

What Is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a blanket term used to describe abusive behavior patterns within marriages and between intimate partners or family members. (1) Sometimes referred to as domestic abuse or intimate partner violence, domestic violence behaviors can be physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological in nature. Abusers use these behaviors to control and intimidate their victims, and the abuse often leaves the victims feeling ashamed, fearful, and unworthy of love.

Sometimes, concerned friends and loved ones of victims of domestic violence wonder why they "just don't leave" their abusive situations. While it may look easy from an observer's viewpoint, abusers often make it extremely difficult for their victims to leave. (2) A person may be financially dependent on their spouse, or they might be terrified to leave their situation due to fears that their abuser will physically harm them or their children. Also, many victims of domestic violence truly love their partners, and they choose to stay with the hope that things can get better.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men are victims of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking, and 1 in 10 women have been raped by an intimate partner. On average, domestic violence hotlines throughout the United States receive over 20,000 phone calls per day, and domestic violence is linked to high depression and suicide rates. (3)

Types of Domestic Violence

A common misconception of domestic violence is that the term only relates to physical violence or assault of a domestic or intimate partner. While physical violence is definitely a type of domestic violence, there are many forms of abuse that fall under the domestic violence umbrella. (4,5)

Common types of domestic violence and abuse include:

- **Physical abuse.** Types of physical abuse include hitting, slapping, kicking, hair pulling, hitting with an object, pushing, scratching, and shaking.
- **Emotional abuse.** Forms of emotional abuse include insulting or humiliating the victim in front of others, neglecting the victim's needs, and making statements that diminish the victim's self-esteem and sense of worth.
- **Gaslighting.** Examples of gaslighting include manipulating victims so they don't trust their own perceptions, telling victims they're "crazy" or "it was just a joke" when confronted about their behavior, and shifting blame to make victims believe they're at fault for the abuser's actions. (6)
- **Sexual abuse.** Types of sexual abuse include intimate partner sexual assault and rape, making body-shaming comments during intimate acts, and withholding sex to punish victims.
- **Financial abuse.** Forms of financial abuse include forbidding victims to work and earn their own incomes, withholding money as a form of punishment, and controlling all the family finances.

- **Technological abuse.** Technological abuse includes reading a victim's private emails and text messages, planting tracking devices in victims' phones or vehicles, and monitoring a victim's social media accounts.
- **Abuse by immigration status.** Immigration abuse behaviors include threats of deportation and hiding or destroying immigration documents as a way to control the victim.
- **Isolation.** Abusers may isolate their victims by forbidding them to communicate with friends and family members, leaving them at home when they go out and socialize, and hiding their phones or computers.

In many domestic violence situations, several types of abuse can take place simultaneously. For example, an abuser may physically assault their partner or spouse, and use gaslighting behaviors to trick them into believing that they somehow "deserved" or "asked for" the beating.

Someone who is physically violent with their partner may also be sexually violent, or they may emotionally abuse the victim in public and physically assault them in private. An abuser who wants to control their victim might abuse them financially by controlling every aspect of their finances while also monitoring their social media accounts, text messages, and emails.

How to Cope With Domestic Violence

In a perfect world, a victim of domestic violence should have the ability to leave their abusive situation without any struggle or pushback from their partner. Unfortunately, it's not always easy to just pick up and leave. However, there are some ways for a victim to cope while they're figuring out their next steps.

Confiding in trusted friends and family members about their situations can help victims create support systems outside their relationships. For those in abusive relationships without outside friends or close family members, domestic violence hotlines and online support groups can provide helpful resources.

It's also a good idea for victims of domestic violence to have safety plans in place that they can refer to if their situations require them to leave their homes immediately. (7)

An effective safety plan should include the following:

- **Emergency phone numbers.** Keeping handwritten notes of phone numbers for shelters and other emergency resources in a purse or wallet as a "backup" can help if the abuser takes or hides their cell phone.
- **Getaway bag:** Having a "getaway bag" packed with essential items such as spare house keys, cash, clothing, medications, and important paperwork ensures victims have what they need for the immediate future.
- **Keep children informed.** Providing children with phone numbers of friends and family members they can call in an emergency and teaching them how to dial 911 can help them stay safe.

How to Help Someone Experiencing Domestic Violence

Victims of domestic violence are often vulnerable, and they may be frightened to take the necessary steps to remove themselves from their abusive situations. Family members and loved ones can help by encouraging the victim to contact local domestic violence hotlines or suggesting they meet with a professional counselor. They can also open up their homes to provide temporary "safe havens" for victims and their children.

If the individual experiencing domestic violence isn't quite ready to leave their abuser, it's important to be supportive and patient. Victims of domestic abuse may have issues with self-esteem, and they might not trust their own instincts if they experienced constant emotional abuse or gaslighting. This can leave them fearful and unsure of how to proceed, and they may be easily swayed when their abuser apologizes or pleads with them to stay.

When a victim of domestic abuse feels safe and supported, it can help them build the strength, courage, and confidence they need to end their abusive relationships for good.

Sources

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