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Domestic abuse

In any relationship, there are ups and downs – people say and do things to each other that are hurtful. However, there's a difference between a normal argument and abusive behaviour: this is domestic violence or abuse.

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What is domestic abuse?

Women's Aid defines domestic abuse as:

'Physical, sexual, psychological or financial violence that takes place within an intimate or family-type relationship and that forms a pattern of controlling behaviour. This can include forced marriage and so-called "honour crimes". Domestic violence may include a range of abusive behaviours, not all of which are always 'violent'.'

The Government defines domestic violence as:

'Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality.'

Types of abuse

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour that includes emotional, physical, sexual and financial abuse. It's about using power and control over another person. Domestic violence generally doesn't happen just once: over time it happens more often and becomes more serious.

Domestic violence often includes emotional, financial and sexual abuse. Many of these behaviours are crimes. Abuse is not an accident – it is behaviour that is designed to control and intimidate the other person. The impact on the abused person can be devastating – physical injury, psychological injury, depression, living in constant fear, self-harming.

- Physical abuse – e.g. hitting, punching, burning, strangling, slapping, biting, pinching, kicking, pulling hair out, pushing, shoving.
- Sexual abuse – e.g. using force, threats or intimidation to make a person perform sexual acts; any degrading treatment based on a person's sexual orientation.

- Emotional abuse – e.g. constant criticism, insults, undermining capabilities.
- Isolation – e.g. preventing someone from having or developing family, social or professional relationships; preventing from working; monitoring or blocking their telephone calls.
- Financial abuse – e.g. withholding money; making a person account for every penny they spend; taking their money without asking.
- Threats – e.g. making angry gestures; using physical size to intimidate; shouting someone down; destroying their possessions; breaking things; punching walls; wielding a knife or a gun; threatening to kill or harm their partner and the children.

Domestic abuse is often a combination of several, if not all, of the above.

Is there a reason for violence, like drinking or drugs?

There's never any excuse for violence or abuse.

- All types of abuse are wrong and the victim is never to blame.
- Children and young people are also never to blame for domestic violence that happens between adults. It is not their fault – even if the argument is about them!
- Domestic violence is about power and control. The abuser feels powerful and strong by hurting the other person and making their victim feel frightened or intimidated.
- Violence is a choice.
- Domestic violence is not caused by drink or drug use. Drinking and drugs can make the abuse worse, but they do not cause the abuse to happen.
- Abusers might say that they are feeling stressed because of money issues or because they don't have a job. Lots of abusers will say they only behave like this because their partner asks for it or deserves it because of something they've done.

Domestic abuse

Who does it happen to?

Domestic violence and abuse happens between two people in a family or between two people who are in an intimate relationship with each other. It can happen to anyone regardless of ethnicity, income or age.

Domestic violence appears within young people's relationships, within gay and lesbian relationships, to disabled people and between family members. More often than not men are the abusers and women are the victims, but domestic violence can also happen to men.

When you look at the roles of men and women in history it can help you to understand why it happens more to women. Historically, women had very few legal rights: they couldn't own property or divorce their husbands; they could only work in certain jobs and were paid much less than men. In many societies, it's been the role of women to mind the home, cook, clean and care for the children and for their husband. Traditionally, it's been the man's role to work and earn the money for the family. Men made the rules and women and children had to follow them. A man had the right to beat his wife and children if he felt they deserved it.



In the UK, a lot has changed since then – things are much better now! In the last century women fought hard to win more rights, such as the right to vote, the right to study and to work. Women now have careers and men and women share the responsibilities of taking care of the home and children.

Men and women should be treated as equals, but this is still not always the case. Many societies and cultures still believe that men are stronger and more powerful than women and this makes some people think that violence between men and women is OK – but it's not! Men and women are still working hard today to change this way of thinking and to stop domestic violence from happening.

Domestic violence can happen to anyone – it doesn't matter what race, ethnicity or religion they are, or how much money they have. It happens to people all over the world.

I've heard it happens more to women – is that true?

- One in four women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime.
- Domestic abuse currently claims the lives of around two women per week.
- It accounts for 15% of all violent incidents.
- 89% of those suffering four or more incidents are women.
- There is an incident of domestic abuse reported to the police every minute.
- We estimate that around 18,170 women and 19,100 children stayed in refuge accommodation during the year 2010/2011.

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Mini glossary

Ethnicity – a group of people whose members share a common culture, language or religious background

Intimidation – scaring someone to get them to do what you want (control through fear)

Types of domestic abuse

There are different types of domestic abuse. Many abusers behave in ways that include more than one type of domestic violence.

Emotional or psychological abuse

Emotional or psychological abuse can be verbal or non-verbal. It lowers the confidence of victims to make them less independent and easier to control.

Emotional abuse includes verbal abuse such as yelling, name-calling, blaming and shaming, isolation, intimidation, threats of violence and controlling behaviour.

Many abused women feel that mental domestic abuse has a bigger effect on their lives – even where there has been life-threatening or disabling physical violence.

Physical abuse

There are a broad range of behaviours that come under the heading of physical abuse, including actions such as punching, slapping, hitting, biting, pinching, kicking, pulling hair out, pushing, shoving, burning and strangling.

“ *It is important to recognise that men experience domestic abuse as victims too.* ”

Sexual abuse

Rape and sexual abuse are common in abusive relationships because a woman's right to consent is likely to be ignored. Evidence suggests that 45% of all rape is committed by current partners. Any situation in which an individual is forced to participate in unwanted, unsafe or degrading sexual activity is sexual abuse.

Economic or financial abuse

Economic or financial abuse limits a victim's ability to access help. Tactics may include controlling the finances; withholding money or credit cards; making someone unreasonably account for money spent/petrol used; exploiting assets; withholding basic necessities; preventing someone from working; deliberately running up debts; forcing someone to work against their will and sabotaging someone's job.

Honour-based violence

'Honour'-based violence (HBV) is a form of domestic abuse that is committed in the name of so-called 'honour'. The honour code is set by male relatives and women who do not follow these 'rules' are then punished for bringing shame on the family. This may include a woman having a boyfriend; rejecting a forced marriage; pregnancy outside of marriage; interfaith relationships; seeking divorce; inappropriate dress or make-up, and even kissing in a public place.

Males can also be victims because they are gay, have a disability or they have assisted a victim.

This crime is not only enforced by men; sometimes female relatives support it too.

Forced marriage

A forced marriage is performed without the full consent or free will of both parties. Victims of forced marriage may be the subject of physical violence, rape, abduction, false imprisonment, enslavement, emotional abuse and murder. It is important not to confuse forced marriage with arranged marriage; in an arranged marriage both parties freely consent.