

# What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of coercive tactics that are used to gain and maintain power and control in an ongoing, familiar relationship. Generally, several forms of abuse, such as psychological, emotional, physical, sexual and/or economic, are used in combination. Abusers believe they are entitled to control how their victims think, feel and behave. This control extends to the entire household, and children in the home are harmed by the behavior and parenting tactics of the abuser. Physical and sexual violence may be a component of the abuse but some victims are controlled through intimidation, threats, emotional and psychological abuse and isolation – no physical abuse is necessary. In an abusive relationship, one party fears the other and attempts to comply with the other's wishes to avoid harm.

Anyone can become a victim of domestic violence. Abuse occurs in all racial, ethnic, economic, religious age groups and across the lifespan. Victims are primarily female, although men can also be harmed. Abusers who use power and control to get gain and maintain power and control include spouses, partners, adult children or other family members and some caregivers. Intimate partners may be of the same sex or opposite sex.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. Why do victims stay with an abuser or return after they have left?

There are numerous reasons why victims maintain contact with abusers or feel they cannot leave an abusive relationship. Victims of abuse often love or care about the people who harm them. Keeping the family together may be very important to the victim for many reasons, including for the sake of children or religious and cultural beliefs. Some victims fear that they will be seriously hurt or killed if they leave their abusers. Others do not have the financial resources and/or housing they need to leave. Medical conditions and disabilities may make living on their own difficult or impossible or the abusive individual may need the victims care.

### 2. Everyone fights sometimes. How can I tell a fight from abuse?

Disagreements occur in most relationships. Sometimes those arguments are loud and people say things that hurt each other's feelings. However, in most relationships, adults say they are sorry and make up. No one gets physically hurt. When there is abuse, one person uses power and control to get what they want out of the relationship. There may or may not be physical abuse in the relationship, but the threat of harm is present. The person with the power uses many tactics to maintain their control in the relationship, including emotional and psychological abuse, threats of physical violence or abandonment, isolating the individual from family and friends, limiting the victim's use of phone, breaking assistive devices and denying health care. Individuals who use power and control tactics in a relationship can be very persuasive, often trying to convince family, friends and professionals that they are only trying to help. Abusive individuals rarely take any responsibility for their inappropriate behavior.

## ***Why Does Abuse Occur?***

### **3. Does anger cause abuse?**

Anger is a normal and healthy emotion and does not cause abuse. Even though abusers can be angry at times, abuse happens when an individual chooses manipulative, threatening or physically violent behavior to gain power and control over another individual. Abusive tactics may occur without any anger evident in the abuser.

### **4. Does mental illness cause abuse?**

Some mental illnesses may have challenging or violent behaviors as one of their symptoms. Contact a mental health expert or doctor to find out more information about specific mental illnesses and combinations of medications to learn if violent behavior is likely or possible. Keep in mind that some abusers have used mental illness as an excuse to continue with their abusive behavior.

### **5. Is abuse caused by stress?**

While stress is a commonly used rationale for abuse, stress does not cause abuse. Everyone experiences stress. Most stressed people do not hurt others. Most abusers under stress do not hit their bosses or law enforcement officers. They choose victims (such as family members) who have less power.

At times providing care for an ill or frail elderly person can be stressful. Some abusers suggest that their negative behavior is due to caregiver stress because they are overwhelmed by the demands of providing care. Research does not support caregiver stress as a primary cause of elder abuse but rather an excuse used by abusers so they can continue their behavior without consequences such as intervention by social services or law enforcement.

### **6. Is abuse caused by a medical condition or combination of medications?**

Some medical conditions or combinations of medications may cause a normally gentle person to become violent. Contact a doctor or health care provider to determine if the person has a medical condition and if aggressive behavior is related to the condition. Keep in mind that abusers may use a medical condition as an excuse for their behavior, so a medical opinion is important.

