
What Is Domestic Violence?

Because the last things abusers want is for their victims to identify their experience as “domestic violence,” it can often be very difficult to do so. Maybe you feel afraid, ashamed, guilty, angry, confused, helpless, hopeless, drained, depressed, and frightened—but you don’t know what to name what is happening to you. You may also feel very alone in your experience. But we want you to know how common your experience is. What we plan to do here is to give you a sense of how laws define domestic violence (it’s broader than you think!) and to show you how prevalent it is in our society. The statistics are staggering, but we want you to recognize that you are not alone in what you are going through and there are many others who understand.

DEFINING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is used as an overarching term to encompass a large number of behaviors—physical, verbal, and psychological—that violate the well-being of an individual and his or her ability to act. There is currently little consensus among practitioners and researchers on which term to use—domestic violence or intimate partner violence—and how to define those terms exactly. What’s more, they may be defined differently in medical, legal, political, or social contexts. But the point is, the legal definition of all that constitutes domestic violence is a wide one.

In general, these terms mean the same thing. Intimate partner violence is used to describe abuse between current or former “romantic” partners. Domestic violence can include abuse from a household member such as a roommate or caretaker, intimate partners, or a family

member—whether or not they live with the victim. For this book, our focus is on domestic violence between only intimate partners, though many principles widely apply to other forms of domestic violence. In this book, we’ve also decided to use the more common and well-known term “domestic violence” but are comfortable with “intimate partner violence” or “intimate partner abuse.”¹ See the note for a fuller explanation of these terms.

Historically, “domestic violence” was mostly associated with physical violence. “Domestic violence” today, however, has a much broader legal definition, which includes sexual, psychological, verbal, and economic abuse.² So if you are wondering if your situation is serious enough to be classified as abuse, the courts are probably more sympathetic than you might think.

A NARROW AND BROAD UNDERSTANDING

The purpose of defining domestic violence is twofold. Of course, you first need to be able to define it for yourself and to name what you are experiencing. Second, you need to be able to talk about your experience with those who haven’t had to live in an abusive situation themselves.

We are going to give a general definition here. Let’s start by discussing what violence is, in terms everybody can agree upon: “Violence is the extreme application of social control. Usually understood as the use of physical force, it can take a psychological form when manifested through direct harassment or implied terroristic threats. Violence can also be structural, as when institutional forces such as governments or medical systems impinge upon individuals’ rights to bodily integrity, or contribute to the deprivation of basic human needs.”³ Many persons understand violence in primarily physical terms—something that harms the body. As this definition makes clear, more and more people are recognizing that using force to control someone at any level (psychological, emotional, sexual, etc.) is violence just the same.⁴

Our definition of domestic violence favors the broader view.

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive, controlling, or abusive behavior that is used by one individual to gain or maintain power and control over another individual in the context of an intimate relationship. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, exploit, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound an intimate partner. If you take a minute to look at our reference notes, you'll realize this definition isn't just our personal preference. It's the increasing consensus of psychologists, lawmakers, and experts in the field (partly for that reason, this section will sound a little more clinical).

As such, domestic violence can take many forms, including willful intimidation, physical assault,⁵ sexual assault, battery, stalking,⁶ verbal abuse,⁷ emotional abuse, economic control,⁸ psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, isolation, any other abusive behavior, and/or threats of such. Of course, threats of abuse can be as frightening as the abuse itself, particularly, when the victim knows the perpetrator may carry out the threats.

Former or current spouses, opposite-sex cohabitating partners, same-sex cohabitating partners, boyfriends, girlfriends, ex-boyfriends, ex-girlfriends, and dates can commit domestic violence. For the purpose of this book, "intimate partner relationship" is defined as a relationship between two people who may or may not be married, heterosexual, homosexual, living together (cohabitating), dating, separated, divorced, or currently in a relationship.⁹

Intimate violence includes the establishment of abusive control and power over another person through fear, isolation, and/or intimidation.¹⁰ Violent behavior, such as the act of engaging in intimate violence, often is thought of as direct "hands-on" infliction of pain but also includes implied threat or actual physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, including withholding finances and medical equipment.¹¹

This understanding of domestic violence gets beyond our society's narrow understanding of the issue and expands the spectrum of actions to be considered domestic violence. Our comprehensive definition and understanding of domestic violence includes several elements. Each element is important in understanding domestic violence:

