

Family Violence

What is Family Violence?

Family (or "domestic") violence is a situation where one partner in a relationship is using violent or abusive behaviours to control the other. Statistics show that one in four women experience some kind of domestic violence in their lives. Because men are responsible for most family violence, in this discussion we have assumed that the abused partner is female. However, it is recognised that some women do abuse their partners and / or children, that some sons abuse their mothers, and that family violence is not confined to heterosexual relationships. The information that is provided here is equally applicable to these cases.

While violence in any form is unacceptable, family violence is perhaps one of the worse scenarios because it breaks the bond of trust between two (or more) people.

Domestic violence can take many forms. Many abused people suffer extreme psychological trauma - living in continuous fear and uncertainty. The long-term effects can also be enduring - it challenges the way they see themselves and the world around them. Family violence also has a significant effect on children in the family, even when they are not directly being abused themselves.

A person does not have to be physically hurt to be abused or to receive help.

Types of Abuse

- *Physical Abuse* includes actual or attempted kicking, hitting, punching, pushing or shoving, slapping, being thrown against walls or furniture, choking and being hit with objects or injured by weapons. It also includes smashing furniture or damaging the house.
- *Sexual Abuse* includes rape and any forced or unwanted sexual contact. Examples include rape after a beating, forcing the abused partner to engage in painful or humiliating, undesired sexual acts, constantly accusing her of infidelity, expecting her to be sexually available when he wants sex as a matter of "right".
- *Psychological Abuse/Verbal Abuse* includes comments and behaviour that makes the abused person feel worthless as well as threatening and intimidatory behaviours. Criticising a partner's character, family and friends is often the beginning. Constant put-downs, demeaning language (e.g., lazy, fat, ugly), and threatening behaviours are also considered abusive acts. This form of abuse can eventually destroy the self-esteem of the person being abused.
- *Verbal Abuse* includes constant put-downs, criticism and threats of physical abuse.
- *Financial Abuse* can include controlling or withholding money or not allowing the abused partner a say in how it is spent. This type of behaviour is designed to reinforce the abusive partner's control over the other.
- *Social Abuse* includes cutting the abused person off from family and friends, making her account constantly for everything she does, embarrassing her and keeping her from earning her own money. Some partners who have been abused describe feeling socially isolated, without their own transport and unable to leave the house.

Nature of Abuse

Family violence is often thought of as a hidden crime. Abused people describe feeling embarrassed or ashamed about what is happening to them. They worry that they are in some way responsible for their own abuse - that is they had been more careful, less provocative, tried harder, they would not have brought the abuse on themselves. The fact is that no-one "deserves" to be abused and no-one should live in fear, especially in their own home. Abusive behaviour in any form is not part of a healthy and nurturing relationship.

It is often difficult to accept there is a problem. Seeing there is a problem is the first step toward solving it. It's never too early or too late to do something! These sort of problems do not go away on their own. Often they get worse as time passes. Many people start to recognise a cycle that happens over and over and over...

The cycle of violence

- *Build-up phase*: During this stage there is an increase in tension between partners. External factors may be involved, such as stress. The abusive partner may say that his partner is provoking him even when she is doing everything possible to keep the peace. The build-up can take days, weeks, or even months. If the abusive partner does not do something about it this phase inevitably leads to explosion.
- *Stand-over (or explosion) phase*: This is a dangerous time for the abused partner. The abuser will use superior strength to control his partner, making threats and usually carrying out an assault. Some abusive people describe feeling as though they "have lost it". Sometimes they blame their behaviour on external factors such as other people or stress.
- *Remorse phase*: The man will frequently feel ashamed of his behaviour and perhaps fear legal or police intervention. During this phase he may make an attempt to deny the seriousness of the assault. He may express helplessness or guilt about his actions. He may genuinely believe and/or try to convince his partner that it will not happen again. But there are other men who will continue to refuse to admit it happened, to try to minimise the incident, and/or to blame the abused partner for the violence.
- *Pursuit (or buy back) phase*: Gifts and promises are made to the partner that has been abused. The aim is to encourage her to stay. If these strategies appear to be failing, the violence may escalate and more abuse will occur.
- *Honeymoon phase*: In this phase the abusive partner works hard to try and make up to the other. He may repair things he broke, buy gifts, and try hard to please his partner. Sometimes during this phase the abused partner describes feeling as though things are better than they have been for a long time between them. While his actions during this phase may indicate a genuine concern and interest in improving the relationship, if the problem is not acknowledged and professional help is not sought, it is likely that things will not get any better over the longer term.

