



# **Safety Planning Workbook: Domestic Violence Education**

Women In Transition

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I am a woman.

I am a daughter.

I am a mother.

I am a sister.

I am a woman of color.

I am a lesbian.

I am married.

I am disabled.

I am an immigrant.

I am single.

I am a senior.

**I am a survivor.**

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# Defining Domestic Violence

Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, wife-beating, spousal abuse, and woman abuse are all terms to describe acts of violence committed against women--violent actions that if committed against a non-intimate would be considered severe crimes.

Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence, is about power, control, and dominance. It is a pattern of coercive behaviors used by one person to control the thoughts, beliefs and/or conduct of an intimate partner or to punish her for refusing to be controlled. Once the abusive and violent behavior has breached the loving bonds of a relationship, it will likely increase and intensify over time—often resulting in frequent and severe injuries, child abuse, stalking, rape, murder and/or suicide.

Abusive, violent behavior is a matter of personal will or self-control, and it is a means to elevate the abusive partner's sense of personal power over the intimate partner without regard for the consequences. At the core of this control is the abusive partner's goal to be the decision maker, the one who knows best, the one with the power. The abused partner is left with limited freedom to make decisions about her life.

The variations and combinations of abusive behavior are vast and unique to each individual relationship – in terms of each person's personal history. These behaviors may range from use of threats, coercion, sexual humiliation, force, injury to children or pets, and economic exploitation, to limits on the partner's independence, and/or devaluing the abused partner's thoughts, feelings, opinions and dreams – her very being.

# Primary Types of Domestic Violence

Acts of domestic violence generally fall into one or more of four categories:

**Verbal and emotional abuse:** Verbal and emotional abuse are constants in almost any abusive relationship, and can include name calling, threats, harassment, excessive possessiveness, isolating the survivor from friends and family, deprivation of physical resources, destruction of personal property and pets, use of children as a means of control, stalking, and/or using violence in the survivor's presence for intimidation (i.e. punching a fist through a wall).

**Physical abuse:** Physical attacks or aggressive behavior can range from bruising to murder, often beginning with acts that are excused as trivial (restraining, pushing, slapping and/or pinching) that escalate into more frequent and serious attacks (punching, kicking, biting, sexual assault, tripping, throwing) and further escalate to life-threatening behaviors (choking, breaking bones, using weapons) resulting in fatal injury to the woman and her children.

**Sexual abuse:** Attacks are often accompanied by, or culminate in, sexual violence wherein the woman is forced to have sexual intercourse with her abusive partner, take part in unwanted sexual activity, or experience sexual humiliation.

**Economic abuse:** In order to maintain control, an abusive partner may leverage economic factors to coerce a woman into believing she is dependent. Economic abuse is a pattern of behaviors or actions that prevent a woman from accessing financial resources, maintaining control of earnings, achieving self-sufficiency and maintaining financial independence. Some examples include withholding money, interfering with education or employment, stealing, sabotaging credit ratings, implementing a strict allowance system and excessively monitoring spending.

# High Risk Factors of Exposure to Domestic Violence

Domestic violence happens across all populations despite race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, economic status, educational achievements, political beliefs, or religious beliefs. In most cases, the person who causes the harm is a man, and the person who is hurt is a woman, but it also exists amongst same sex couples and between partners of any gender identification.

There is **not** a 'typical woman' who will be abused. **The biggest risk factor is being born female**; according to the National Center Against Domestic Violence 1 in 3 women will be physically assaulted by a partner in her lifetime, and 1 in 7 have been stalked by a current or former partner ("Get the Facts and Figures", 2015). However, some women have a special level of dependence on their partners, and/or various forms of societal oppression that can all contribute to her level of vulnerability to being isolated and having lack of access to resources.

This section is designed to talk about potential factors that may make a woman more vulnerable to domestic violence, or things that could increase the level of **lethality** (the capacity to cause death or serious harm or damage) in the event she is experiencing abuse.

