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Domestic Violence toward Women: Recognize the Patterns and Seek Help

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Your partner apologizes and says the hurtful behavior won't happen again. But you fear it will. At times you may start to doubt your own judgment, or wonder whether you're going crazy. You may even feel like you've imagined the whole thing. But the emotional or physical pain you feel is real. If this sounds familiar, you may be the victim of domestic violence.

Also called domestic abuse, intimate partner violence or battering, domestic violence occurs between people in intimate relationships. It can take many forms, including emotional, sexual and physical abuse. Men are sometimes abused by female or male partners, but domestic violence is most often directed toward women. It can happen in heterosexual or lesbian relationships.

Unfortunately, domestic violence against women is common. It happens to teenage girls and women of all backgrounds. As many as 4 million women suffer abuse from their husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends or intimate partners in the United States each year.

Recognizing Abuse: Know the Signs

It may not be easy to identify abuse, especially at first. While some relationships are clearly abusive from the outset, abuse often starts subtly and gets worse over time. For example, abuse may begin with occasional hurtful comments, jealousy or controlling behavior. As it gets worse, the abuse may become more frequent, severe or violent. As the cycle of abuse worsens, your safety or the safety of your children may be in danger.

You may be a victim of abuse if you're in a relationship with someone who:

- Controls finances, so you have to ask for money
- Looks at you or acts in ways that scare you
- Acts jealous or possessive, or accuses you of being unfaithful
- Tries to control how you spend your time, who you see or talk to, where you go or what you wear
- Wants you to get permission to make everyday decisions

- Gets angry when drinking alcohol or using drugs
- Scares you by driving recklessly
- Threatens to kill him or herself

You are very likely in an abusive relationship if you have a relationship with someone who does even one of the following:

- Hits, kicks, shoves, slaps, or chokes you or threatens you with violence or a weapon
- Forces you to have sexual intercourse or engage in sexual acts against your will
- Calls you names, insults you or puts you down
- Prevents you from going to work or school
- Stops you from seeing family members and friends
- Hurts, or threatens to hurt you, your children or pets
- Destroys your property
- Controls your access to medicines
- Blames you for his or her violent behavior or tells you that you deserve it
- Says that his or her abusive behavior is no big deal or even denies doing it
- Tries to force you to drop charges
- Tries to prevent you from calling the police or seeking medical care

Pregnancy, Children and Abuse

Pregnancy is a particularly perilous time for an abused woman. Not only is your health at risk, but also the health of your unborn child. Abuse can begin or may increase during pregnancy.

Abusive relationships can also be particularly damaging to children, even if they're just witnesses. But for women in an abusive relationship, chances are much higher that their children also will be direct victims of abuse. Over half of men who abuse their female partners also abuse their children.

You may worry that seeking help may further endanger you or your children, or that it may break up your family. But in the long run, seeking help when you safely can is the best way to protect your children — and yourself.

An Abusive Relationship: It's about Power and Control

Though there are no typical victims of domestic violence, abusive relationships do share similar characteristics. In all cases, the abuser aims to exert power and control over his partner.

Although a lot of people think domestic violence is about anger, it really isn't. Batterers do tend to take their anger out on their intimate partner. But it's not really about anger. It's about trying to instill fear and wanting to have power and control in the relationship.

In an abusive relationship, the abuser may use varying tactics to gain power and control, including:

- Emotional abuse. Uses put-downs, insults, criticism or name-calling to make you feel bad about yourself.
- Denial and blame. Denies that the abuse occurs and shifts responsibility for the abusive behavior onto you. This may leave you confused and unsure of yourself.
- Intimidation. Uses certain looks, actions or gestures to instill fear. The abuser may break things, destroy property, abuse pets or display weapons.
- Coercion and threats. Threatens to hurt other family members, pets, children or self.
- Power. Makes all major decisions, defines the roles in your relationship, is in charge of the home and social life, and treats you like a servant or possession.
- Isolation. Limits your contact with family and friends, requires you to get permission to leave the house, doesn't allow you to work or attend school, and controls your activities and social events. The abuser may ask where you've been, track your time and whereabouts, or check the odometer on your car.
- Children as pawns. Accuses you of bad parenting, threatens to take the children away, uses the children to relay messages, or threatens to report you to children's protective services.
- Economic abuse. Controls finances, refuses to share money, makes you account for money spent and doesn't want you to work outside the home. The abuser may also try to sabotage your work performance by forcing you to miss work or by calling you frequently at work.

Breaking the Cycle: Difficult, but Possible with Help

Domestic violence is part of a continuing cycle that's difficult to break. If you're in an abusive situation, you may recognize this pattern:

- Your abuser strikes using words or actions.
- Your abuser may beg for forgiveness, offer gifts or promise to change.
- Your abuser becomes tense, angry or depressed.
- Your abuser repeats the abusive behavior.

