

Domestic abusers use intimidation to gain control over their victims' lives. Physical violence is the most commonly recognized form of abuse. However, emotional abuse also can be extremely damaging to victims. Domestic abuse knows no racial, social or class boundaries.

What Constitutes Domestic Abuse

In some cases, domestic abuse begins subtly with name-calling or threats. From there it can escalate to physical confrontations, ranging from pushing and slapping, to life-threatening actions, such as choking, stabbing and hitting, that can result in hospitalization or death.

Domestic abuse also can include emotional mistreatment. Rather than causing physical harm, emotional abusers use words and actions to dominate, humiliate, degrade and devastate their victims. Name-calling, telling malicious jokes and demonstrating extreme jealousy are just a few of the ways abusers seek control. This is very different from the occasional careless comment that many of us experience over the course of a relationship. Emotional abuse is a pervasive pattern of repeated put-downs that erode the victim's feelings of self-worth and help the abuser gain power over the victim's thoughts and actions.

Characteristics of the Abuser

Although they come in all shapes and sizes, abusers tend to have similar traits. Women are capable of committing domestic violence, but well over 90 percent of batterers are men.

The abuser sees the victim as an object or a possession, rather than as a person with whom he or she is in an equal relationship. The key characteristic that abusers share is a need to control the spouse or partner. One victim shared this account of her abusive relationship: "When I first met my husband, he made me feel like I was the only person in the world. Over time, I realized that wasn't such a good thing." Abusers seek to dictate every aspect of their partners' lives from how they can act to whom they are allowed to speak.

Drugs and alcohol commonly play a role in the cycle of domestic violence. While these substances may intensify the situation, they are not the cause of the abuse. A person can be abusive even if he or she is not under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Though some abusers were once victims themselves, experiencing domestic violence does not automatically create a perpetrator. However, growing up in a violent home is certainly one risk factor common to many perpetrators.

It is important to remember that whatever the reason, domestic violence is a criminal act with sometimes lethal consequences.

Why Victims Stay

If you know someone who is being abused, you may wonder why that person would remain in a relationship containing so much violence and pain. Though it may be difficult to understand, many battered women have valid reasons for not leaving their abusers. These reasons may seem illogical to you as a friend or family member, so it is necessary to look at the situation from the perspective of the victim. Most victims cite the following as their reasons for staying:

- **Fear:** Most victims do not leave their current situations because they are afraid. The headlines in any newspaper prove that this fear is well founded. In fact, the point at which a woman decides to leave is often the most dangerous time. If the abuser is able to find out where the victim has gone, the victim's risk of being killed is quite real.
- **Lack of resources:** Because domestic abusers try to hold exclusive control over the person they

abuse, it becomes difficult for most victims to imagine leaving when they have little or no money or people to help. With limited access to support and the huge risk of violence associated with leaving, an abused person might choose to remain in the current situation.

- **Children:** If the victim has children, he or she may not leave for the benefit of the kids. If the victim runs away, he or she risks losing custody of the children. The victim may stay in the abusive relationship because the responsibilities and financial costs of being a single parent may be too much to handle alone. He or she may believe or be told by friends or relatives that it is better for the children to live with both parents.
- **Loss of self-worth:** An abused woman may feel her self-worth is tied to being a wife and mother. She may feel that she would rather endure abuse than raise her children without a father. It is not unusual for friends and family to support these notions and advise the victim to stay. Victims often report hearing "You married him for better or worse" or "The children need a father" from well-meaning friends and relatives. Battered woman's syndrome, a disorder caused by prolonged violent abuse, can take away normal abilities to make even simple decisions independently. In extreme cases, this syndrome mimics the reactions observed in prisoners of war and concentration-camp survivors.
- **Promises to change:** Often, the abuser becomes deeply regretful after a violent incident. Tenderness, gifts, apologies and promises to change can follow moments of terror. The victim remembers the person with whom he or she fell in love, and emotions cloud rational thought. It is important to realize, however, that these apologies are part of the continuing cycle of abuse. Sometimes perpetrators threaten to kill themselves if the victims leave. If the abused person still has feelings for the abuser, thoughts of leaving may make the victim feel guilty and confused.

What You Can Do to Help

Whatever the victim's reasons for continuing the relationship, it is important to shift your focus from learning why he or she stays to understanding how you can help. If you suspect that a friend or loved one is being abused, tell him or her about your suspicions, and offer your support. Try not to issue ultimatums like, "You've got to leave him immediately or I can't help you!" It is important to remember that each person's situation is unique. What you consider a solution may put the victim at greater risk.

Most likely, the victim has limited access to resources, assistance and money to effectively escape the abuser. This could be a factor keeping the victim in the relationship. This helplessness stems from the abuser's need to have complete authority over the victim, limiting the victim's contact with the outside world.

Provide the victim with both a sympathetic ear and practical options. An abused person needs someone who will listen to what he or she has to say and help him or her find safe solutions. In some cases, the victim will not open up to someone unless he or she can trust that person unconditionally. Most likely, the victim will want you to keep confidential any information that he or she has divulged. Do not violate that trust unless the circumstances warrant immediate emergency intervention.

Offer to help the victim find out about local resources for battered women and men. You could call shelters to find out about the services they offer, such as counseling, legal assistance and places to stay.

Be sure only to make promises of assistance that you are willing or able to keep. If you, for example, offer your home as a safe place for the victim and then, out of legitimate concern for your own safety, are unable to follow through, you may have left your friend in a tough spot. It would have been more helpful to have concentrated on locating a local shelter for the person.

Remember that, because of the need to control, a perpetrator may monitor phone calls, e-mails or even follow the victim. Be careful that your interactions do not put the victim at greater risk.

While you may have ideas about what your friend should do, it is important for him or her to decide how to handle the situation. Abusers try to strip victims of their ability to make decisions. Encourage self-empowerment by supporting the victim in making his or her own choices. Never confront the abuser with the confidential information your friend has given you in an effort to help the abuser see the light.

If and when your friend is ready to leave, he or she may look to you for guidance. This is a time for you to be concerned with your safety as well as that of your friend. The most violent acts committed by abusers usually take place when the victim attempts to leave. If you are helping a friend escape an abusive relationship, take safety precautions to protect you and your family from becoming victims as well. Your local police department can provide information based on your specific situation.

Your employee-assistance program (EAP) can provide information about what to do if your friend or family member is being abused. You also can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE for information on shelters and other services in your area. In an emergency, call your local police.

Additional Information

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