- **Abuse in Childhood:** Experiencing or witnessing abuse in childhood without supportive psychological intervention may leave a woman more vulnerable to experiencing domestic violence when she's older. Girls who are sexually and/or otherwise physically abused are six times more likely to experience abuse as an adult ("Intimate Partner Violence and Lifetime Trauma", 2011).
- **Fragile Support Network:** Having a fragile support network can make a woman more vulnerable to becoming isolated and more easily controlled by a partner (and as we know, domestic violence is about power and control). For instance, growing up in foster care may lead to a lack of a support network in adulthood, creating greater risk for isolation.
- **Women with Disabilities or Mental Illness:** Women who have a disability or suffer from mental illness may be particularly vulnerable because they may depend on a partner in ways that other

women do not. This can create a special opportunity for manipulation by an abuser—an abuser may withhold medications, or refuse to take the survivor to her necessary appointments. For women who struggle with mental illness, there’s an opportunity for abusive partners to convince law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and sometimes even the survivors themselves that the abuse is not real and is just “made up” as one symptom within the mental illness. Additionally, when abusers manipulate the situation and present their partner as being “crazy”, it could lead to their partner getting committed to a mental institution against their will. This could be used as a threatened kind of “punishment” for a survivor not going along with something the abuser wants, or just another means for an abuser to assert their control (“Intimate Partner Violence and Lifetime Trauma”, 2011).

- **Age:** Older women are uniquely vulnerable to domestic violence. Some reasons for this include special pressure to adhere to traditional and cultural ideology preventing them from leaving an abusive partner, greater potential of isolation, and greater dependence on their spouse as a caretaker both financially and maybe physically. This may leave them reluctant or unable to report the abuse.

At the other end of the spectrum are young women (age 18-24), who are the most vulnerable to exposure to intimate partner violence (“Demographics and Domestic Violence”, 2015). Being at a distinct disadvantage from lack of relationship experience to see potential red flags, they sometimes struggle to know what resources exist for help, or even knowing what abuse in a relationship actually looks like.

- **Cultural or Religious Beliefs:** In some cultures and religions, talking about any relationship or marital problems may be frowned upon. The abuse may be minimized, or thought of as something women just “deal with”. There may be pressure to stay in an abusive marriage because divorce isn’t accepted by the community.
- **Gender Identity Minority Groups:** For members of the trans\* community, abusers may undermine their partner’s ‘gender identity saying things like “You’re not a real woman”. This is a serious form

of psychological abuse and can make people who are trans\* feel further marginalized and misunderstood.

Additionally, some trans women may actually feel their gender identity is validated by experiencing domestic violence—as women are most frequently the targets of domestic violence, it can feel like part of being a woman (Ing and Woods, 2013).

### **Intersectionality: Sexism and Other Forms of Oppression**

Everyone is affected by violence, but here at WIT, we recognize that women face unique challenges due to sexism, and can unite to support each other. We also acknowledge that those challenges are different for women of different social identities (race, class, ability, etc.). By using Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of **intersectionality** (the intersection of different parts of social identity and oppression), we can respect the overlap of multiple kinds of oppression and how other parts of **social identity** (a person's idea of themselves based on groups they belong to—for example being a woman, or person of color) may affect a woman's experience of domestic violence (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw says “the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class.” For Women of Color, race and gender interact to create an experience that is different for them than it is for white women or for Men of Color. These two kinds of oppression intersect to form a **third unique experience**.

Other aspects of a woman's social identity, in addition to race and gender, also impact her experience of violence, the options that are available to her, the response to her situation from institutions like the police and the court system, and her personal resources. Is she an undocumented immigrant? Can she speak English? Does she come from the poverty class? Did she grow up in the foster care system? Is she disabled? Is she a lesbian or bisexual? What is her religious identity? Is she gender nonconforming? Is she elderly or very young? All of these aspects of social identity add additional dimensions to the oppression she experiences.



