

Am I in an Abusive Relationship?

You may already know the answer to this question. But if you don't, it's okay to explore the issue. Either way, we believe you'll soon find you are not alone in your experience.

When the abuse first begins, many women in abusive relationships aren't sure if what they are experiencing is abusive. In fact, one of the biggest hurdles to addressing domestic violence is that very few victims self-identify as experiencing abuse. Many think abuse happens to "those women" and don't want to have the stigma of being one of "those women."

The most telling sign that you are in an abusive relationship is living in fear of your partner. If you feel like you have to walk on eggshells around him—constantly watching what you say and do in order to avoid a blowup—your relationship is unhealthy and likely abusive. Other signs include your partner's belittling of you, his attempts to control you, and feelings of self-loathing, helplessness, and desperation.

An abuser typically has a well-stocked arsenal of ways to exert power over you. He may employ domination, humiliation, isolation, threats, intimidation, denial, blame, and more. What's more, he is often creative and strategic in when—and how—to put these to their most effective use.

None of this is your fault. Your abuser is the only one to blame.

And because he is so good at deceptively wielding control, it can often be difficult to discern if you are being abused. From the perspective of outside observers, these signs of abuse may be cut-and-dry. But

for those trapped in the cycles of abuse, making sense of these complicated relational dynamics—especially when the relationship is intimate—can be suffocating and confusing.

If this is where you find yourself right now, here are some ways to discern if your relationship is abusive.

SIGNS YOU'RE IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

What the Abuser Does

Some abuse victims may be so confused by the relational dynamics in their relationship—understandably so—that they need to hear stories and common experiences from others in order to make sense of their own. Some find it helpful to identify domestic abuse by understanding the common profiles of abusers—and recognizing their partner among them.

Since abuse is defined by an abuser's behavior—not yours—we'll start with identifying just that. Here are eight categories or personas abusers commonly exhibit:¹

1. Bully

- Glares
- Shouts
- Smashes things
- Sulks

2. Jailer

- Stops you from working and seeing friends
- Tells you what to wear
- Keeps you in the house
- Charms your friends or family

3. Headworker

- Puts you down
- Tells you you're too fat, too thin, ugly, stupid, useless, etc.

4. Persuader

- Threatens to hurt or kill you or the children
- Cries
- Says he loves you
- Threatens to kill himself
- Threatens to report you to social services

5. Liar

- Denies any abuse
- Says it was “only” a slap
- Blames drinking, drugs, stress, overwork, you, unemployment, etc.

6. Bad Father

- Says you are a bad mother
- Turns the children against you
- Uses access to harass you
- Threatens to take the children away
- Persuades you to have “his” baby and then refuses to help you care for it

7. King of the Castle

- Treats you as a servant/slave
- Says women are for sex, cooking, and housework
- Expects sex on demand²
- Controls all the money

8. Sexual Controller

- Sexually assaults you
- Won't accept no for an answer
- Keeps you pregnant
- Rejects your advances and allows sex only when he wants it rather than when you initiate

Next, we'll look at the specific tactics your abuser might use to exert his power and control. The most common tactics include belittling, controlling, and acting violently and/or making violent threats.

YOUR PARTNER'S BELITTLING BEHAVIOR

Does your partner:

- Yell at you?
- Embarrass, insult, criticize you, call you names, or put you down?
- Treat you so badly that you're embarrassed for your family or friends to see?
- Put you down, but then tells you that he loves you?
- Ignore or belittle your opinions or accomplishments?
- Blame you for his abusive behavior?
- Use any mistake you made in the past against you?
- Not allow you to disagree?
- Ignore your feelings and ideas?
- Tell you that you are a bad parent or threaten to take away or hurt your children?
- Act like the abuse is no big deal, tell you it is your fault, or even deny doing it?
- See you as property or a sex object, rather than as a person?

YOUR PARTNER'S CONTROLLING BEHAVIOR

Does your partner:

- Act excessively jealous or possessive?
- Withhold affection as a way to punish you?
- Control where you go, what you do, and demand your whereabouts?
- Keep you from seeing your family or friends?
- Limit your access to money, the phone, or the car?