- *Intentional:* The abuser consciously or subconsciously sets out to use deliberate abusive tactics to achieve his/her ends. The abuser chooses to abuse and he can choose to stop abusing at any time.
- *Methodical:* The abuser systematically uses a series of abusive tactics to gain power over the partner and to control her.
- *Pattern:* The abused partner often at first sees the abusive tactics as isolated and unrelated incidents, but they are really a series of related acts that form a pattern of behaviors.
- *Tactics:* The abuser uses a variety of tactics to gain power and to control his partner such as threats, violence, humiliation, exploitation, or even self-pity.
- *Power:* The abuser aims to acquire and employ power in the relationship. For example, the abuser may use force or threats of physical harm to intimidate his or her partner, thereby gaining physical and emotional power. Or the abuser may prohibit the partner from working, making the partner financially dependent on the abuser, and thereby gaining financial power.
- *Control:* With sufficient power, the abuser can control his partner—forcing or coercing her to do as the abuser wishes. For example, the abuser controls the decision making for the relationship, or controls who has social contact with the partner, or determines the sexual practices of the partner. The goal of the abuser is to force compliance.
- *Desires:* The abuser's ultimate goal is to get his emotional and physical desires met and he aims to selfishly make use of his partner to meet those needs. Most abusers are afraid their desires will not be fulfilled through a normal healthy relationship. Fear motivates them to use abuse to ensure that their desires will be met.

Domestic violence is a pervasive, life-threatening epidemic and crime that affects millions of people worldwide in every community.

It takes place across all races, ages, socioeconomic statuses, geographic regions, religions, nationalities, and education backgrounds, including traditional, nontraditional, teen dating, and adult dating relationships as well as older populations.¹² You are not alone.

A NATIONAL PROBLEM

Domestic violence is dangerously good at hiding itself, yet it is extremely prevalent—and extremely damaging—in our world today.

Domestic violence exists in every community and culture (including communities and cultures that we might perceive as happy and “normal”). The number of occurrences of domestic violence is staggering. Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused at some point during her lifetime. Most often, the abuser is a member of her own family.

Intimate partner violence is pervasive in U.S. society. The prevalence of domestic violence in the United States is difficult to determine because the crime is vastly underreported, yet the statistics are still overwhelmingly high: one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.¹³ Statistics about domestic violence are based on reported acts, with between two to four million women being abused physically by an intimate partner each year in the U.S.¹⁴ Women of all races are about equally vulnerable to violence by an intimate partner.

Pastor and social activist Ron Clark puts it into perspective this way:

If our nation were a church of 400 people, one could estimate that 160 would be adult women, twenty would be teenage girls, 160 would be adult men, and twenty would be teenage boys. According to national statistics, forty of the women would experience some form of physical abuse in their life. Twenty of the women would be currently experiencing physical abuse. Four of five of the teenage girls would experience some type of dating violence. If abuse is

expanded to include verbal and emotional abuse, then at least eighty of the women would be experiencing the humiliation and degradation of verbal criticism from a spouse or boyfriend. Approximately sixty of the men and boys would have assaulted their girlfriend or wife at some time. It could also be expected that half of the congregation (200 people) would have witnessed abuse in their family or their spouse's family and 150 of them would have known of a woman who has been abused in the past year. Even more than this, some of the men and boys in the congregation would be actively abusing some of the women.¹⁵

Nearly three out of four (74%) of Americans personally know someone who is or has been a victim of domestic violence. Approximately 30% of Americans say they know a woman who has been physically abused by her husband or boyfriend in the past year.¹⁶ So if you haven't told anyone about your abuse, remember that even if it seems as though the situation is isolating, many of the people you talk to already know others with a similar experience.

In terms of lifetime abuse rates, various studies show that 22–33% of American women will be assaulted—including rape, physical violence, or stalking—by an intimate partner in their lifetimes.¹⁷ A 2001 U.S. study revealed that 85% of the victims were female with a male abuser.¹⁸ Historically, females have been most often victimized by someone they knew.¹⁹ The other 15% includes intimate partner violence in gay and lesbian relationships and men who were abused by a female partner.²⁰ Women are 90–95% more likely to suffer domestic violence than men.²¹ Women living with female intimate partners experience less intimate partner violence than women living with male intimate partners. Men living with male intimate partners experience more intimate partner violence than do men who live with female intimate partners.²² These findings provide further evidence that intimate partner violence is perpetrated primarily by men, whether against male or female partners. The numbers show that overall, women are at far

greater risk of intimate partner violence than are men.²³

Young women are particularly at risk. Women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence and sexual assault.²⁴ Similarly, women who are 20–24 years of age are at the greatest risk of nonfatal intimate partner violence.²⁵ And among teenage girls, one in three reports knowing a friend or a peer who has been hit, punched, kicked, slapped, or physically injured by a partner.²⁶

Violence against women is primarily intimate partner violence: 64% of women who reported being raped, physically assaulted, and/or stalked since the age of 18 were victimized by a current or former husband, cohabitating partner, boyfriend, or date.²⁷

CHILDREN

Even if the recipient of abuse is the mother (and not any children), children are affected by domestic abuse in staggering and long-lasting ways. And it is here, among some of the household's most vulnerable members, that we see some of the most toxic effects of the cycle of abuse. If you have children, this section will be especially hard to read, but please bear with us, because we think it's important that you know this information.