**During dangerous and stressful times a woman may become more intensely aware of the various forms of societal oppression that also work against her. Some examples of societal oppression that may relate to domestic violence include:**

- **Race and Socioeconomic Status:** Women of color at highest risk of high lethality intimate partner violence (“Women of Color Facts and Stats”, 2006). This means they are at the highest risk of being killed or suffering serious harm or damage from their partner. They may be less likely to report, or seek help because they are less comfortable contacting or trusting the police or the criminal justice system. It may be against their culture to talk about the abuse to others, or their culture may align them with religious doctrine that discourages divorce. They may be living in the country as undocumented immigrants, who could be at risk of deportation if their abuser chooses to follow through with threats of reporting them. Continuing to be affected by institutionalized discrimination and the cycle of poverty, they are more likely to be living in low-income communities, where they may be exposed to more community violence in addition to violence in the home, and may just feel that violence is just a way of life.

Class oppression is also a contributing factor for vulnerability to domestic violence. Women living at or below the poverty line are the most dependent on the system for support, a system that is frequently overwhelmed and cannot provide adequate resources (“Intimate Partner Violence and Lifetime Trauma”, 2011). They may be less likely to have support networks who can afford to help them financially during a crisis, or have the space to assist them with a temporary place to stay.

It should also be noted that many women have been forced into poverty after losing their job due to domestic violence, and/or are kept in poverty by a partner who is taking advantage of them financially (such as not permitting the survivor to work, taking all her money, or refusing to give her any money even for basic necessities).

- **Same Sex Couples and Gender Identity Minority Groups:** Women in same sex relationships or whose partner, or themselves belong to a gender identity minority also face special concerns due to oppression. They may not be out to friends, family, or other members in their community, possibly due to concerns for their physical safety because of violence against homosexual and bisexual relationships, and people who are trans\*. Fear of being outed creates a very vulnerable dynamic which

abusive partners commonly exploit by using threats of exposing their partner's sexuality or gender identity to the world. Outing of these identities can have serious aftermath: people are at risk of losing their job, their housing, or their spiritual communities to name only a few.

Additionally, survivors in same sex couples may have difficulty getting the police or the criminal justice system to believe that they are being abused, because of the stereotype that women cannot be abusers. Beyond this, even if the criminal justice system recognizes that there is abuse, it can be hard to establish that they are the victim because of assumptions about gender presentation. For instance, the partner who dresses in a way that is more masculine may automatically be assumed to be the perpetrator (Greenberg, K. 2012).

**At Women In Transition, we acknowledge that although all women experience sexism and can unite to fight to end sexism, it is important also to acknowledge that we come from different places and different walks of life and experience sexism as it intersects with the other parts of our identities. We can identify the various parts of sexism in action (intimate partner violence, rape, economic inequality, reproductive injustice, gender, etc.) while respecting each other's differing experiences with each one. Every individual woman's obstacles in life are a bit different from the next woman's, but we can help each other by really listening to each other and providing each other with the kind of support that each individual needs.**

# Understanding Why Abuse Happens

As part of a national survivor's advocacy network, we believe that those who are abusive use their behavior to achieve and maintain power over their partners in order to get their own needs and desires met quickly and completely. Abusive people hurt their partners because violence is an effective method to gain power. WIT therefore rejects theories that attribute the causes of violence to family dysfunction, inadequate communication skills, women's provocation, stress, chemical dependency, lack of spiritual relationships to a deity, economic hardship, class practices, racial/ethnic intolerance, mental illness, or other factors. These issues may be associated with abuse of women but do not cause it. Removing these factors will not end violence against women.

Abusive people, like those they abuse, come from a wide spectrum of life experiences, backgrounds and relationships. As with abused women, there is no specific psychological "profile" of an abuser. Generally, such individuals are not violent in any other area of their lives outside the home.