### **7. Does elder abuse occur because a victim of child abuse grows up and then abusers his/her parent(s)?**

Abusive parents can unknowingly teach children that abuse is an effective way to control another individual. Abusive behavior is a choice. Individuals who grew up with abuse can choose to behave abusively or they can choose to stop the pattern of violence that may be all too familiar for them. Many adults who were victims of child abuse or witnessed domestic violence

growing up, have healthy, happy adult relationships and do not hurt their children, spouse/partners or parents.

Some individuals who are abused as children experience emotional problems and/or mental illness as adults. This may require specific treatment to deal with the effects of their victimization; however, this is not an excuse for someone to continue abusive behavior.

#### **8. Does drug and/or alcohol abuse cause the violence and abuse?**

Many people use drugs and/or alcohol and are never abusive. Drugs and alcohol do not cause abuse or violence, however, the violence may intensify when using drugs or alcohol. Sometimes abusers will use drugs and/or alcohol as an excuse for their behavior. Abusers who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol have two separate problems - abusive behavior and substance abuse. Drug and alcohol treatment programs are designed to help an individual stay sober, not to eliminate the abusive behavior.

#### ***Options: What Can I Do?***

#### **9. What should I do if I see or hear abuse/violence?**

If you see someone being physically hurt or threatened with a weapon, call a law enforcement emergency line such as 911.

Talk to them. Tell them you are concerned for their safety and that you are there to help. Let them know that domestic violence and elder abuse do not stop without some sort of outside intervention.

Offer to accompany them to speak with an advocate at a domestic violence program or a social worker at an elder abuse agency.

Be part of their "safety plan". A safety plan is created by the victim with the help of a professional. The intent is to plan for a victim's safety needs before another violent episode erupts. If you believe they are in immediate danger, call 911.

#### **10. Should I talk to the abuser?**

Be careful. The abuser may feel like he or she is losing control and therefore try to harm the victim. Consider your own safety as well. Ask the victim what could happen if you talk to the abuser.

#### **11. Should I talk to the victim's friends or family?**

Be careful. Well-intended family members may tell the abuser that the victim has told you about the abuse. Others may confront the abuser. Either way, the victim could be at greater risk of harm. Ask the victim what could happen if you talk to family members or friends.

## 12. What can I do if I think I might be a victim of abuse?

Keep in mind that you are not alone. Many other individuals are harmed by spouses, partners, family or caregivers; many experience sexual assault and/or abuse by someone they know or a stranger.

Help is available. Talk with someone you trust and/or an advocate at a domestic abuse or sexual abuse program. You can usually call your local domestic/sexual abuse hotline and talk with someone without having to give your name or location. Talk to them about what is going on in your relationship and they will help you identify abusive behaviors that may be present. For the nearest domestic abuse hotline in your area, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-SAFE or 1-800-799-7233; for the nearest sexual assault hotline in your area, call the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) at 800-656-HOPE or 800-656-4673.

You can also ask for support and information from other professionals such as law enforcement, health care providers or faith community members. Be aware, that certain professionals may be mandatory reporters, meaning they would have to report to an investigative/enforcement agency any kind of physical or sexual abuse that you might share.

### *Counseling: Is it Helpful?*

## 13. Is counseling helpful for victims?

Most victims of abuse are not mentally ill. However, some victims experience depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other mental health issues because of the abuse. In addition, persons with mental illness are often targeted as easy victims who will not be believed. Many victims find counseling, peer support, and support groups helpful. Many domestic abuse or rape crisis centers have support groups and counseling available for victims at no charge. These programs can also provide referral information for mental health counselors who are skilled in working with victims of abuse.

## 14. Is counseling helpful for abusers?

Abusers are responsible for their own actions. Educational programs done in a group setting have been shown to be the most effective way to help abusers change their behavior. The most effective programs usually have at least a 26-week program, and many of the participants are court mandated into the program. Please note, one on one counseling and/or counseling the victim and abuser together is not recommended and has proven to be harmful to victims. For information about educational programs for abusers, contact your local domestic violence program.

