

# Domestic Abuse and Where to Find Help

## Overview

Understanding domestic abuse and where to find help if you or someone you know is being abused.

- Understanding domestic abuse
- Facts about domestic abuse
- The signs of abuse
- If you think a friend or co-worker is being abused
- If you are being abused
- Plan ways to protect yourself
- Where to find help

Whether or not you recognize the signs, it's likely that someone you know is a victim of domestic abuse. The person may be someone you work with, someone from your community, or a family member or friend. In this article, you'll find resources and information on domestic abuse.

## Understanding domestic abuse

Many of us think of domestic abuse as abuse that involves only physical harm -- slapping, kicking, pushing, throwing things, sexual assault, or threatening with a weapon. This is one form of domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse can also involve a pattern of emotional and verbal abuse. Underlying domestic abuse is the abuser's need to feel powerful and in control of another person's behavior and actions. Abusers may hurt their victims and maintain control over them by using insults, put-downs, public humiliation, name-calling, verbal threats, or social and economic isolation. Abusers may be extremely jealous and keep the victim from seeing friends or relatives. They may use threats of violence, of suicide, or of taking away the children.

All of these tactics are meant to silence victims so that they are afraid to seek help or call the police. As the National Crime Prevention Council says, "Silence is the batterer's best friend. We have to end the silence and change our attitudes toward domestic crime."

## Facts about domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is hard to talk about, and many victims of domestic abuse hide that they are being abused, even from close relatives and friends. For this reason, there are many misconceptions about domestic abuse. Here are some facts:

- *Domestic abuse is a widespread problem.* Millions of women, children, and men are abused every year.
- *Domestic abuse affects families of all backgrounds.* It can affect people of any race, religion, culture, or education or income level. Domestic abuse may involve couples who are married or unmarried, living together or apart.
- *Both men and women may be victims of domestic abuse,* but women are the more frequent victims. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 85 percent of all victims of domestic violence are women. More than 3 million American women are physically abused by their partners every year. (Because women make up the majority of domestic abuse victims, we will use the word *she* to refer to victims.)

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- *Domestic abuse isn't always physical.* Women who are not physically bruised but who suffer other forms of domestic abuse, including insults, verbal threats, and social or economic isolation, may not recognize that they are being abused.
- *All children in a violent home are at risk of being abused themselves.* Violence at home can have serious long-term effects on children and can affect their emotional development and self-esteem. Children who grow up seeing abuse face a greater risk of becoming victims or abusers themselves when they grow up. Some states consider it child abuse when a child witnesses domestic violence.
- *It can be very difficult for a victim of abuse to leave the relationship.* The victim may be socially isolated, hope her partner will change, or feel ashamed or responsible for the violence she suffers, as if she provoked it or deserves it. She may fear for her life or her children's safety. She may be financially dependent on her partner and have no way to support herself and her children. She may see no way out of the relationship.

### **The signs of abuse**

Someone who is in abusive relationship may show signs that include the following:

- being afraid of a partner or of breaking up with or divorcing a partner
- rough treatment, including grabbing, pinching, shoving, or hitting
- emotional abuse, such as put-downs, embarrassment, or humiliation in public or private
- social isolation, including not being allowed to see or talk to relatives or friends
- unexplained bruises or injuries
- increased or unexplained absences from work
- getting harassing phone calls at work or at home
- withdrawing from friends, family, or co-workers

### **If you think a friend or co-worker is being abused**

If you have a friend, relative, or co-worker who may be a victim of domestic abuse, reach out and offer support. Let the person know that help is available. You may feel uncomfortable talking about such a private matter, but domestic abuse can be a matter of life and death. Here are ways to offer support:

- *Show your concern.* Let the victim know you are ready to listen and help whenever she's ready. You might begin by saying, "Has anyone been hurting you or threatening you?" Or, "I'm concerned for your safety. I'm here to help." You may have to help her recognize the signs of abuse.

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- *Let her know that you believe her.*
- *Tell the woman that she doesn't have to stay in an abusive relationship and that help is available.*
- *If a co-worker may be a victim of abuse, urge her to contact your employer's employee assistance program (EAP). You might say, "Confidential resources are available through work that you can call to talk about your situation."*
- *If a friend may be a victim of domestic abuse, give her hot line numbers and other resources. You might say, "I'm afraid for your safety. Here's a number to call." Suggest that she keep the number in a place where the abuser won't find it.*
- *Encourage the victim to seek medical attention for any injuries she has. Offer to accompany her to the doctor's office.*
- *Talk about the impact of domestic violence on children. Children who live in violent households may suffer emotional and psychological damage even if they aren't abused. They need to feel safe and secure to thrive. Let the victim know that some states consider it child abuse when children witness to physical abuse.*
- *Tell the victim that she is not responsible for the abuse. The abuser is responsible for his actions. Stress does not excuse or justify domestic violence. You might tell the victim, "You don't deserve to be abused."*
- *Remind the person that abusers rarely stop abuse without help. An incident of abuse is often followed by a "honeymoon" period, but when tensions mount, the abusive behavior returns. In fact, the severity and frequency of abuse tends to escalate over time. You might say, "I'm afraid it will only get worse over time."*
- *Be there for the person. A victim of domestic abuse may need you to make phone calls for her, go with her to the police, or help with child care as she works out a safety plan. Although you can't do it all, ask and do what you can do to help.*
- *Don't ignore the situation. A domestic abuse situation can get worse over time, putting the victim and children in jeopardy. Seek support yourself if you're uncertain about what to do.*
- *Respect the woman's decisions, even if she returns to the abuser. Be sure she knows that your support remains available regardless of how she handles the situation. Often, battered women return to their abuser several times before leaving for good. If the woman is staying in a violent relationship, your continued help, support, and encouragement are vital.*

