

Domestic Violence and Abuse

Recognizing the Signs of an Abusive Relationship and Getting Help

[Español \(/es/articulos/abuso/abuso-y-violencia-domestica.htm\)](/es/articulos/abuso/abuso-y-violencia-domestica.htm)



Domestic violence and abuse can happen to anyone, yet the problem is often overlooked, excused, or denied. This is especially true when the abuse is psychological, rather than physical. Noticing and acknowledging the signs of an abusive relationship is the first step to ending it. If you recognize yourself or someone you know in the following descriptions of abuse, reach out now. There is help available. No one should live in fear of the person they love.

Understanding domestic violence and abuse

When people think of domestic abuse, they often focus on domestic violence. But domestic abuse occurs whenever one person in an intimate relationship or marriage tries to dominate and control the other person.

Domestic violence and abuse are used for one purpose and one purpose only: to gain and maintain total control over you. An abuser doesn't "play fair." Abusers use fear, guilt, shame, and intimidation to wear you down and keep you under his or her thumb. Your abuser may also threaten you, hurt you, or hurt those around you.

Domestic violence and abuse do not discriminate. Abuse happens among heterosexual couples and in same-sex partnerships. It occurs within all age ranges, ethnic backgrounds, and economic levels. And while women are more commonly victimized, [men are also](#)

[abused](/articles/abuse/help-for-men-who-are-being-abused.htm) (/articles/abuse/help-for-men-who-are-being-abused.htm)—especially verbally and emotionally. The bottom line is that abusive behavior is never acceptable, whether it's coming from a man, a woman, a teenager, or an older adult. You deserve to feel valued, respected, and safe.

Recognizing abuse is the first step to getting help

Domestic abuse often escalates from threats and verbal abuse to violence. And while physical injury may be the most obvious danger, the emotional and psychological consequences of domestic abuse are also severe. Emotionally abusive relationships can destroy your self-worth, lead to anxiety and depression, and make you feel helpless and alone. No one should have to endure this kind of pain—and your first step to breaking free is recognizing that your situation is abusive. Once you acknowledge the reality of the abusive situation, you can get the help you need.

Signs that you're in an abusive relationship

There are many signs of an abusive relationship. The most telling sign is fear of your partner. If you feel like you have to walk on eggshells around your partner—constantly watching what you say and do in order to avoid a blow-up—chances are your relationship is unhealthy and abusive. Other signs that you may be in an abusive relationship include a partner who belittles you or tries to control you, and feelings of self-loathing, helplessness, and desperation.

To determine whether your relationship is abusive, answer the questions below. The more “yes” answers, the more likely it is that you’re in an abusive relationship.

Are you in an abusive relationship?

Your inner thoughts and feelings

Do you:

- feel afraid of your partner much of the time?
- avoid certain topics out of fear of angering your partner?
- feel that you can't do anything right for your partner?
- believe that you deserve to be hurt or mistreated?
- wonder if you're the one who is crazy?
- feel emotionally numb or helpless?

Are you in an abusive relationship?

Your partner's belittling behavior

Does your partner:

- humiliate or yell at you?
- criticize you and put you down?
- treat you so badly that you're embarrassed for your friends or family to see?
- ignore or put down your opinions or accomplishments?
- blame you for their own abusive behavior?
- see you as property or a sex object, rather than as a person?

Your partner's violent behavior or threats

Does your partner:

- have a bad and unpredictable temper?
- hurt you, or threaten to hurt or kill you?
- threaten to take your children away or harm them?
- threaten to commit suicide if you leave?
- force you to have sex?
- destroy your belongings?

Your partner's controlling behavior

Does your partner:

- act excessively jealous and possessive?
- control where you go or what you do?
- keep you from seeing your friends or family?
- limit your access to money, the phone, or the car?
- constantly check up on you?

Physical abuse and domestic violence

Physical abuse is the use of physical force against someone in a way that injures or endangers that person. Physical assault or battering is a crime, whether it occurs inside or outside of the family. The police have the power and authority to protect you from physical attack.

