

Domestic Violence

What Is It?

Domestic violence is the abuse of a family member, intimate partner, or ex-partner.

Domestic violence often refers to violence between spouses, but it can also include non-married domestic partners and ex-partners.

Domestic violence takes many forms. Abusers typically use a variety of methods to gain and maintain power and control over their victims. The abuse may be **physical** (hitting, punching, kicking, slapping, pushing, stabbing, or strangling). It may be **sexual** (forcing victims into sexual acts against their will). Domestic violence may also be **emotional** (threatening victims or someone the victims love, controlling their actions, intimidating them, or making them feel worthless). Or it may be **financial**—controlling victims' access to money. Domestic violence may also involve stalking—repeatedly following victims against their will, causing them fear.

Who Commits Domestic Violence?

Abusers are both male and female, although many more men than women commit domestic violence.¹ Abusers come from all cultures, religious backgrounds, and socioeconomic levels.

Important Facts about Domestic Violence

1. **Domestic violence is common and dangerous.** An estimated 1.3 million women and more than 78,000 men are victimized by domestic violence every year.² Almost one-third of reported homicides of women are committed by an intimate partner.³
2. **Abusers are responsible for domestic violence.** Abusers often blame the victim for the domestic violence, even though the abusers have chosen to commit abuse. Many abusers are violent only to their family members—not to co-workers, neighbors, or others. Some abusers “blame” alcohol or drugs, but they are responsible both for abusing these substances and for their subsequent actions.
3. **Domestic violence hurts entire families.** Domestic violence affects children, other family members, witnesses, co-workers, friends, and the community. Children who witness domestic violence are victims, too, and they are much more likely than other children to become abusers when they grow up.⁴

¹ Shannan M. Catalano, “Criminal Victimization, 2005,” (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006)), 9, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cv05.pdf> (accessed May 21, 2008).

² Ibid.

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Crime in the United States, 2000: Uniform Crime Reports,” (Washington, DC: 2001).

4. Victims may have powerful reasons for staying in abusive relationships, such as:

- Fear that the violence will increase if the victim tries to leave.
- Fear of not being able to support herself or himself and the children.
- Fear of losing custody of the children.
- Shame and reluctance to let others know about the abuse.
- Not knowing where to turn for help.

If You Are a Victim

How You May Feel: Not all victims have the same feelings about being abused. You may feel afraid, depressed, anxious, ashamed, or alone. You may be angry, have trouble sleeping or concentrating, or feel constantly tense and afraid of future abuse. You may feel helpless or hopeless, and you may not want to see other people. You may want to use—or have used—alcohol or drugs to ease the pain.

You may not recognize that you are in an abusive relationship, especially if the abuse happens rarely or if there are times when the relationship is peaceful. You may have mixed feelings because you sometimes feel love and affection for a partner you are afraid of when he or she is abusing you. You may even wonder if you are to blame for the abuse. You may be afraid that people won't believe you if you report the abuse or that they will think you are responsible.

Physical Effects: You may have cuts, scrapes, bruises, or fractures on your head, neck, face, limbs, and any other area of your body. You may have genital injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, broken or loose teeth, ruptured eardrums, or internal injuries.

Decisions to Consider:

- **Medical Care:** Will you seek medical care to treat your injuries? You may want to seek such help, even if you decide not to report the crime.
- **Domestic Violence Shelter:** Will you seek refuge in a shelter? Many communities offer temporary housing to victims and their children. A victim advocate (see below) can help you find one and make a plan to help keep you safe.
- **Counseling:** Will you deal with your feelings privately or seek the help of a trained professional? Counseling can help you cope with the emotional and physical impact of the crime and regain a sense of control over your life.
- **Reporting the Crime:** Will you report the crime? If you decide to file a report, a victim advocate can help you understand the criminal justice process and decide what other steps you might take.
- **Protection Order:** Will you seek a temporary court order to require the abuser to stay away from you, your home, your work, or other places you often go?

⁴ Boys who witness family violence are twice as likely as those who do not witness family violence to abuse their own partners and children when they grow up. Strauss, Gelles, and Smith, "Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence," in R.J. Gelles, ed., *Families*, (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990).

Resources

The best way to find out about these options is to talk to a crime victim advocate. The National Crime Victim Helpline (**1-800-FYI-CALL**) advocates can help you think through these decisions and refer you to resources in your area. Helpline services are free and confidential.

National Crime Victim Helpline

1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255)

1-800-211-7996 TTY

8:30 a.m.– 8:30 p.m. ET weekdays

Or visit: **Help for Crime Victims:** www.ncvc.org/victimassistance

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