

Overview of Domestic Violence

A Pattern of Behavior

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behavior that is used by one person to gain power and control over another. This may include physical violence, sexual, emotional and psychological intimidation, verbal abuse, stalking and economic control. Domestic violence can happen to people of all racial, economic, educational, religious backgrounds, and in heterosexual and same sex relationships. While both men and women may be victims of domestic violence, research shows that the overwhelming majority of adult victims are women and domestic violence is a major cause of injury to women.

Domestic violence is learned behavior (through observation, experience, reinforcement, culture, family, community) and is rarely caused by substance abuse, genetics, stress, illness or problems in the relationship, although these factors are often used as excuses and can exacerbate violent behavior. Domestic violence is reinforced when abusers are not arrested, prosecuted or otherwise held responsible for their acts.

Complex Dynamics

Domestic violence victims are unique within the categories of crime victims. The violence perpetrated on them is seldom confined to just one incident; the crimes against them are seldom limited to one specific act. These are victims who often experience virtually every type of crime – property damage, theft, terroristic threats, assault, false imprisonment, rape, stalking, kidnapping, arson, homicide – all at the hands of one offender. In addition, the violence is often compounded when victims are elderly or have disabilities, speak limited English, or live in areas with high rates of crime or rural regions with limited resources. They are paralyzed by fear and constrained by circumstances.

Obstacles to Leaving a Violent Relationship

Fear of retaliation and further violence is of paramount concern to a victim considering ending an abusive relationship. Victims are in heightened danger at this time. The essence of domestic violence is power and control, and when a victim attempts to leave the relationship, the abuser intensifies his/her efforts to maintain control of the victim. Violence typically increases in frequency and severity, and can be lethal.

In addition, many other factors limit a victim's ability to leave an abusive relationship. Isolation from friends and family and control over access to resources severely restrict the victim's ability to learn about legal and other options for stopping the violence and/or leaving the relationship. Lack of economic resources to become and remain independent from the abuser, particularly if the victim has children, is a key factor weighing against leaving. Wanting to maintain attachment to the partner, the relationship, the family, the children, and the home also can be powerful influences to stay. Victims may stay to avoid guilt about the potential consequences of seeking legal or criminal recourse against the abuser – breaking up the family, separating the children from their father, causing the abuser to lose his job or go to prison.