Quick tips

- Abuse happens to people from all walks of life, from every age group, income and educational level, and religious and cultural background.
- Many fear admitting the seriousness of the abuse. The abused partner may feel betrayed, ashamed, guilty or blame them self.
- The abusive partner may also blame the abused person.
- It is important that the abused partner does not take blame. No matter what reasons are given for the abuse, there is no excuse. Being abused is not a normal part of a relationship.
- Keeping abuse a secret is dangerous. It is likely to become more frequent or get worse.
- Promises to stop do not usually mean an end to the abuse. It is very difficult for abusive partners to change their attitudes and behaviour. Even with professional help, it may take along time to learn new behaviour.
- Find out about what you can about domestic or family violence – talk to someone, read about it so that you have an understanding of the abusive relationship.

Effects of Family Violence On Children

Children are at high risk of suffering psychological trauma in homes where family violence occurs, even if they are not directly being physically abused themselves. Children can be hurt when attempting to protect the abused partner and infants can be injured if being held by the abused partner when the abuser strikes out. Even if the child is not present in the room when the abuse occurs, research shows that children are aware that it is happening. They suffer from living in homes where fear, cruelty and violence exist.

Studies have found that boys who witness violence against their mothers are more likely to abuse their female partners as adults than boys raised in non-violent homes. Children learn from watching their role models, and living in a violent home can teach them that:

- Violence is a normal part of life

- It is acceptable for men to abuse women, including husbands hitting wives
- Violence is an effective way to solve problems, win arguments or to accomplish your goals
- There are few, if any, consequences for violent acts
- Disrespect for women
- It is possible to love and inflict pain at the same time
- Violence is an effective way to relieve stress
- Inequality in relationships is normal

Children may feel that they are in some way to blame for the violence at home, not understanding it is an adult problem. They may take on a parenting role with younger siblings when the mother is incapacitated. The child often feels considerable guilt over their inability to stop the violence while also feeling pressured to keep the family secret - they are too ashamed or embarrassed to bring people home which restricts their social activities. The range of emotional and behavioural problems identified in children exposed to violence is extensive and includes:

- Low self-esteem
- Adjustment problems, fewer social activities and interests
- Excessive cruelty to animals
- Poor school performance
- Running away from home
- Aggressive language and behaviour
- Higher risks of drug and/or alcohol abuse and juvenile delinquency
- Poor conflict resolution skills

The decision to leave an abusive relationship is difficult and even more so when children are involved. Many women are concerned about access and custody issues, fear violent reprisals and/or retaliation through children. Some choose to remain in the relationship "for the sake of the children" or for economic reasons. Separation and divorce does not guarantee the safety of abused partners and their children, and may in fact be the time of greatest danger.

What you can do if you get abusive

Face the fact that you have a problem: You need to recognise the impact of your violence on those around you; understand that each of us is responsible for our own actions; and acknowledge the need to do things differently. To do this effectively you will probably need some help.

Take some action: Once you have acknowledged the need to change, you will likely need some guidance about effective strategies for achieving your goals. Services are available through Community Support groups designed specifically for men who find themselves in this situation. Alternatively, you can approach a MO, Psychologist, or Defence Community Organisation (<http://www.defence.gov.au/dco/>) representative for further information about appropriate resources in your region. Taking action takes courage but it gives you the option of :

- Stopping your violence against your partner (and family)
- Learning new ways to handle pressure
- Improving your self awareness and ability to express yourself effectively.