- Withhold basic necessities (food, clothes, medications, shelter)?
- Make you ask for money or refuse to give you money?
- Restrict you to an allowance?
- Prevent you from working or sabotage your job?
- Steal from you or take your money?
- Constantly check up on you?
- Control your plans and friends?
- Stop you from seeing your family or friends?
- Force you to drop charges?

YOUR PARTNER'S VIOLENT BEHAVIOR OR THREATS

Does your partner:

- Hit, kick, slap, choke, burn, shove, shake, drag, bite, push, punch, or physically harm you in any other way?
- Throw things at you?
- Have a bad and unpredictable temper?
- Threaten to hurt or kill you?
- Threaten to take your children away or harm them?
- Threaten to commit suicide if you leave?
- Intimidate you with guns, knives, or other weapons?
- Destroy your property or belongings?
- Threaten to kill your pet?
- Force, threaten, or coerce you to have sex?
- Destroy your belongings?

The descriptions above are focused on your partner's behavior, which are all telltale signs of abuse. These next questions are for you—to determine how you feel regarding your partner's behavior. The more “yes” answers here, the more likely it is that you're in an abusive relationship.³

THE VARIOUS KINDS OF ABUSE

As we've discussed previously, there are different kinds of abuse but all of them are wrong. To help you take inventory of your unique situation, let's consider these different kinds of abuse:

Physical

When we talk about domestic violence, we are often referring to the physical abuse of a spouse or intimate partner. This means using physical force against someone in a way that injures or endangers that person. Physical assault or battering is a crime, whether it occurs inside or outside of the family. The police have the power and authority to protect you from physical attack. And you have the right to protect yourself and your children, if you have them.

Sexual

Any situation in which you are forced to participate in unwanted, unsafe, or degrading sexual activity is sexual abuse. Forced sex, even by a spouse or intimate partner with whom you also have consensual sex, is an act of aggression and violence. Sexual assault includes rape, but it also includes coercion, intimidation, or manipulation to force unwanted sex. We define sexual assault as any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained and is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority.⁴

Sexual assault is a display of power by the perpetrator against the victim. It is not a product of an "uncontrollable" sexual urge. In fact, it is not actually about sex at all; it is about violence and control. Perpetrators use sexual actions and behaviors as weapons to dominate, control, and belittle another person.

If you feel as though you are being pressured into sex or that you are doing something that you do not want in order to placate your partner, then let us tell you now that your feelings are valid and that it is abuse.

As shaming as sexual assault feels, you aren't alone in this either.

According to surveys, one in four women will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetimes, and these statistics are probably underestimates.⁵ Sexual assault can occur in marriage. As a matter of fact, researchers have estimated that sexual assault occurs in 10–14% of all marriages.⁶

Emotional

Most people can identify physical abuse—pushing, hitting, kicking—if it is happening in their relationship. Emotional abuse, on the other hand, is not always so easily spotted.

It's harder to pinpoint exactly what's wrong, and easier to minimize what's really going on. It doesn't leave you bleeding or bruised. The neighbors can't hear it (not always) through the walls. But emotional abuse is no less destructive than physical abuse, and it is no less wrong.

The aim of emotional abuse is to chip away at your feelings of self-worth and independence—a violent process, in that it degrades you and your sense of your God-given worth. If you're the victim of emotional abuse, you may feel that there is no way out of the relationship, or that without your abusive partner you will have nothing.

So how *can* you identify if what you're experiencing is emotional abuse? There are several ways. Emotional abuse includes *verbal abuse* such as yelling, name-calling, blaming, and shaming. Isolation, intimidation, and controlling behavior are also signs of emotional abuse. Sometimes, abusers throw in threats of physical violence or other repercussions if you don't do what they want.

Emotional abuse also includes *economic abuse* such as withholding money and basic necessities, restricting you to an allowance, sabotaging your job, and stealing from you or taking your money.