To begin with, studies suggest that between 10–15 million children are exposed to domestic violence every year.²⁸ And for these children, abusive adults can cause tremendous long-term physical, emotional, and spiritual damage in their lives. This is true even if they physically abuse the mother (but the children are not physically hurt), though roughly half of men who physically abuse their wives also abuse their children.²⁹ Bruce Perry, one of the top neurological trauma researchers in the world, has conclusively shown that when young children merely witness domestic violence, this trauma exposure creates long-term physiological changes, including significant structural alteration and damage to the brain.³⁰

The aftermath of abuse comes out in children's behavior as well. Children exposed to violence are more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, be exploited in teenage prosti-

tution, and commit sexual assault crimes.³¹ Children who witness violence at home display emotional and behavioral disturbances as diverse as withdrawal, low self-esteem, nightmares, self-blame, and aggression against peers, family members, and property.³²

The damage also occurs in more intangible ways. Children who witness the abuse often experience their mother's powerlessness and humiliation. Many lose their childhood innocence because their sense of security has been violated and they feel dramatically unsafe. Children often develop anxiety in anticipation of the next attack, blame themselves for the abuse, and fear abandonment—especially if they should fail to keep the violence secret. They are left isolated and frightened as they carry the weight of shame, responsibility, guilt, and anger.³³

And here, among children, we see one of the most toxic effects of the cycle of abuse: Witnessing violence from one parent or caregiver to another is the strongest risk factor of transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next.³⁴ Boys who witness domestic violence are *twice as likely* to abuse their own partners and children when they become adults.³⁵ Men exposed to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or domestic violence as children are almost four times more likely than other men to perpetrate domestic violence as adults.³⁶

The most common factor among men who abuse their wives is that they experienced (received or witnessed) domestic violence themselves in childhood. Again, this history does not excuse anyone from choosing destructive behavior, but it does illustrate the far-reaching effects of abuse.

Additionally, we know that girls who grow up in physically abusive homes are more likely to be physically and sexually victimized by their own intimate partners in adulthood. Daughters are more than six times more likely to be sexually abused in homes where intimate partner violence occurs.³⁷ Children in homes where domestic violence occurs are physically abused or seriously neglected at a rate of 1500% higher than the national average in the general population.³⁸ And even when they grow into adults, children who've grown up in abusive households are

15 times more likely to be abused by other adults.

If you are reading this and are still on the fence about getting out of the relationship. All of these studies point to destructive effects of abuse that are long-term. Even if your child has not personally suffered abuse yet, the consequences of even witnessing it in the home over the rest of their lives could be catastrophic.

FREQUENCY AND DURATION

One of the common perceptions that keep many women in abusive relationships is the belief that this time, he'll change—that this time, he really means it when he says it won't happen again. But the numbers tell another story.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, approximately half of the women raped by an intimate partner and two-thirds of the women physically assaulted by an intimate partner said they were victimized multiple times by the same partner.³⁹ Female rape victims have reported 4.5 rapes on average by the same partner, and female physical assault victims averaged 6.9 assaults. Among women who were victimized multiple times by the same partner, 63% of rape victims and 70% of assault victims say their victimization lasted a year or more. On average, women who were raped multiple times said their victimization occurred over 3.8 years, and women who were physically assaulted multiple times said their victimization occurred over 4.5 years.⁴⁰

Your abuser may say it won't happen again, but more often than not, it will. This is a difficult truth to come to terms with, but we believe it is important for you to know for your own safety.

THE REALITY OF LEAVING

You are the expert for your situation; what we are telling you may be new information, but we know you will have been doing everything you can to manage yourself and any children involved. An abuser will attempt to totally disempower you and force you to stop trusting your own instincts. We would encourage you to begin trusting your own

instincts and when possible seek help. You will already be taking steps to keep yourself and any children safe. Using the resources in appendix 2, this risk can be dramatically decreased through taking certain steps and accessing specialist support. All of the studies and statistics we have discussed here point to long-lasting damage if you stay, but we also want to be clear about the risks of leaving.