Our priority must therefore be to understand why abuse and violence is directed at women and children, not why each individual person abuses. While abusive people have varied personalities and many issues which influence their behavior and contribute to abuse or heighten the likelihood of its occurrence, they do not explain the most consistent target: women. Four out of five survivors of domestic violence are women ("Get the Facts and Figures"). We must work to discover what social conditions produce this target generation after generation and change those conditions in order to end violence against women and children.

# Domestic Violence and the Community

**Big Picture:** Domestic violence is not only abuse that happens in relationships, but in the big picture is a form of violence against women. It is a world-wide problem: across the globe, this serious abuse of human rights is **the most common form of violence against women** (“Community Costs of Domestic Violence”, 2011). The tolerance of domestic violence continues to hold women back, sending the message that their independence and general well-being are not as important. It keeps them from having the basic human rights to safety and respect. Globally, nationally, locally, as long as this violence still exists and is consistently mainly targeted at women, gender equality cannot truly exist.

**Generational Cycles:** Research shows that domestic violence is often passed down through family generations. While having experienced abuse in childhood does not necessarily mean carrying the pattern into adulthood, we know that children who were abused or have witnessed abuse are more likely to abuse or become abused in their adult relationships. Children tend to model the behavior of whichever parent they identified with growing up—most often this means girls growing up more likely to be abused and boys more likely to become abusers according to the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health (“Intimate Partner Violence and Lifetime Trauma”, 2011).

**Local Impact: Secondary Trauma and Community Violence:** In communities where domestic violence is less hidden, witnessing the violence goes beyond just affecting immediate family members and begins to affect neighbors and different community members. When community members see a woman (maybe a neighbor) brutally beaten in her home and the abuser removed with force by law enforcement, witnessing that kind of experience is traumatic. The community feels the vibrations and shares a small part of that pain. Also, hearing lots of stories from loved ones who have experienced trauma can result in what’s called **secondary trauma** (experiencing trauma response symptoms from secondhand exposure to other people’s traumatic experiences). Even beyond this, violence tolerated as a way to solve problems at home has the potential to transfer to community relationships as a whole.

**Societal Costs:** Domestic violence contributes a lot to the cost of our medical care system. The most recent number in the United States (from 2003—over ten years ago), as updated by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, stated that the overall cost of domestic violence on the community was over \$8.3 billion. This is a number we can feel confident has increased by now. This number is a combination of cost of services that are medical and mental health (the increase of which can continue on for 15 years even once abuse has ended), but also takes into account the overall loss of productivity due to time taken off and job loss as a result of domestic violence, and the costs in relation to the criminal justice system (“Intimate Partner Violence: Consequences”, 2017).

- Women experiencing severe violence were collectively found to have lost the equivalent of 8 million days of paid work (“Intimate Partner Violence”, 2017)
- Cost of healthcare treatment for survivors of domestic violence in the US is over \$4 billion (“Intimate Partner Violence”, 2017)

Domestic violence affects all of us by putting greater strain on the medical care system, criminal justice system, and economy due to days of work lost.

### **How Can You Help?**

After recognizing what a strong global and communal impact domestic violence has, maybe you’ve decided you’d like to get involved in making a difference! For more information on how to help someone you know in a domestic violence situation, please see the last section of this packet, How to Help Someone. Other ideas include:

- Volunteering! Get involved in supporting local agencies who provide direct domestic violence services, many of whom can use help with play care services for clients, administrative tasks, or assistance at community education events (spreading the word about domestic violence)
- Advocacy: Get involved on a larger level working to affect the institutions and policies that trickle down to affect survivors of domestic violence.
- Help create connections in the community between domestic violence agencies and other agencies/populations that could benefit from being educated on domestic violence (networking—if you know of a community that could benefit from training on domestic violence connect them with WIT!).
- Make donations to domestic violence agencies such as money or new/gently used items.