These are just some examples. But if you don't see your particular experience listed here, use this as a general guide: Does your partner do something deliberately and repeatedly that puts you down or thwarts your plans? If the person who is supposed to be providing love,

support, and guidance is keeping you in a situation where you are constantly made to feel inferior, you aren't in a healthy relationship.

REFLECTING ON YOUR PARTNER'S BEHAVIOR

Reflect on your partner's abusive behavior. Do you see him in these pages? Can you see evidence that the behaviors were deliberate, controlled, or planned? Does he act differently toward you when there are other people around? How has he attempted to stop your resistance to his abuse? Does he treat others with respect, while treating you with disrespect?

In chapter 3, we'll explore some of the reasons why he chooses to abuse. But first, let's take a look at your own experience to get clarity on your situation. Our hope is that as we spell out the nuances of what you may be experiencing, you will be able to call it what it is, plain and simple—abuse.

YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Do you:

- Feel afraid of your partner most of the time?
- Avoid certain topics out of fear of angering your partner?
- Feel afraid of your partner's temper?
- Feel afraid to disagree?
- Feel that you can't do anything right for your partner?
- Believe you deserve to be hurt or mistreated?
- Have to justify everything you do, every place you go, or every person you talk to in order to avoid your partner's anger?
- Feel afraid to leave or break up because your partner has threatened to hurt you, himself, or someone else?
- Avoid seeing family or friends because of your partner's jealousy?
- Wonder if you're the one who is crazy?
- Feel emotionally numb or helpless?

IT IS STILL ABUSE IF . . .

A handbook for victims of violence, *Breaking the Silence*, makes these important points about abuse:⁷

It is still abuse if . . .

- The incidents of physical abuse seem minor when compared to those you have read about, seen on television, or heard other women talk about. There isn't a "better" or "worse" form of physical abuse; any physical harm is a serious offense.
- The incidents of physical abuse have only occurred one or two times in the relationship. Studies indicate that if your spouse/partner has injured you once, it is likely he will do it again.
- The physical assaults stopped when you became passive and gave up your right to express yourself as you desire, to move about freely and see others, and to make decisions. It is not a victory if you have to give up your rights as a person and a partner in exchange for not being assaulted!
- There has not been any physical violence. Many women are emotionally and verbally assaulted. This can be as equally frightening and is often more confusing to try to understand.

THE POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL

Domestic violence is about exerting power and control. As Ann Jones and Susan Schecter explain, "What matters to the controller is not what he does but what he gains by doing it."⁸

The following "Power and Control Wheel"⁹ can be helpful for you to evaluate where you stand in your relationship. It identifies aspects of abusive behavior and its underlying motivation as emotional power and control. The wheel is a tool created by researchers to help define and identify *some* of the behaviors used to maintain power and control. So if you don't see an exact description here of what you're going through, don't jump to the conclusion that what you are experiencing isn't abuse.



Abusers may begin with physical or sexual abuse—the outer rim—to help establish the control. Once established, physical and sexual abuse may no longer be used to maintain the emotional control. A look or tone from the abuser may serve to control the victim once abuse has been established in the relationship. However, the pattern in some cases is reversed—some abusers begin with the inner spokes and escalate to physical or sexual abuse when the behaviors listed on the inside are no longer effective for them to maintain power and control.

Anne Ganley, a therapist in Seattle who writes on healing from abuse, uses the distinction between “hands-on” and “hands-off” abuse.¹⁰ Hands-on includes physical and sexual abuse. Hands-off involves psychological, verbal, and emotional abuse. This includes threats (such as suicide, removing the children, hurting the children, deportation),



forcing the victim to perform degrading acts (eating dinner out of the dog bowl, eating cigarettes left in an ashtray, licking the kitchen or bathroom floor), controlling the victim's activities (such as sleeping and eating habits, relationships, access to money), attacking the victim's self-esteem, denying the validity of her feelings and ideas, or intentionally frightening the victim.