Sexual abuse is a form of physical abuse

Any situation in which you are forced to participate in unwanted, unsafe, or degrading sexual activity is sexual abuse. Forced sex, even by a spouse or intimate partner with whom you also have consensual sex, is an act of aggression and violence. Furthermore, people whose partners abuse them physically *and* sexually are at a higher risk of being seriously injured or killed.

It is still abuse if...

The incidents of physical abuse seem minor when compared to those you have read about, seen on television, or heard other women talk about. There isn't a "better" or "worse" form of physical abuse; you can be severely injured as a result of being pushed, for example.

The incidents of physical abuse have only occurred one or two times in the relationship. Studies indicate that if your spouse/partner has injured you once, it is likely he will continue to physically assault you.

The physical assaults stopped when you became passive and gave up your right to express yourself as you desire, to move about freely and see others, and to make decisions. It is not a victory if you have to give up your rights as a person and a partner in exchange for not being assaulted!

There has not been any physical violence. Many women are emotionally and verbally assaulted. This can be as equally frightening and is often more confusing to try to understand.

Source: *Breaking the Silence Handbook*

Emotional abuse: It's a bigger problem than you think

Not all abusive relationships involve physical violence. Just because you're not battered and bruised doesn't mean you're not being abused. Many men and women suffer from emotional abuse, which is no less destructive. Unfortunately, emotional abuse is often minimized or overlooked—even by the person being abused.

Understanding emotional abuse

The aim of emotional abuse is to chip away at your feelings of self-worth and independence—leaving you feeling that there's no way out of the relationship, or that without your abusive partner you have nothing.

Emotional abuse includes *verbal abuse* such as yelling, name-calling, blaming, and shaming. Isolation, intimidation, and controlling behavior also fall under emotional abuse. Additionally, abusers who use emotional or psychological abuse often throw in threats of physical violence or other repercussions if you don't do what they want.

You may think that physical abuse is far worse than emotional abuse, since physical violence can send you to the hospital and leave you with scars. The scars of emotional abuse are very real, though, and they run deep. In fact, emotional abuse can be just as damaging as physical abuse—sometimes even more so.

Economic or financial abuse: A subtle form of emotional abuse

Remember, an abuser's goal is to control you, and he or she will frequently use money to do so. Economic or financial abuse includes:

- Rigidly controlling your finances
- Withholding money or credit cards
- Making you account for every penny you spend
- Withholding basic necessities (food, clothes, medications, shelter)
- Restricting you to an allowance
- Preventing you from working or choosing your own career
- Sabotaging your job (making you miss work, calling constantly)
- Stealing from you or taking your money

Abusive behavior is the abuser's choice

Despite what many people believe, domestic violence and abuse is not due to the abuser's loss of control over his or her behavior. In fact, abusive behavior and violence is a deliberate choice made by the abuser in order to control you.

Abusers use a variety of tactics to manipulate you and exert their power:

Dominance – Abusive individuals need to feel in charge of the relationship. They will make decisions for you and the family, tell you what to do, and expect you to obey without question. Your abuser may treat you like a servant, child, or even as his or her possession.

Humiliation – An abuser will do everything he or she can to make you feel bad about yourself or defective in some way. After all, if you believe you're worthless and that no one else will want you, you're less likely to leave. Insults, name-calling, shaming, and public put-downs are all weapons of abuse designed to erode your self-esteem and make you feel powerless.

Isolation – In order to increase your dependence on him or her, an abusive partner will cut you off from the outside world. He or she may keep you from seeing family or friends, or even prevent you from going to work or school. You may have to ask permission to do anything, go anywhere, or see anyone.

Threats – Abusers commonly use threats to keep their partners from leaving or to scare them into dropping charges. Your abuser may threaten to hurt or kill you, your children, other family members, or even pets. He or she may also threaten to commit suicide, file false charges against you, or report you to child services.

Intimidation – Your abuser may use a variety of intimidation tactics designed to scare you into submission. Such tactics include making threatening looks or gestures, smashing things in front of you, destroying property, hurting your pets, or putting weapons on display. The clear message is that if you don't obey, there will be violent consequences.

