certain topics or spend a lot of time figuring out how to talk about certain topics so that you do not arouse your partner's negative reaction or anger?
- Do you ever feel that you can't do anything right for your partner?
- Do you ever feel so badly about yourself that you think you deserve to be physically hurt?
- Have you lost the love and respect that you once had for your partner?
- Do you sometimes wonder if you are the one who is crazy, that maybe you are overreacting to your partner's behaviors?
- Do you sometimes fantasize about ways to kill your partner to get them out of your life?
- Are you afraid that your partner may try to kill you?
- Are you afraid that your partner will try to take your children away from you?

- Do you feel that there is nowhere to turn for help?
- Are you feeling emotionally numb?
- Were you abused as a child, or did you grow up with domestic violence in the household? Does domestic violence seem normal to you?

**Your partner's lack of control over their own behavior:**

- Does your partner have low self-esteem? Do they appear to feel powerless, ineffective, or inadequate in the world, although they are outwardly successful?
- Does your partner externalize the causes of their own behavior? Do they blame their violence on stress, alcohol, or a "bad day"?
- Is your partner unpredictable?
- Is your partner a pleasant person between bouts of violence?

**Your partner's violent or threatening behavior:**

- Does your partner have a bad temper?
- Has your partner ever threatened to hurt you or kill you?
- Has your partner ever physically hurt you?
- Has your partner threatened to take your children away from you, especially if you try to leave the relationship?
- Has your partner ever threatened to commit suicide, especially as a way of keeping you from leaving?
- Has your partner ever forced you to have sex when you didn't want to?
- Has your partner threatened you at work, either in person or on the phone?
- Is your partner cruel to animals?
- Does your partner destroy your belongings or household objects?

**Your partner's controlling behavior:**

- Does your partner try to keep you from seeing your friends or family?
- Are you embarrassed to invite friends or family over to your house because of your partner's behavior?
- Has your partner limited your access to money, the telephone, or the car?
- Does your partner try to stop you from going where you want to go outside of the house, or from doing what you want to do?
- Is your partner jealous and possessive, asking where you are going and where you have been, as if checking up on you? Do they accuse you of having an affair?

**Your partner's diminishment of you:**

- Does your partner verbally abuse you?
- Does your partner humiliate or criticize you in front of others?
- Does your partner often ignore you or put down your opinions or contributions?
- Does your partner always insist that they are right, even when they are clearly wrong?

- Does your partner blame you for their own violent behavior, saying that your behavior or attitudes cause them to be violent?
- Is your partner often outwardly angry with you?
- Does your partner objectify and disrespect those of your gender? Does your partner see you as property or a sex object, rather than as a person?

**In my workplace, what are the warning signs that a person is a victim of domestic violence?**

Domestic violence often plays out in the workplace. For instance, a husband, wife, girlfriend, or boyfriend might make threatening phone calls to their intimate partner or ex-partner. Or the worker may show injuries from physical abuse at home.

If you witness a cluster of the following warning signs in the workplace, you can reasonably suspect domestic abuse:

- Bruises and other signs of impact on the skin, with the excuse of “accidents”
- Depression, crying
- Frequent and sudden absences
- Frequent lateness
- Frequent, harassing phone calls to the person while they are at work
- Fear of the partner, references to the partner’s anger
- Decreased productivity and attentiveness
- Isolation from friends and family
- Insufficient resources to live (money, credit cards, car)

If you do recognize signs of domestic abuse in a co-worker, talk to your Human Resources department. The Human Resources staff should be able to help the victim without your further involvement.

**What are the causes of domestic abuse or domestic violence?**

A strong predictor of domestic violence in adulthood is domestic violence in the household in which the person was reared. For instance, a child’s exposure to their father’s abuse of their mother is the strongest risk factor for transmitting domestic violence from one generation to the next. This cycle of domestic violence is difficult to break because parents have presented violence as the norm.

Individuals living with domestic violence in their households have learned that violence and mistreatment are the way to vent anger. Someone resorts to physical violence because:

- they have solved their problems in the past with violence,
- they have effectively exerted control and power over others through violence, and
- no one has stopped them from being violent in the past.



### **Some immediate causes that can set off a bout of domestic abuse are:**

- stress
- provocation by the intimate partner
- economic hardship, such as prolonged unemployment
- depression
- desperation
- jealousy
- anger

### **How does society perpetuate domestic abuse?**

Society contributes to domestic violence by not taking it seriously enough and by treating it as expected, normal, or deserved. Specifically, society perpetuates domestic abuse in the following ways.

- Police may not treat domestic abuse as a crime, but, rather, as a “domestic dispute”
- Courts may not award severe consequences, such as imprisonment or economic sanctions
- A community usually doesn’t ostracize domestic abusers
- Clergy or counselors may have the attitude that the relationship needs to be improved and that the relationship can work, given more time and effort
- People may have the attitude that the abuse is the fault of the victim, or that the abuse is a normal part of marriage or domestic partnerships
- Gender-role socialization and stereotypes condone abusive behavior by men

Community solutions may be inadequate, such that victims cannot get the help they need. For example, seeking refuge in a shelter may require a woman to leave her neighborhood, social support system, job, school, and childcare. In addition, teenagers are often not welcome at shelters, particularly teenage males. Teenage girls with children may have difficulty finding shelter because of their own age. And male victims of domestic violence have trouble finding shelters that will take them.

Domestic abuse is more common in low-income populations. Low-income victims may lack mobility and the financial resources to leave an abusive situation.

### **Who abuses their spouse or intimate partner?**

- Ninety-two percent of physical abusers are men. However, women can also be the perpetrators of domestic violence.
- About seventy-five percent of stalkers are men stalking women. But stalkers can also be women stalking men, men stalking men, or women stalking women.
- Domestic abuse knows no age or ethnic boundaries.
- Domestic abuse can occur during a relationship or after a relationship has ended.

### **What are the results of domestic violence or abuse?**

The results of domestic violence or abuse can be very long-lasting. People who are abused by a spouse or intimate partner may develop:

- sleeping problems
- depression
- anxiety attacks
- low self-esteem
- lack of trust in others
- feelings of abandonment
- anger
- sensitivity to rejection
- diminished mental and physical health
- inability to work
- poor relationships with their children and other loved ones
- substance abuse as a way of coping
- Physical abuse may result in death, if the victim does not leave the relationship.

### **What is the effect of domestic violence on children?**

Children who witness domestic violence may develop serious emotional, behavioral, developmental, or academic problems. As children, they may become violent themselves, or withdraw. Some act out at home or school; others try to be the perfect child. Children from violent homes may become depressed and have low self-esteem.

As they develop, children and teens who grow up with domestic violence in the household are:

- more likely to use violence at school or in the community in response to perceived threats
- more likely to attempt suicide
- more likely to use drugs
- more likely to commit crimes, especially sexual assault
- more likely to use violence to enhance their reputation and self-esteem
- more likely to become abusers in their own relationships later in life

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