The "Power and Control Wheel" shows the vast amount of ways that abusers exert power and control over their intimate partners. Many women do not realize the different ways that an abuser has been harming them until they are out and away from his grip of power and control. So we've included another tool to figure out if you are in an abusive relationship: the "Equality Wheel," which was developed to describe a nonviolent, non-abusive partnership. This wheel represents

healthy or ideal behaviors that one would hope to find in a relationship. The core of a healthy relationship focuses on equality. Once a power imbalance has occurred in a relationship, it opens the door for abusive behavior.

THE CYCLE OF ABUSE

The specifics of domestic violence differ from situation to situation, but domestic violence tends to follow a pattern no matter when it occurs or who is involved. The pattern or cycle repeats and can happen many times during a relationship. This may be difficult to read about if this pattern is a reality in your life rather than words on a page, but we hope that by describing the pattern, you will get a clear picture of the depth of the situation.

The pattern starts at its center, which is the abuser himself. He puts his wants and whims first and foremost. And while the abuser's life revolves around what he wants, the life of the abused revolves around the abuser.

Every morning, the guessing game begins anew. *What mood will he be in today? What precautions can I take to avoid hidden minefields? What will happen if I upset him again?*

This leads the victim to be very careful of what she says, how she responds, her facial expressions, and even how she dresses. The victim has oriented her whole existence to please him, and their happiness and peace depends on his moods and how he feels about everything. The victim works to keep the peace.

The pattern of domestic violence may be best understood through several phases. Each phase may last a different length of time and over time the level of violence may increase. And remember, not all domestic violence relationships fit the cycle and not everyone's experiences are the same.

The cycle of violence is a tool developed by researcher Lenore Walker in her book *The Battered Woman Syndrome*.¹¹ On average, about one-third of domestic violence victims can identify with this

cycle. Examining the cycle of violence reveals the complexity of abuse and how abusers can skillfully blend abuse with loving behaviors.

If you aren't sure if you can break things off, or if you think that the cycle will naturally be broken if you leave, it's important to see the whole picture and to understand what he might do in response. As you will see, the worst parts will always subside if he doesn't think it's an effective way to keep you in his power, but when he has lured you back, nothing will have changed. And without intervention, the frequency and severity of the abuse tends to increase—spiraling downward in the cycle of abuse.

The cycle below describes the main phases of abusive incidents in more detail so that you can see which ones might apply to your particular situation.

TENSION PHASE

During the tension phase, the victim often feels like they are walking on eggshells. This phase may last for weeks or even months, and in it:

- Stress begins to build
- Communication breaks down
- The victim senses growing danger, and tries to avoid it
- Violence/abuse occurs, yet the victim perceives it as “minor”
- Incidents occur more often, intensity increases
- Family denies, minimizes, blames external factors
- The victim begins to hope “somehow” things will change

CRISIS PHASE

The crisis phase is easily recognizable, because in it, the abuser often simply snaps. This phase may last anywhere from two hours to 24 hours, or even span over several days. In the crisis phase:

- The victim's anxiety runs extremely high
- Major, uncontrolled violence occurs

- The abuse becomes explosive, acute, and unpredictable
- The abuse may result in serious injuries, even death
- The abuser blames the victim
- The victim accommodates in order to survive
- The victim may escape during this phase, yet often returns when the crisis is over
- The victim may isolate herself and collapse emotionally

CALM PHASE

This phase is exactly what it sounds like—the calm after the storm. This is when the abuser often showers the victim with apologies and false promises. The calm phase may last for days or weeks, and in it:

- The whole family is in shock at first
- The abuser may be extremely remorseful and seek forgiveness
- All are relieved that crisis is past
- The victim is worn down, accepts promises, presents
- Children become caretakers to “keep the peace”
- The abuser may display kind, loving behavior
- The family welcomes this “honeymoon” stage and wants to believe violence won’t recur

THE CYCLE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ABUSER

This is the experience of the cycle from your point of view. Now here is what the cycle looks like within the mind of the abuser:

- Abuse—Your abusive partner lashes out with aggressive, belittling, or violent behavior. The abuse is a power play designed to show you “who is boss.”
- Guilt—After abusing you, your partner feels guilt but not over what he’s done. He’s more worried about the possibility of being caught and facing consequences for his abusive behavior.
- Excuses—To sidestep this guilt, your abuser rationalizes what

he has done. The person may come up with a string of excuses or blame you for the abusive behavior—anything to avoid taking responsibility.