# Controlling Behavior Techniques and Characteristics

**Abuse While Dating:** Emotional, verbal or physical abuse while dating is an indicator of later abuse. The evidence is overwhelming that after one violent incident, there is a tendency for this behavior to increase in frequency and severity.

**Abuse of a Pregnant Partner:** Sometimes there is more violence when the partner is pregnant or soon after she gives birth. A recurring theme is: “If you would have my baby, or have one more baby, then things would be better.” Yet abuse during pregnancy has also been called the “poor man’s abortion”.

**Alcoholism and Drug Addiction:** Drinking and/or drug use is an excuse for the violent behavior, not the cause. However, this behavior often worsens when the abusive partner is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Research has demonstrated that between 40 to 60 percent of the incidents of domestic violence involve substance abuse (Soper, R., 2014).

**Mental Illness:** The belief that mental illness is a cause of domestic violence is a common misconception. Abusive partners may blame their actions on an inability to control themselves due to their mental illness, but mental illness and domestic violence are two separate issues. Experts who work with abusive partners point out that an inability to control reactions because of mental illness typically extends to all areas of an individual’s life, while in domestic violence relationships abusers only act abusively with their partner. This indicates that their behaviors are in fact in their control, and choices they are making (“Abuse and Mental Illness: Is There a Connection?”, 2015).

**Various Emotions Expressed as Anger:** Abusive people may struggle with healthy ways in which they can express various emotions or thoughts. Instead of communicating openly and honestly about frustrations, abusive people may tend to become angry. Handling stress, sadness, confusion as well as worry can all be expressed as anger. Many abusive people misdirect their anger towards their intimate partner. Circumstances such as this are an indication of a potentially pervasive problem. People who display uncontrollable anger involving typical everyday issues (conflict with a co-worker, a flat tire, traffic jam, missing the bus, empty carton of orange juice left in the refrigerator, noisy children, etc.) may have increased difficulty

managing their emotions with an intimate relationship. However, many abusive people do not display uncontrollable anger (some can be very even-tempered), and many are very charming and patient with *everyone except their partner*.

**Not Accepting Accountability:** Abusive people blame circumstances for their use of violence: “If only I had a job, I wouldn’t be so upset.” “I was drunk, that’s why I hit you.” “If you were a better partner, I wouldn’t have to hit you.” “If you showed me more respect, I wouldn’t have to talk to you this way.” Such individuals are masters at blaming outside events for their own behavior, and not accepting any accountability for their actions. A life-long pattern of avoiding consequences for abusive behavior limits the sense of personal responsibility for destructive behavior as well as any motivation for change. The abused partner becomes the metaphorical punching bag. In one sense, if abusive people can project their faults onto their partner, then they don’t have to deal with themselves, and are then able to continue on in their blameless state.

**Child Abuse:** Along with abusing their partners, the abusive person often commits child abuse. Frequently we hear women say “I could put up with him beating me, but when he hit the baby, I left that day.” While she will tolerate the behavior toward herself, she can’t stand to see it happen to her children.

**Close-mindedness:** There is only one way: the way of the abuser. They may claim to listen to their partner’s opinions and needs, but when the decision is to be made, it is their decision.

**Cruelty to Animals:** This is a red flag—cruelty to animals is a strong indicator of potential violent behavior towards people. An adult who mistreats or savagely beats pets should be considered a potential danger.

**Extreme Jealousy:** Abusive people may accuse their partners of having other sexual relationships. Slight evidence is sufficient to fire their imaginations. A van parked across the street was proof enough for one survivor. Another accused his wife of fellatio with another whenever she suffered flu symptoms. Such intense, irrational jealousy may arise from the abusive partner’s own insecurities and projections, as they may be having outside sexual liaisons themselves, or may be used to another means to psychologically torture their partner—though they do not genuinely believe the accusations they make, if she is afraid to spend time with others for fear of being accused, she is further isolated.