To begin with, domestic abuse does not end immediately with separation from the abuser. We believe leaving is a critical step for a woman in an abusive relationship, but as critical as it is, it is also dangerous. Over 75% of separated women suffer post-separation abuse.⁴¹ Not only that, but even if the separation seems at first successful, there is an ongoing risk to a person once they leave an abusive relationship.

The abuser may begin to stalk and harass the woman once she has left. And then there is the emotional impact that surfaces when someone is finally out from under the abuse. However, this is also the time when the emotional support from family and friends often stops. This is why it is important to remind supporters to stick around. Approximately 75% of all domestic homicides occur while the victim is trying to leave their abuser or has just left the relationship.⁴² This is a valid fear, and if you believe you may be at risk, skip down to the section, “Reporting and Protection Orders.”

To keep yourself and your children safe, please review the following risk factors. It is important to note that the presence of a risk factor does not mean that violent behavior will necessarily occur, only that the odds of it occurring are greater. These risks include the following:

- Unmarried, cohabiting couples have higher rates of intimate partner violence than do married couples. Unmarried couples are at greater risk of intimate partner violence than married couples.⁴³
- Minorities have higher rates of intimate partner violence than do white people.⁴⁴

- Lower income women have higher rates of intimate partner violence than do higher income women.⁴⁵
- Less educated women have higher rates of intimate partner violence than do more educated women.⁴⁶
- Couples with income, educational, or occupational status disparities have higher rates of intimate partner violence than do couples with no status disparity.⁴⁷
- Women were significantly more likely to report violence by a current partner if their education level was greater than their partner's.
- Experiencing and/or witnessing violence in one's family of origin increases one's chances of being a perpetrator or victim of intimate partner violence.⁴⁸
- Wife assault is more common in families where power is concentrated in the hands of the husband or male partner and the husband makes most of the decisions regarding family finances and strictly controls when and where his wife or female partner goes.⁴⁹
- Persons with a disability are at greater risk of violence,⁵⁰ although there is no empirical evidence that having a disability increases one's risk of intimate partner violence.

Verbal abuse is one of the biggest indicators that physical abuse may follow. Much of the violence perpetrated against women by male partners is part of a systematic pattern of dominance and control, or what some researchers have called “patriarchal terrorism.”⁵¹ If you see signs of this in your relationship, leaving will be a risk—but we believe these signs also give you strong reason to leave.

REPORTING AND PROTECTION ORDERS

So if these are the risk factors, what are you to do about them? One of the practical precautions you can take is to report the abuse, and file a protection order. These are frightening words—we know. But we will

walk you through what you need to do.

First of all, domestic violence is one of the most chronically underreported crimes—which limits what can be done about it.⁵² Only about one-quarter of all physical assaults, one-fifth of all rapes, and one-half of all stalking incidents perpetuated against females by intimate partners are reported to the police.⁵³

Why isn't it reported? These facts suggest that most victims of intimate partner violence do not consider the justice system an appropriate vehicle for resolving conflicts with intimates.

Unfortunately, some have good reason to distrust the justice system. According to a study based on the National Violence Against Women Survey, for example, approximately 20% of victims annually obtain civil protection orders against former partners. But about one-half of those orders against intimate partners who physically assaulted them were violated.

But the police can be an effective deterrent. Steven Tracy points out that a 1986 Bureau of Justice Statistics survey concluded that women who reported their abuse to authorities were far less likely to be assaulted again than the wives who submitted to the abuse and did not contact the authorities.⁵⁴ Specifically, the survey found that 41% of wives who did not report their abusive husbands to the police were attacked again within six months, whereas only 15% of abused wives who reported the abuse to authorities were assaulted again.⁵⁵

The bottom line? The justice system may not be an absolute guarantee, but if you are honest and up front about the danger your abuser poses, the police can be a key to safety. If you take that first step, remember that there are resources that the police can offer you—people to talk to and make plans with you—that can make all the other steps easier. They've done it before—you are not alone.

THE POWER OF NAMING VIOLENCE FOR WHAT IT IS

Naming and describing the evil done to you does not ensure automatic personal healing. However, it does provide clarity, which may

motivate your path to safety. On the other hand, if domestic violence is not defined, named, or described, then it remains hidden.

In the Bible, the psalmist never shies away from telling the truth of his dire circumstances—and neither should you. By naming injustice, violence, and lies, you acknowledge to God—and to yourself—that things are not the way they are meant to be. That very longing for wrongs to be righted speaks to your dignity, value, and worth as one created by God.

Acknowledging the trauma you have experienced is vital to your healing, but it is only the first step. As you begin to come to terms with your abuse, further healing will come as you are able to interpret the effect of what happened to you within a larger pattern of meaning. The first step toward doing this is to look closely at the effects of domestic violence and the accompanying emotions.