

Abuse and Domestic Violence

What is abuse?

Abuse is one person trying to control another with fear, violence, or bullying. There are different kinds of abuse:

- Physical abuse is an injury to your body. Abuse may include hitting, kicking, shaking, biting, throwing, stabbing, and choking. It may also include beating you with objects such as a knife or cord or purposely burning you with hot water, cigarettes, or a stove.
- Mental and emotional abuse includes swearing or threatening to hit you; insulting you, making fun of you, or calling you names; forcing you to do shameful or humiliating acts; threatening to hurt your children if you don't do what the abuser wants; hurting or destroying your property or pets, or keeping you locked up and away from other people.
- Sexual abuse includes forcing you to have sex; hurting your breasts or genitals; or making you do sexual acts with other people or animals.
- Economic abuse may include refusing to let you work or harassing you while you are at work; not letting you have money or a bank account; or stealing from you.

What is the cause?

People are more likely to abuse others when they are under stress, abusing drugs or alcohol, or were abused as children. Abusers may be male or female, rich or poor, young or old, gay or straight.

Abuse often follows a pattern that has 3 phases.

1. The abuser gets edgy and tense. Almost any subject, like housework or money, may cause tension to build up. Verbal abuse, insults, and criticism increase. Shoving begins.
2. The tension mounts. You may argue or defend yourself. The abuser responds by hitting or kicking you, often saying that it is to teach you a lesson.
3. The abuser apologizes and promises to change. The abuser may be so charming that you believe that the violence will not happen again. You may think that the danger has passed and the relationship can be saved.

Usually abuse gets worse over time.

Abuse often starts or gets worse during a pregnancy. This puts both the woman and the unborn baby at risk. People who abuse a spouse are also likely to threaten or abuse their children. Protecting a child from abuse is one reason to leave a relationship.

How can I take care of myself?

The longer you stay in an abusive relationship, the greater your risk of being badly hurt.

Ask yourself if your relationship is safe. Arguments are normal in a relationship. However, physical violence is never OK. No one has the right to hurt someone else. Does your spouse or partner ever:

- ✓ Scare you with threats of violence by throwing things when angry?
- ✓ Hit you and then tell you it's your fault?
- ✓ Promise the violence won't happen again, but it does?

If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, you are in an abusive relationship. You could be risking your own health and that of your children.

Admit you are abused. You have the right to feel safe, especially in your own home. Talk with a trusted healthcare provider, counselor, friend, or family member about what is happening. Find someone you can call if you need to leave a dangerous situation.

Many people who have been abused have problems with depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Getting help for these disorders can help you deal with an unhealthy relationship.

Learn the warning signs. Learn to know when violent behavior might happen before it does.

Warning signs often include:

- ✓ Demanding that you not see certain friends or family members, keeping you away from school or work, or making you stay home when you want to go out.
- ✓ Putting you down with name calling or constant criticism.
- ✓ Violent threats toward children, other family members, or pets.
- ✓ Threatening to use a weapon, such as a gun or knife.

Stay alert. Avoid arguments in small rooms; rooms with weapons, such as a kitchen; and rooms with no outside doors. Don't use alcohol and drugs because they can keep you from acting quickly to protect yourself or your child.

Plan an emergency exit. Know where to get help, such as:

- ✓ Crisis hotlines.
- ✓ Rape crisis centers.
- ✓ Domestic violence programs.
- ✓ Legal aid services.
- ✓ Shelters for abused adults and children.
- ✓ Mental health centers.

If you feel you or your children are in danger from your partner, take action. Pack a suitcase to store with a friend or neighbor that includes a change of clothing for you and your children. Keep the following items in an easy-to-find but safe place, so you can take them with you on short notice:

- ✓ Medicines for you or your children
- ✓ IDs such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, and driver's license
- ✓ Extra cash, your checkbook, savings account book, and credit cards
- ✓ Important documents such as welfare identification, insurance records, automobile titles, marriage license, address book, passports, or green cards
- ✓ Copies of legal documents such as protective orders or divorce or custody papers
- ✓ A toy or book for each child
- ✓ Extra set of car, house, office, and safety deposit box keys
- ✓ Telephone numbers and addresses of family, friends, and community agencies

Know where you will go and how to get there at any time of day. Explain to the person helping you that you may show up suddenly.

In an emergency, call the police or 911. If no police officer or other official responds right away, keep calling. Leave the place where you are being attacked if possible. If you leave and don't call 911 at the time of the attack, report the attack to the police as soon as possible.

Call your healthcare provider or go to the emergency room if you are hurt. Give healthcare providers complete information about how you were injured. Ask for a copy of the medical record. You may be able to file charges against your attacker. Ask your healthcare provider, emergency room staff, or the police about this.

Make changes. Don't confuse guilt with love. You and your children should never be abused. You will need to think about the long-term situation. No matter what choices you make, counseling can be very helpful. Counseling can help you to look at yourself more positively. It can also help you as you start to make changes in your life.

If you and your partner want to have a healthy relationship, there are many options. Individual or group counseling can help victims of abuse. The abuser must get treatment before you try getting back together. Your partner must admit to losing control and must learn new ways of dealing with anger, stress, and conflict. Then you can feel safe in the relationship again.

You may decide to leave your partner for good. If you are married to the abuser, it's important to get a lawyer who deals with abuse cases. If you are concerned that you cannot afford a lawyer, call a legal aid service in your community.

Where can I get help?

Many states have toll-free, 24-hour domestic violence hotlines. Look in your local telephone book to find one in your area. You can get more information from:

The National Domestic Violence Hotline
1.800.799.7233
thehotline.org/

National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence
1.202.429.6695
nccafv.org

Alliance for Children and Families
1.800.221.2681
alliance1.org

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