

Understanding Relationship Abuse:

A Guide by the National Domestic Violence Hotline

Relationships exist on a spectrum — ranging from healthy to abusive, with unhealthy relationships somewhere in the middle. Relationship abuse, also known as domestic violence or intimate partner violence, is a pattern of behaviors one partner uses to gain or maintain power and control over another partner. Abuse comes in many forms, and there's usually more than one form occurring in an abusive relationship.

Healthy

A healthy relationship means both you and your partner are:

- Communicating
- Respectful
- Trusting
- Honest
- Equal
- Enjoying personal time away from each other
- Making mutual choices
- Economic/financial partners

Unhealthy

You may be in an unhealthy relationship if your partner is:

- Not communicating
- Disrespectful
- Not trusting
- Dishonest
- Trying to take control

Abusive

Abuse is occurring in a relationship when one partner is:

- Communicating in a hurtful or threatening way
- Mistreating
- Accusing the other of cheating when it's untrue
- Denying their actions are abusive
- Controlling
- Isolating their partner from others

Forms of Abuse

Here are some of the most reported forms of abuse—every type of abuse is harmful and has serious repercussions for those experiencing it.

Physical Abuse: The use of physical violence or threats of violence to control a partner. Examples include throwing objects at victim(s), driving recklessly and endangering passengers or property, punching and slapping, forcing substance use, or preventing the use of emergency/medical services.

Emotional/Verbal Abuse: The use of words and behaviors to coerce, manipulate, control, or hurt a survivor. Examples include name calling, threatening the survivor, their children, family, or pets, blaming their actions on the survivor, coercing or intimidating the survivor into doing or not doing certain things.

Sexual Abuse: Forcing someone to engage in sexual activity or interactions that they are uncomfortable with or do not consent to. Reproductive coercion is one tactic used and involves one partner deciding and/or restricting access to reproductive health care (like refusing to use contraception or sabotaging birth control methods).

Financial/Economic Abuse: When a partner extends power over finances. Examples include taking the survivor's paycheck, only giving the survivor an "allowance", refusing to give them money for basic needs, forcing the victim to support their abusive partner financially, getting the victim fired or interfering with their job, or ruining a survivor's credit.

Digital Abuse: The use of technology and the internet to bully, harass, stalk, intimidate, or control a partner. This behavior is often a form of verbal or emotional abuse conducted online. Examples include controlling the survivor's use of social media, going through their phone to see who they are calling or texting, forcing the survivor to share social media, phone, or computer passwords, or using technology to track or monitor their location or activities.

Warning Signs

It's important to be aware of the many red flags or warning signs that abuse may be present. Here are several tactics often used by those causing harm:

- Love bombing, including being extremely charming at the beginning of your relationship, and sweeping you off your feet with expensive gifts.
- Telling you that you never do anything right.
- Preventing you from making your own decisions, including about working or attending school.
- Controlling finances in the household without discussion, including taking your money or refusing to provide money for necessary expenses.
- Intimidating you through threatening looks or actions.
- Threatening to harm or take away your children or pets.
- Threatening to tell your family or friends that you are LGBTQ or questioning.

Relationships are unique and can transition from healthy to unhealthy to abusive. Different factors such as socio-economic status, race, gender identity, or sexual orientation can impact a relationship that is abusive and create barriers to accessing support. For example, some people may not have the financial resources to leave their abusive partner, concerns calling law enforcement or may be afraid to share their abusive experience because of immigration status.

Thing to Consider

Once you recognize that something unhealthy or abusive is happening in a relationship, it can be hard to know what steps are best. Here are some things to think about regarding abusive relationships:

Anyone can experience domestic violence.

People often have a pre-conceived notion of who experiences domestic violence. People assume that it happens primarily to women who are uneducated or poor, and that it could never happen to them or someone they know. Even survivors may believe that they have done something wrong to deserve the abuse, but there is no justification for abuse. Abuse is ultimately a choice made by one partner to control and harm the other and is not the fault of the person experiencing it. Stigma, shame and guilt are common feelings among survivors—but they shouldn't be. Abuse is never okay and it is never your fault.

Domestic violence affects people from all walks of life, regardless of their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socioeconomic status. No matter where someone lives, how much money they make, or how educated they are, they can still experience domestic violence.

Prioritize safety.

Relationship abuse can affect us in many ways, from our physical safety to our emotional, mental, or financial health and well-being. If you are experiencing abuse, it is important that you prioritize the ways you can be safe. Many survivors are worried about their partners being hurt or getting in trouble, and that may cause them to not take action that will help them be safer. Trust yourself to know what is best for you and reach out to trusted people who can support you with your specific needs. Here are some ideas on safety.

Physical safety: Know the fastest ways to remove yourself from a situation if your partner begins to get physically violent. This could mean leaving out a backdoor or going into a more crowded area where they may be less likely to harm you. If you cannot leave, take steps to make yourself small by crouching into a corner and protecting sensitive areas like your head.

Emotional safety: Talk to supportive friends, family members, or advocates in a private place so the abusive partner does not know you are receiving support.

Digital safety: Delete any messages sent to your support system that the abusive partner may see, including clearing your internet history that may show programs or organizations that help with abuse.

Economic safety: If possible, having a private bank account that the abusive partner does not know about can help you set aside money for yourself. This could also mean asking friends or family to hold onto money for you in case of an emergency.

Police involvement.

A big part of staying survivor-centered involves the question of getting law enforcement involved. Oftentimes when we hear about abuse, our first instinct is to call 911 or the police. If you or someone you know is experiencing abuse, it is important (if possible) to first talk about if you want law enforcement involved or not. For various reasons, not all people are comfortable with the police being involved. Police involvement looks different depending on your situation and in some instances actually escalates the abuse, so having trusted individuals who you can discuss the pros and cons of involving law enforcement is important.

Practice self-care.

This is important both for the survivor experiencing abuse as well as any friends or family who are supporting them. Here are some self-care ideas:

Do a grounding exercise. Oftentimes when we are triggered by a traumatic event, the emotions or memories that come up can be overwhelming. They can take us back to a past time when we experienced abuse ourselves, or to a time when we saw abuse firsthand. Using grounding exercises can be a helpful way to bring yourself back to the present moment where you are safer and in a better place. Here is a simple exercise to try:

- Focus on breathing in slowly through the nose for a count of five.
- Hold that breath for a shorter count of three.
- Exhale as slow as possible out the mouth for a count of five.
- Repeat these slow, deep breaths as many times as needed.

If you want, you can include a mantra that you say out loud to remind yourself that you are safe. This mantra could be “I am safe now.” Find something that helps soothe you!

Do something different. When we are triggered, doing something different can be helpful. This change of pace can help us move our body in a different way to deal with stress or can put us in a mindset that allows us to focus on something different. Some things to try out could include going on a walk, doing a centering meditation, creating art through drawing or coloring, or doing some form of physical activity.

Find support. Going through an abusive relationship is stressful and overwhelming. If you feel alone or unsupported, that can create added challenges in feeling safer. Finding some form of support, whether it is friends, family, a religious organization, or a domestic violence support group, can help you feel less alone. Being able to process the abuse with people you trust and having folks who can help you document the abuse, get to a safer place, or who can connect you to different support resources, can be very beneficial if you are experiencing abuse.