#### **If you are being abused**

- *Talk with a friend or relative about what is happening. Get support.*
- *Find out what resources are available through work.*

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- *Let your human resources department or manager know about your situation*, just in case your abuser shows up at your workplace.
- *Save evidence of abuse*. If you go to a hospital or to see your doctor, explain what happened. Ask your doctor to put a record of it in your file. Keep any evidence of abuse, such as photos of bruises and injuries. Save any threatening e-mail or voice-mail messages. Consider filing a complaint with the police.
- *Plan ahead in case you need to leave on short notice*. Gather important documents like birth certificates, health insurance cards, Social Security cards, checkbook, bank records, and driver's license in one place. If you don't have a credit card in your own name, save a secret fund of cash. If possible, keep a change of clothing for yourself and your children, other personal care items, and an extra set of car keys at a friend's or relative's house or at work.
- *Get help*. Gather information about legal help, restraining orders, counseling, shelters, and resources in your community.

#### **Plan ways to protect yourself**

- *Have a safe place to go if you feel you are going to be physically harmed*. Learn about safe places in your community where you go in an emergency. The police can tell you about these. Remember that the abuser may be able to find you easily at the homes of family and friends.
- *If you have children, have a secret code* that tells them that they need to leave the home and go to a designated location. That location might be the home of a neighbor who is willing to help in a crisis. In some states, allowing a child to witness physical abuse is considered child abuse. And it must be reported by doctors, social workers, teachers, or others who hear of it. For this reason and others, you must protect your children from physical as well as emotional abuse.
- *Have alternate plans for school and child care*. Abusing partners may try to take children from school and child care if you have decided to leave. Any restraining order should include your children if they may be in danger as well.
- *Stay out of the kitchen where knives are readily available* or areas where firearms may be kept if your partner is becoming abusive.
- *Know all exits in your home*. Rehearse getting out of your home when your partner is not around.
- *Have a cell phone available to call for help*. If you don't have a cell phone, get a recycled cell phone through a domestic violence prevention program. These recycled cell phones function only for 911 calls.

#### **Where to find help**

Here is what to do if you or someone you know is in immediate danger:

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- *Dial 911 or call the police if you or someone else is in immediate danger of assault or abuse.*

Here is what to do if you or someone you know needs help but is not under immediate threat:

- *Call the National Domestic Violence Hot Line ([www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)) at 800-799-7233 or 800-787-3224 (TDD). The hot line has information on finding shelters, housing, counseling, job training, and legal help in your area. It also provides resources for abusers. The hot line provides help in more than 170 languages.*

Other helpful resources include the following:

### **American Bar Association Commission on Domestic Violence**

*[www.abanet.org/domviol](http://www.abanet.org/domviol)*

The American Bar Association Commission on Domestic Violence has information and other resources on domestic violence, the law, and finding legal assistance. The main American Bar Association site, *[www.abanet.org](http://www.abanet.org)*, has an online Lawyer Locator service that lets you search for an attorney by Zip code, specialty, languages spoken, and more.

### **Family Violence Prevention Fund**

415-252-8900

*<http://endabuse.org>*

The Family Violence Prevention Fund works to prevent violence in homes and communities in a variety of ways, including by calling attention to the needs of battered immigrant women.

### **Legal Momentum**

212-925-6635

*[www.legalmomentum.org](http://www.legalmomentum.org)*

Legal Momentum has publications and other resources on a variety of topics related to domestic violence and other issues that affect women.

### **S.A.F.E. (Stop Abuse for Everyone)**

*[www.safe4all.org](http://www.safe4all.org)*

S.A.F.E. specializes in helping domestic-violence victims whose needs are often overlooked, including straight men, gay men, lesbians, and the elderly. Its free services include an electronic discussion forum and online support groups for battered men and others.

**Safe Horizon**

800-612-HOPE (800-612-4673)

*www.safehorizon.org*

This organization is the largest provider of domestic violence services in the country. It works with the criminal justice system to support women throughout the complex process of leaving violent relationships and building safe cultures.

**U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women**

*www.ovw.usdoj.gov*

The Office on Violence Against Women offers publications, links to state resources, and other helpful material.

Domestic abuse is frightening, but there are many people and organizations that can provide support. Don't put off getting help if you or someone you care about may be in danger. Remember that the program that provided this publication offers helpful information and resources on personal and work issues.

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