**Extreme Possessiveness:** Abusive people may go to extreme lengths to isolate and control their partners. One woman was not permitted to go into her backyard because her husband called every hour or two, and if she did not answer on the first ring she might have been beaten. Although abusive people may tend to be loners, a double standard applies as they enjoy the company of their own family and friends, but prohibit their partner from exercising the same pleasure.

**“Jekyll and Hyde” Personality:** Between episodes of violence, the abuser can have drastic personality changes; they can be pleasant and charming, and to outsiders have a very charismatic personality. This is the personality with which the survivor fell in love originally and continues to love. Periodically, sometimes in cycles, her partner seems to change into a different, abusive person. Sometimes abusive partners display their “Dr. Jekyll” side to the public, while the “Mr. Hyde” only emerges at home. This is especially difficult because others do not believe the survivor when she speaks of her partner’s abusive behavior.

**Low Self-Esteem:** Abusive people generally feel powerless and ineffective in the world, and have a poor self-image. Abusive people often attack their partners when they feel their sense of entitlement has been threatened. This, however, should never serve as an excuse for violence.

**Minimizing the Violence:** Abusers frequently minimize and deny the use of violence to others and to themselves. “I didn’t hit her” or “I just pushed her a little” are some common denials. Sometimes awareness of their own behavior is so totally repressed that they will notice the injury they gave their partner the previous evening, and ask, “What happened to you?” One of the most crucial aspects of treatment for abusive people is to help them get in touch with their violence – when they acknowledge the truth of their past behavior; they may encounter within themselves a backlog of guilt and revulsion for themselves.

**Money Miser:** Another way for an abusive person to control his partner is to keep a tight control over their finances. A survivor may have to request every penny she gets, and it is more difficult for her to leave if she has no finances.



**Objectification:** Many abusers see their partners as property, or sex objects. Abusive men don't see women as people, or respect women as a group. They see women as "less than" and strictly subscribe to traditional gender roles.

**Remorse:** The abusive individual often wants another chance: "I'll change, I won't do it again". This is frequently a very predictable part of the cycle of violence—most abusers never put these words into action.

**Unpredictable Behavior:** Abused women frequently cannot predict what will bring on a violent incident. One day her partner is tolerant of anything, and the next day her partner puts her in the hospital after an argument over something insignificant.

**Verbal Abuse:** Abusive people use an enormous amount of verbal abuse which often comes right before and/or accompanies physical abuse. Derogatory and demeaning labels are piled on the survivor. Mind games are extremely common. Some verbal abuse is less obvious to the survivor, as it can be so subtle and hard to identify the intention behind the words. A survivor often grows to accept the judgment of their abusive partners – that she is a bad housekeeper and mother, that she is completely undesirable. Her self-esteem slips ever lower.

**Violent Family of Origin:** Children raised in a household where domestic violence occurs are often affected by witnessing the interactions. Typically, children follow the pattern of the parent they most identify with (Callahan, 2014). Where many boys identify with the aggressive partner (often the man in the household), many girls identify with the survivor (often the woman in the household). Sometimes, the children grow up unconsciously repeating the same behaviors and beliefs of the parent with whom they identify. However, each person remains responsible for their actions. **Being raised in a violent home does not justify violence in future relationships or excuse abusive behaviors.** Being raised in a violent home also does not guarantee that a child will grow up to be abused or to abuse others. Understanding the impact of family violence helps us to gain insight into an adult's behavior.

# After Effects of Trauma

It's important to understand that while there can be overlap among traumatic experiences, trauma is also extremely individual and won't affect each person the same way. There is no "normal response to a traumatic event—each person brings their own differences and experiences that may cause the symptoms to show up in different ways. For instance, physical violence may have different effects depending on the age of the survivor at the time. That being said, long-term exposure to violence can produce many kinds of both physical and mental health problems, only *some* of which we will mention here.