Typically each time the abuse occurs, it worsens, and the cycle shortens. As it gets worse, you may have a hard time doing anything about the abuse or even acknowledging it. Over time, an abusive relationship can break you down and unravel your sense of reality

and self-esteem. You may begin to doubt your ability to take care of yourself. You may start to feel like the abuse is your fault, or you may even feel you deserve it.

This can be paralyzing, and you may feel helpless or as though your only option is to stay in the abusive situation. It's important to recognize that you may not be in a position to resolve the situation on your own.

But you can do something — and the sooner you take action the better. You may need outside help, and that's OK. Without help, the abuse will likely continue. Leaving the abusive relationship may be the only way to break the cycle.

A number of government and private agencies provide resources and support to women who are abused and their children. These resources include 24-hour telephone hot lines, shelters, counseling and legal services. Many of these services are free and can provide immediate assistance.

Create a Safety Plan

Leaving an abuser can be dangerous. You're the only one who knows the safest time to leave. You may know you are in an abusive relationship and realize you need to leave as soon as you safely can. Or, you may be concerned about your partner's behavior and think you may need to get out at some point in the future. Either way, being prepared can help you leave quickly if you need to. Consider taking these precautions:

- Arrange a safety signal with a neighbor as an alert to call the police if necessary.
- Prepare an emergency bag that includes items you'll need when you leave, such as extra clothes, important papers, money, extra keys and prescription medications.
- Know exactly where you'll go and how you'll get there, even if you have to leave in the middle of the night.
- Call a local women's shelter or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-7233 to find out about legal options and resources available to you, before you need them.
- If you have school-age children, notify the school authorities or school counselor about custody arrangements and warn them about possible threats.

Keep your Communication Private

It isn't uncommon for an abuser to monitor mail, telephone and Internet communication. Take precautions to help maintain your privacy and safety by following these steps.

Telephone Conversations

- Avoid making long-distance phone calls from home. Your abuser could trace the calls to find out where you're going.
- Be cautious when using a cell phone. Your abuser may be able to intercept conversations using a scanner. Switch to a corded phone if you're relaying sensitive information.
- Be aware of controlling use of your cell phone. Your abuser may use frequent cell phone conversations or text messages as a way to monitor and control your activities. An abuser may also check your cell phone to see who has called, or attempt to check your messages.

Computer Use

If you think your abuser is monitoring your computer use, the safest bet is to access a computer at a friend's house or at the library. If you do use a shared home computer, there are several steps you can take to help maintain your privacy:

- Use a Web-based program for e-mail. Programs such as Outlook Express, Netscape Mail and Eudora store sent and received e-mails on your computer. A Web-based e-mail service is safer. Most of these services — such Gmail, Hotmail and Yahoo mail — offer free e-mail accounts.
- Store files on the Internet. You can store files online and access them from any computer. A few companies that offer this service are IBackup and HyperOffice. You can also store documents as attachments in e-mail programs.
- Change your password often. Choose passwords that would be impossible to guess. The safest passwords contain at least six characters, both numbers and letters. Avoid easily guessed numbers and sequences.
- Clear your Web-browser history. Browsers such as Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator keep a record of the Web pages and documents you have accessed. They also store graphics of images you look at. You can also use a program such as AbsoluteShield Internet Eraser or Speed Tracks Eraser to clear your Internet records.
- Clear your document history. Applications such as Word or Excel keep a record of edited documents. Don't store or edit any documents you don't want your abuser to see on a shared computer.

Where to Find Help

No one deserves to be abused. If you think you may be in an abusive situation, seek help or advice as soon as you safely can. There are many resources available to help you. The first step to getting out of an abusive situation may be as easy as making one phone call. In an emergency situation, call 911, your local emergency number or your local law

enforcement agency. If you aren't in immediate danger, the following resources can help:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-SAFE, or (800) 799-7233. Provides crisis intervention and referrals to in-state or out-of-state resources, such as women's shelters or crisis centers.
- Your doctor or hospital emergency room. Treats any injuries and refers you to safe housing and other local resources.
- Local women's shelter or crisis center. Typically provides 24-hour, emergency shelter for you and your children, advice on legal matters, advocacy and support services, and evaluation and monitoring of abusers. Some shelters have staff members who speak multiple languages.
- Counseling or mental health center. Most communities have agencies that provide individual counseling and support groups to women in abusive relationships. Be wary of advice to seek couples or marriage counseling. This isn't appropriate for resolving problems of violence in intimate relationships.
- Local court. Your district court can help you obtain a court order, which legally mandates the abuser stay away from you or face arrest. These are typically called orders for protection or restraining orders. Advocates are available in many communities to help you complete the paperwork and guide you through the court process.
- Books and online resources. Learning more about how to cope with your situation and communicating with others who understand what you're going through can help you make strong choices.

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