Denial and blame – Abusers are very good at making excuses for the inexcusable. They will blame their abusive and violent behavior on a bad childhood, a bad day, and even on the victims of their abuse. Your abusive partner may minimize the abuse or deny that it occurred. He or she will commonly shift the responsibility on to you: Somehow, his or her violent and abusive behavior is your fault.

Abusers *are* able to control their behavior—they do it all the time

Abusers pick and choose whom to abuse. They don't insult, threaten, or assault everyone in their life who gives them grief. Usually, they save their abuse for the people closest to them, the ones they claim to love.

Abusers carefully choose when and where to abuse. They control themselves until no one else is around to see their abusive behavior. They may act like everything is fine in public, but lash out instantly as soon as you're alone.

Abusers are able to stop their abusive behavior when it benefits them. Most abusers are not out of control. In fact, they're able to immediately stop their abusive behavior when it's to their advantage to do so (for example, when the police show up or their boss calls).

Violent abusers usually direct their blows where they won't show. Rather than acting out in a mindless rage, many physically violent abusers carefully aim their kicks and punches where the bruises and marks won't show.

The cycle of violence in domestic abuse

Domestic abuse falls into a common pattern, or cycle of violence:

The Cycle of Abuse



Abuse – Your abusive partner lashes out with aggressive, belittling, or violent behavior. The abuse is a power play designed to show you "who is boss."

Guilt – After abusing you, your partner feels guilt, but not over what he's done. He's more worried about the possibility of being caught and facing consequences for his or her abusive behavior.

Excuses – Your abuser rationalizes what he or she has done. The person may come up with a string of excuses or blame you for the abusive behavior—anything to avoid taking responsibility.

"Normal" behavior – The abuser does everything he can to regain control and keep the victim in the relationship. He may act as if nothing has happened, or he may turn on the charm. This peaceful honeymoon phase may give the victim hope that the abuser has really changed this time.

Fantasy and planning – Your abuser begins to fantasize about abusing you again. He spends a lot of time thinking about what you've done wrong and how he'll make you pay. Then he makes a plan for turning the fantasy of abuse into reality.

Set-up – Your abuser sets you up and puts his plan in motion, creating a situation where he can justify abusing you.

Your abuser's apologies and loving gestures in between the episodes of abuse can make it difficult to leave. He may make you believe that you are the only person who can help him, that things will be different this time, and that he truly loves you. However, the dangers of staying are very real.

The full cycle of domestic violence: An example

A man **abuses** his partner. After he hits her, he experiences self-directed **guilt**. He says, "I'm sorry for hurting you." What he does not say is, "Because I might get caught." He then **rationalizes** his behavior by saying that his partner is having an affair with someone. He tells her, "If you weren't such a worthless whore I wouldn't have to hit you." He then **acts contrite**, reassuring her that he will not hurt her again. He then **fantasizes** and reflects on past abuse and how he will hurt her again. He **plans** on telling her to go to the store to get some groceries. What he withholds from her is that she has a certain amount of time to do the shopping. When she is held up in traffic and is a few minutes late, he feels completely justified in assaulting her because "You're having an affair with the store clerk." He has just **set her up**.

Recognizing the warning signs that someone is being abused

It's impossible to know with certainty what goes on behind closed doors, but there are some telltale signs and symptoms of emotional abuse and domestic violence. If you witness these warning signs of abuse in a friend, family member, or co-worker, take them very seriously.

Warning signs of abuse in others

People who are being abused may:

- Seem afraid or anxious to please their partner
- Go along with everything their partner says and does
- Check in often with their partner to report where they are and what they're doing
- Receive frequent, harassing phone calls from their partner
- Talk about their partner's temper, jealousy, or possessiveness

Warning signs of physical violence:

Warning signs of abuse in others

People who are being physically abused may:

- Have frequent injuries, with the excuse of “accidents”
- Frequently miss work, school, or social occasions, without explanation
- Dress in clothing designed to hide bruises or scars (e.g. wearing long sleeves in the summer or sunglasses indoors)