- **Common Physical Symptoms:**

- Headaches/migraines
- Changes in eating/sleeping
- Hypertension
- Arthritis
- Muscle tension
- Heart disease
- Memory problems
- Digestive issues
- Chronic Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Sexual dysfunction
- Differences in menstrual cycle

(Black, M.C., 2011), ("Effects of Domestic Violence")

- **Common Psychological Symptoms:**

- Dissociation (feeling "checked out")
- Flashbacks ("reliving" the trauma)
- Lowered self-esteem
- Paranoia
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Difficulty managing emotions
- Depression
- Thoughts of suicide
- Anxiety
- Self-harm behaviors
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

(Black, M.C., 2011), ("Effects of Domestic Violence")

- **Common Emotional, Social, Spiritual Symptoms:**

- Feelings of shame
- Loss of social connection
- Feeling hopeless
- Avoidance of new relationships
- Difficulty trusting others
- Questioning spiritual faith
- Loss of spiritual community if divorce is against religious beliefs

("Effects of Domestic Violence")

- **Financial Struggles:**

- Financial hardship after moving to escape an abusive partner
- Expensive divorce proceedings
- Medical bills
- Job loss after time taken off to attend court dates
- Job loss to tend to illness caused by the domestic violence

## **Impact on Children:**

For some survivors this section may feel meaningful because it relates to their own children. For some survivors, it may feel meaningful because of their own childhood trauma they experienced. If you are a survivor of childhood trauma, this information may help you better understand the person you are today.

Many of the psychological and emotional symptoms that happen in adults can also happen in children. However, there are important differences depending on the stage of development a child is in at the time of abuse. Certain kinds of abuse toward children are more damaging than they may have been for an adult. The first few years of life are where a child is developing first-attachment relationships (relationships where a child learns whether they can trust their caretaker and environment). It's possible that violence can hurt a mother's ability to provide a stable environment for her child, which harms a child's ability to develop healthy attachment and feelings of trust in their environment (Callahan, A., 2014).

In school age children, trying to cope with violence at home can affect a child's ability to perform at school because they have a hard time concentrating ("Effects of Domestic Violence").

Also, research shows that children exposed to domestic violence (especially in the first few years of life) are more likely to grow up to become survivors or abusers themselves, meaning that the violence continues from generation to generation. Even just witnessing abuse can affect a child's sense of values and expectations of how they should be treated (or how they should treat others) (Callahan, A. 2014).

We want to mention that, while exposure to trauma can have an impact on a child's development, **children can heal from abuse**. Once they're in a stable environment with good emotional and psychological supports, it is very possible for child survivors to heal and lead happy, healthy lives with healthy relationships.

# Growth after Trauma:

As with many life experiences, trauma can have positive growth too—called **post-traumatic growth!** Even though traumatic experiences are often painful and never something we want to experience, it is important to remember that from each experience we learn and grow as people. Domestic violence is no exception. We encourage survivors to try to honor the good as well as the bad—**you're here, which means you're a survivor.** Here is a list of some possible positive after effects our counselors put together.

- **Growth from trauma can mean increased...**

- Self-awareness
- Knowledge about resources
- Ability to advocate for yourself
- Safety-planning skills
- Knowledge of the system
- Ability to spot red flags of abuse
- Compassion for others
- Life experience
- Boundary setting skills
- Ability to listen to your intuition
- Compassion for yourself and others
- Knowledge to share with others

# How to Help Someone in an Abusive Relationship

Seeing someone else in an abusive relationship can be very difficult, especially a friend or loved one. It can be painful to see someone you care about being hurt and mistreated, and it can be very scary if you begin to have serious concerns about the break-down of their mental health or threats to their physical safety.

