

Media Guide

A Guide for Media Professionals Reporting on Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a complex issue that can be difficult to report on.

The media are essential in reporting its facts accurately, especially at times of great tragedy. Journey Center for Safety and Healing offers this media guide to assist reporters, copywriters, headline writers, editors, and producers when covering stories that involve domestic violence through a more engaged and empowering lens.

In this media guide you will find:

- What is Domestic Violence and Key Facts
- Do's and Do Not's When Talking About Domestic Violence
- Ohio and National Media Resources

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence, sometimes called intimate partner violence, is an established pattern of coercive control used by one partner over the other. It is about establishing and maintaining power and control. Domestic violence occurs when one person intentionally causes physical or emotional harm to a partner in an intimate relationship.

Domestic violence can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels and it can happen to those who are married, living together, or simply dating.

Domestic violence is not about anger and it is rarely an isolated incident. Most victims experience multiple forms of abuse and repeated acts of violence over time. This can include any form of sexual, physical, verbal/emotional, financial, and/or digital abuse. Domestic violence is a crime.

Ohio Criminal Law (Ohio Revised Code 2919.25).

Elements for an action to be an offense:

- Knowingly causing or attempting to cause harm
- Recklessly cause harm
- Threats of imminent physical harm
- These actions are directed toward a family or household member
 - Spouse, ex-spouse, current or former significant other, parent or child, step-parent or step-children

Key Facts to Remember about Domestic Violence

- **Domestic Violence is rarely an isolated incident** and it is identified by an established pattern of coercive control of one partner over the other. Power and control are held by the abuser, fear is experienced by the victim.
- **Abuser tactics are usually broader than physical violence and threats of physical violence.** Power and control is used and maintained by an abuser through stalking and monitoring a victim's activities, communication, etc., through social isolation, threats of suicide by an abuser, threats to harm the victim and/or children, financial abuse and withholding access to financial or other resource, emotional and verbal abuse. These are just a few of the tactics that an abuser may choose to use against their partner.
- **Domestic violence crosses racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and religious lines and occurs in all types of intimate relationships – it happens to people of all genders.**
- Though substance abuse, mental illness, and economic hardship may be present in domestic violence, research does not support these as a cause for domestic violence to occur. While the presence of these factors may increase the violence, they do not cause the violence.
- **Separation is a process.** A victim needs to consider many factors when leaving and/or ending a relationship. It is imperative that a victim is in charge of their leaving- victims do leave when they are ready and when it is safe.
- **Separation or leaving is the most dangerous time for a victim.** Risk for serious injury and/or death escalate when a victim ends an abusive relationship.
- **Domestic violence is gender-based violence-** women are the most frequent victims of domestic violence. Nearly half of female victims are killed by a current or former male intimate partner. Additionally, Women of color, and women who are immigrants/refugees are over-represented among victims of severe DV and DV-related homicides, disproportionate to their representation in the population.
- **Domestic violence is a community problem.** Domestic violence impacts. Effects include neighborhood and workplace safety, criminal justice, healthcare costs, lower economic productivity, child development and education, and many other community factors.

The Do's

- Enhance the community's understanding of domestic violence
 - Abuse is a choice. Domestic violence is a choice made by an abuser; it is not the result of someone "snapping" nor is it a "crime of passion"
 - Talk about the warning signs of domestic violence and the pattern(s) of domestic violence
- Place the crime in the context of domestic violence
- Acknowledge that domestic violence is a community problem and consider the impact on the entire community
 - The victim's place of work, school, and/or their faith organization
 - Services and resources for family members and children
- Use language of accountability when applicable
 - For example. Say, "He threatened her repeatedly with violence," rather than, "She feared his threats"
- Look into the prior history of domestic violence and let the story evolve. Go beyond the recent history
 - This may include Protection Orders, calls to the police, etc.
 - Consider the behavior of an abuser: were guns in the home? Is there a history of strangulation or stalking?
- Use statistics to reinforce that domestic violence is a serious issue
- Consider the safety and confidentiality needs of victims, their families, and others involved in the story
- **Promote help seeking by displaying resources:**
 - *When appropriate, posting the local number, rather than the national number will decrease the number of people a victim will have to talk to in order to receive services.*
 - *Journey Center for Safety and Healing*
 - 24-Hour Helpline:
 - Call or text: 216.391.4357 (HELP)
 - Live chat: [Journeyneo.org](https://www.journeyneo.org)

The Do Not's

- Avoid calling domestic violence a “relationship problem” or an anger problem
 - These phrases are inaccurate and describe domestic violence as an issue between two people and conceals that the abuser is responsible for the violence
- Do not focus on the victim’s behavior. The victim is not at fault. Focus on the abuser and their behaviors. Avoid using victim blaming language
 - Refrain from using minimizing terms such as “dispute,” “quarrel,” or “love triangle,” which detract from the violence and criminal nature of the behavior.” Name it for what it is: domestic violence.
 - Do not ask, “Why did they stay?” or, “What did they do?”
- Avoid using statements from individuals who may not know the complexities of how domestic violence may appear to outsiders or who may be emotionally connected to the abuser
 - Examples: “I never heard anything” or “They was a nice person at work”
 - Family members, friends, etc. may be important to the story but keep in mind that they may be reluctant to speak negatively about the abuser and may not present an accurate picture of the abuse and/or the history of the violence
- Use discretion with the term “alleged”
 - “Alleged” fits within the tenet of professional journalism but knowing when and when not to use it is important. Use ‘accused’ to describe the alleged abuser. Rather than, ‘the victim was allegedly attacked by their partner’, say, ‘the victim told police their partner attacked them’
- Is the victim’s (past) behavior relevant?
 - Talking about why a survivor stays with or goes back to an abuser is irrelevant and distracts from the abuser’s actions; it implies that the victim is complicit in the abuse
- Do not assume some cultures or classes are violent and others are not
 - Focusing on a victim’s or abuser’s economic status, race, or ethnicity confuse the point that domestic violence occurs in all communities. While these factors may influence tactics an abuser uses to gain and maintain their power and control they are not the cause
- Avoid treating domestic violence as an inexplicable tragedy, beyond the reach of community action

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Warning Signs of Domestic Violence

- Jealousy, controlling behavior: telling their partner where to go, who to talk to or not talk to, how to dress, etc., quick involvement and/or moving quickly in the relationship, unrealistic expectations, isolation, blaming others for problems and/or feelings, cruelty to children, cruelty to animals, verbal abuse, rigid gender roles, threats of violence, past abuse, Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde personality, controlling finances in a relationship

How to Help

- Listen and give the victim your full attention
- Believe what the victim is telling you
- Be supportive
- Remind the victim that the abuser is not their fault
- Do not judge a victim's decisions

Additional Resources and References

- [Journalists need more help than ever coping with work trauma](#)
 - *Columbia Journalism Review. August 12, 2019*
- [How journalists can take care of themselves while covering trauma](#)
 - *Poynter. May 29, 2019*
- [National Network to End Domestic Violence \(NNEDV\)](#)
- [Ohio Domestic Violence Network](#)
- [Queensland Government](#)
- [Violence Free Colorado](#)
- [Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#)

Journalists can play a powerful role in helping build a society where fewer people make excuses for violent behavior, fewer people blame victims, and where all members of our community are informed and empowered to take action against domestic violence.