Warning signs of isolation:

People who are being isolated by their abuser may:

- Be restricted from seeing family and friends
- Rarely go out in public without their partner
- Have limited access to money, credit cards, or the car

The psychological warning signs of abuse:

People who are being abused may:

- Have very low self-esteem, even if they used to be confident
- Show major personality changes (e.g. an outgoing person becomes withdrawn)
- Be depressed, anxious, or suicidal

Speak up if you suspect domestic violence or abuse

If you suspect that someone you know is being abused, speak up! If you're hesitating—telling yourself that it's none of your business, you might be wrong, or the person might not want to talk about it—keep in mind that expressing your concern will let the person know that you care and may even save his or her life.

Talk to the person in private and let him or her know that you're concerned. Point out the things you've noticed that make you worried. Tell the person that you're there, whenever he or she feels ready to talk. Reassure the person that you'll keep whatever is said between the two of you, and let him or her know that you'll help in any way you can.

Remember, abusers are very good at controlling and manipulating their victims. People who have been emotionally abused or battered are depressed, drained, scared, ashamed, and confused. They need help to get out, yet they've often been isolated from their family and friends. By picking up on the warning signs and offering support, you can help them escape an abusive situation and begin healing.

Do's and Don'ts	
Do:	Don't:
Ask if something is wrong	Wait for him or her to come to you
Express concern	Judge or blame
Listen and validate	Pressure him or her
Offer help	Give advice
Support his or her decisions	Place conditions on your support
Source: <i>NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence</i>	

Where to turn for help

Help for women:

- **In the US:** Call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](http://www.thehotline.org/) (<http://www.thehotline.org/>) at 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE).
- **In Canada:** Visit [ShelterSafe](http://www.sheltersafe.ca/) (<http://www.sheltersafe.ca/>) to find the helpline of a women's shelter near you.
- **UK:** Call [Women's Aid UK](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/) (<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/>) at 0808 2000 247.
- **Ireland:** Call [Women's Aid](https://www.womensaid.ie/) (<https://www.womensaid.ie/>) at 1800 341 900.
- **Australia:** Call [1800RESPECT](http://www.1800respect.org.au/) (<http://www.1800respect.org.au/>) at 1800 737 732.
- **Worldwide:** visit [International Directory of Domestic Violence Agencies](#)

(<http://www.hotpeachpages.net/>) for a global list of helplines and crisis centers.

Help for men:

- **In the US and Canada:** Call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](http://www.thehotline.org/2014/07/men-can-be-victims-of-abuse-too/) (<http://www.thehotline.org/2014/07/men-can-be-victims-of-abuse-too/>) at 1-800-799-7233.
- **UK:** Call the [ManKind Initiative](http://www.mankind.org.uk/) (<http://www.mankind.org.uk/>) at 01823 334244.
- **Ireland:** Call [AMEN](http://www.amen.ie/) (<http://www.amen.ie/>) at 046 902 3710.
- **Australia:** [One in Three Campaign](http://www.oneinthree.com.au/) (<http://www.oneinthree.com.au/>)

Related articles



(</articles/abuse/getting-out-of-an-abusive-relationship.htm>)

[Getting Out of An Abusive Relationship](/articles/abuse/getting-out-of-an-abusive-relationship.htm): (</articles/abuse/getting-out-of-an-abusive-relationship.htm>) Protecting Yourself Before and After You Leave



(</articles/abuse/help-for-men-who-are-being-abused.htm>)

[Help for Men Who Are Being Abused](/articles/abuse/help-for-men-who-are-being-abused.htm): (</articles/abuse/help-for-men-who-are-being-abused.htm>) Recognizing the Signs and Getting Out Safely



(/articles/abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect.htm)

[Child Abuse and Neglect: \(/articles/abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect.htm \)](#) How to Spot the Signs and Make a Difference

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: October 2017.

HelpGuide.org REPRINT

©Helpguide.org. All rights reserved. The content of this reprint is for informational purposes only and NOT a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

Visit <https://www.helpguide.org/> for the complete article which includes references, related articles and active links.