- “Normal” behavior—The abuser does everything he can to regain control and keep the victim in the relationship. He may act as if nothing has happened, or he may turn on the charm. This peaceful “honeymoon” phase may give the victim hope that the abuser has really changed this time.
- Fantasy and planning—But then your abuser begins to fantasize about abusing you again. He spends a lot of time thinking about what you’ve done wrong and how he’ll make you pay. Then he makes a plan for turning the fantasy of abuse into reality.
- Setup—Your abuser sets you up and puts his plan in motion. What’s more, by now he’s convinced himself that he is perfectly justified in punishing you in this way.



The abuser's apologies and affectionate gestures in between the episodes of abuse can make it difficult to leave. He may make you believe that you are the only person who can help him, that things will be different this time, and that he truly loves you. However, the dangers of staying are very real—as you will experience anew every time the cycle starts all over again.

Here's an example of a full cycle of domestic violence looking from the outside in: A man abuses his partner. After he hurts her, he experiences self-directed guilt. He says, "I'm sorry for hurting you." What he does not say is, "Because I might get caught." He then rationalizes his behavior by saying that his partner is having an affair with someone. He tells her, "If you weren't such a worthless whore, I wouldn't have to hurt you." He then acts contrite, reassuring her that he will not hurt her again. He then fantasizes and reflects on past abuse and how he will hurt her again. He plans on telling her to go to the store to get some groceries. What he withholds from her is that she only has a certain amount of time to do the shopping. When she is held up in traffic and is a few minutes late, he feels completely justified in abusing her because, "You're having an affair with the store clerk." He has just set her up.¹²

TREE, TRUNK, AND ROOTS

Lundy Bancroft, a consultant who has studied extensively the minds of abusive men, writes, "Abuse grows from attitudes and values, not feelings. The roots are ownership, the trunk is entitlement, and the branches are control."¹³ The issue of abuse is not only about having control of and power over someone else. The abuser uses power and control as tools to support his belief that he owns his wife or partner and that he is entitled to certain treatment.

This is why violence against women increases in cultures and countries where women are actually owned (through practices of dowry) and where issues of male entitlement run higher (e.g., machismo culture). It also explains why most abusers are male—and most victims,

female—because male ownership and entitlement runs through the root of almost all societies. We would suggest that this is because male domination was a primary consequence of the fall. In Genesis 3:16, after the fall, God responds to Eve, saying: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” This does not mean God determined men should rule their wives—that male domination is ideal and how it should be. Rather, we see this man’s ruling over his wife as a consequence of sin—that is *not* the best plan for humanity. This is further evidenced by the fact that before the fall, men and women were equal.

Chauvinism and misogyny are effects of sin; they are not part of God’s design for men and women. Chauvinism says that men and women have been created in a hierarchy with the male as the higher, superior sex—much like a king born into a family with a natural right to exercise authority over the rest of his nation. Chauvinism upholds that women, in contrast, are the weaker or lesser of the sexes, inheriting a natural role of submission to the man—like the citizens of a country who have no natural claim to authority.

But we don’t believe that God created you to be in this role.

The practical implication of chauvinism is that in the family, the church, and in society at large, women are not to exercise authority over men because it’s believed that they are incapable of doing so by virtue of how they have been made.

This is the assumption of “male privilege,” which is a term that refers generally to the special rights or status granted to men but denied to women in a society on the basis of their sex. This position is very problematic because it’s oppressive. And it can often, tragically, become the foundation of abuse. Moreover, this position misunderstands God’s creative intentions for men and women.

In other words, we believe abuse is not just a case-by-case incident. It is an epidemic—and since we are Christians, we believe that it is an outgrowth of the human sinfulness. Abuse is not the way things should be. You were made for more than this.