## Reasons Why She Might Stay

Sometimes it can be hard to understand why she doesn't "just leave". But, there are many reasons people stay in relationships (think back to your past relationships, has there ever been a time you stayed in a relationship longer than you knew was best for you, even if things weren't abusive?). Some reasons she might stay could include:

- **Conflicting emotions.** Most relationships don't start out as abusive, they slowly become abusive over time, sometimes getting more dangerous as time goes on (we call this escalation of behavior). Often the survivor has already fallen in love with the person she thought her abuser was before knowing this side of them. Even once the abuse starts, part of the manipulation abusers use in domestic violence is to not always behave abusively, especially in the "**honeymoon period**" right after an abusive incident. It can be very confusing and hard to not still feel love for the abuser and keep hoping that they'll change or "get help". Abusive partners may also show remorse, make promises of it never happening again, or make promises of "getting help", never to follow through.
- **Thinking the abuse is normal, and this is just how relationships are.** Depending on her other life experience and the culture she was raised in, she may see abuse as normal and just something women "deal with".
- **Feeling mentally exhausted.** Her partner may have told her so many times that she's worthless and doesn't deserve better that she starts to feel like it's true. Also, change is scary—ending a relationship is a big change to make and takes energy that she may not have right now.
- **She's been isolated.** This workbook talks about the power of isolation as an abusive tactic; sometimes survivors feel very alone and like they can't reach out to anyone for help, for many it can be hard to talk about the abuse at all. Some survivors have feelings of embarrassment that they "got into the situation", when the reality is that **domestic violence can happen to anyone at any time.**

- **She may not have a lot of resources.** It can be very hard to leave with a lack of resources. Maybe the abuser has sabotaged all her attempts to get a job in the past few years, to keep her dependent on them for income. Maybe they insist on going everywhere with her, so she hardly even has time to make plans to get out of the relationship. Or maybe they have something she needs that they're able to exploit, like being a caretaker if she has disabilities.
- **Threats.** They may make threats to her physical safety, physical safety of loved ones, her pets, or her property. An abusive partner may threaten that if she ever calls the police, or tries to leave, that they will kill her or hurt her family. If the survivor is an illegal immigrant, the abusive partner may threaten to report her. If the survivor is a member of the LGBTQ community, there could be threats to out their identity to others.

## What You Can Do

Having a basic understanding of some of the reasons why a woman may choose to stay in an abusive relationship is important, but there are still ways you can help:

- **Tell her you're concerned for her wellbeing**

Maybe you've noticed some changes in her behavior or overheard some things that made you concerned about her relationship. If she discloses to you that she's being abused, tell her that **the abuse is not her fault and there is no excuse for abuse.**

- **Listen nonjudgmentally**

Sometimes it's a huge step for survivors to even be able to talk about the abuse. Having someone there to listen nonjudgmentally to the situation can feel vital and break their feelings of being isolated. It may help them to feel comfortable reaching out to others.

- **Respect her decisions**

Try not to criticize, remember that change is a process, and she may leave and go back many times. This is common. Remember that she's already in a controlling relationship with someone who tells her what to do. If anyone else, even a well-meaning support person tries to tell her what to do, she may continue to

feel controlled instead of empowered. Ultimately she is the only one living her situation; respect that she knows her situation best.

- **Encourage her to seek support**

Perhaps in the form of counseling, or even anonymously calling the LifeLine, just to talk if that's helpful. Let her know that there are free services where she can get nonjudgmental support, whether she wants to leave the relationship or not. A counselor can help her look at all sides of her situation, and help her cope emotionally, as well as plan for the future.

- **Know your own boundaries and limitations**

Being a support person in this situation is challenging, there may be some ways you're able to lend support and others you aren't. It's important to take care of yourself before you attempt to help others. If you're struggling, don't hesitate to reach out to WIT's LifeLine to talk to a trained counselor—we're here for you too.

- **Do not confront the abuser. This could be dangerous for you, or for your loved one.**

If you know someone who has a pattern of behaving abusively in relationships and who is interested in getting help through counseling, **Menergy** is a Philadelphia-based intervention program for abusive partners. They can be reached at (215) 242-2235.



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