Consider some time apart: Sometimes you need space to consider your family and your future. When you make the decision to spend some time apart for this purpose you are sending a clear message to your partner (and yourself) that you are serious about making changes in the relationship. You are also letting

your children know that violence and abuse is not acceptable in your family and that their well-being is your most important consideration. This can be a scary step to take - you may wonder whether you will ever get back together again. It is important to consider getting support for yourself during this time. Ask your MO, psychologist or DCO representative for a referral to an appropriate service.

Quick Tip

It is difficult to change your attitudes and behaviours. Even with professional help, it may take a long time for change to happen. Remember it is your responsibility to change. Your MO, regional psychologist or DCO can provide you with information about suitable programs.

What you can do if you are being abused

If you are being abused, there are things you can do. Making the decision to leave or stay in a violent relationship is very difficult. Sorting out your choices is hard work, but is worth it. It's good to have someone to talk to who can help you with your options – You may contact your local DCO representative or one of the other service providers listed below.

Getting professional support can help by providing an opportunity to talk without being judged, someone to let you know that it's not your fault, help you make a safety plan, help you get a Restraining Order or a Domestic Violence Order and provide you with information and referral to relevant services.

You may feel responsible for your partner's needs because of his dependence on you and you may still have feelings for him. But it is important that the physical and emotional safety of yourself and your children comes first. Children who grow up in violent homes can come to believe that violence and abuse is normal. They may become abusive or accept abuse from someone else.

If you choose to stay, try to increase the level of safety for yourself and your children by planning ahead. There are ways to increase your safety if you choose to remain and people who care and are willing to help – Check the contact list below for appropriate services.

There are laws against violence in Australia. If you have been threatened with violence or actually assaulted you may:

- *Call the police*: Police can play a vital role in the early intervention and prevention of family violence. They have the duty to investigate reported complaints of family violence and powers to detain the abusive partner for determined periods. With sufficient evidence of assault or other charges the police can lay charges against the abusive partner. You can also call the police if you believe you are being stalked or harassed.
- *Apply for an intervention order*: If you believe the violence is likely to happen again, you can apply for an Intervention Order. These are aimed at preventing future violence. If the abusive partner defies the order, police are obliged to act.

If you decide to leave there are several things you can do to prepare yourself. For instance, it is a good idea to find out about your rights regarding protection orders; criminal charges; separation and divorce; property settlement; and matters involving children – from the Women's Legal Centre, Legal Aid or a solicitor. Other advice can be obtained from one of the services listed below (just remember, if you have a redial button on your telephone anyone else in the house can push it to find out who you have just rung).

Quick Tip

- It is not the fault of the abused person that their partner is violent
- It is normal for an abused partner to leave a few times before they are ready to leave forever
- It is not good for children to live with violence
- If you find out that children are being abused you have an obligation to ensure that abuse stops.

Support Services and Contact Details

National Help Line

Freecall: 1800 2000 526

Violence Against Women Specialist Unit www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/cpd.nsf/pages/vawsu_index

Women's Information and Referral Service

Freecall: 1800 81 72 27

 <http://www.wirc.act.gov.au>

Emergency services

These services provide immediate help, information and/or referral.

Police

Phone: 000

Child Protection and Family Crisis Service

Freecall: 1800 06 67 77 (24 hours)

Domestic Violence Line (Department of Community Service)

Phone: 1800 65 64 63 (24 hours, seven days)

TTY: 1800 67 14 42

Homeless Persons Information Service

Freecall: 1800 234 566

Incest Counselling and Resource Centre

Freecall: 1800 65 41 19

Kids Helpline

Freecall: 1800 55 1800

Sydney Rape Crisis Centre

Freecall: 1800 42 40 17

For contact details of the sexual assault service nearest to you, ask the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre worker you speak to or call your local hospital or community health centre and ask them.

Victims of Crime Support Line

Freecall: 1800 63 30 63