

Safety & Wellness in Conflictual Relationships

What is Domestic Violence and Abuse?

Domestic violence and abuse are rarely a one-off event (*see the "Recognizing Domestic Violence Checklist."*)

For example, at the end of a long and frustrating day your partner snaps at you or makes a hurtful or even a derogatory comment. After they have had time to cool off, they apologize, recognize that what they said was not OK, and acknowledge that they are taking their frustrations out on you. They apologize and make a commitment to not do it again. If this is a one-off event, or something that happens extremely rarely, it might not be a sign of an abusive relationship. It might be a sign of someone who needs some better self-care and stress reduction strategies.

While it is never OK to be hurtful to your partner, one-time events, where the person recognizes what they have done, sincerely apologizes for it, and makes a genuine effort to change, is not usually abuse.

Another example could be that money is tight in your family now and you or your partner have been out of work for a while. Your partner finds out that you have just gone and spent hundreds of dollars on items that you don't need right now. Your partner either asks you to return the items or hand over your credit card until some of the debt can be cleared. In this situation while your partner may appear to be controlling your finances, they may be doing it to avoid being in a situation where bills cannot be paid or where you are in too much debt.

It is important to consider your partner's motives. Are they aiming to be controlling, or are they aiming to ensure that your family is safe and provided for? It could be a bit of both.

Consider the pattern of your partner's behaviors.

- Are they trying to control and dominate you in multiple areas of your life?
- Are they cruel and demeaning? Do you feel physically or emotionally unsafe around them?
- Do you feel like no matter what you do you cannot please them or make the fighting stop?
- Do they show little or no empathy if they hurt you physically or emotionally?
- Do they tell you that the fighting is your fault?

These are all signs that you are in an unhealthy relationship.

One-off events can be a red flag or warning sign that:

- Things are escalating.
- Your relationship is headed in a toxic direction.
- You and your partner need to get help with your relationship.
- You or your partner need to get support to manage conflict or challenging situations.
- You and your partner might want to get couples or individual counselling.
- You might want to consider what you will do if this happens again.
- You and your partner might want to explore healthy ways to manage feelings of anger, frustration, hurt, fear, etc.

Abuse can be a one-time event if it is:

- Serious (for example, a threat to cause harm to you or someone else or they do harm you or someone else – including a pet).
- Planned/ premeditated (for example, they shut down your bank account, deliberately cause you to be removed from study, or deliberately cause an unplanned pregnancy)

Even with one-off events it can be useful to talk to a counsellor, a family preservation worker, or another trusted professional, such as your family doctor, about what has happened. People who are not emotionally involved can often have useful insights and helpful suggestions. They may also see patterns of behavior that others might miss.

Domestic violence and abuse are usually part of a bigger pattern of behavior.

All domestic violence is about control.

The abuser feels the need to be in total control so that:

- You will not leave *(even if they use threats of leaving you as a form of control)*.
- They feel superior to you and others *(they often have very low self-esteem but may appear to have a big ego)*.
- They feel respected by others in the community *(this is part of trying to meet the needs of their ego)*.

Two common types of personality disorders that lead to abusive behavior are:

Narcissistic personality disorder: Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental health condition that causes an intense need for admiration, a sense of superiority, and a lack of empathy.

Borderline personality disorder: People with borderline personality disorder are hypersensitive to rejection and abandonment and may use controlling behaviours to avoid it.

If you notice any of these traits in your partner there is a higher likelihood of the relationship becoming abusive. It would be a good idea to see professional support from a counsellor or trusted professional for yourself and for your relationship.

Abuse may start with things that seem small at the time, for example, criticizing your clothing choices, the way you look, or what you choose to order at a restaurant. They encourage you not to spend time with certain friends. It might start with encouraging you to perform some sexual acts that you are a bit uncomfortable with, but you are willing to go along with. Over time these behaviors that seemed “small” or “not too bad” to begin with can become more forceful and uncomfortable as time passes.

An analogy that is often used is the frog in the boiling water scenario.

If you place a frog into boiling water, it will jump straight out.

If you place a frog into warm water and slowly heat the water the frog will stay there until it boils.

The idea being that if you notice the abuse early in the relationship, for example, if someone were to slap you across your face on a first date, you will end the date quickly and refuse to see that person again.

On the other hand, you may enter a relationship, it starts off well and you start to fall in love with this person. You might move in together, get married and have children together. Now you have a lot more invested in the relationship and it is harder to leave. Slowly, they start with small criticisms, the occasional harsh comment. They might start by encouraging you to stay home with them and not see friends and family. They might start to restrict what you can do, who you can see, what you can spend money on. These things start slowly at first so you might brush them off then, over time, they get worse. This

is like the frog that was placed in the warm water that slowly gets hotter. One day you realize that you are in boiling water and now you must get out!

Exploring some common myths about domestic violence

Myths	Facts
Domestic violence does not happen often	1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men will experience physical or sexual abuse
Domestic violence is only physical	Domestic violence can be verbal, emotional, physical, spiritual, sexual and economic
Domestic violence can only occur in lower class, immigrant or minority communities	Domestic violence does not discriminate - it can happen to anyone
It is easy to leave an abusive relationship	Leaving an abusive relation is not easy. When attempting to leave there is an increased risk to the survivor's safety
The perpetrator is abusive because of substance abuse, unemployment, or stress	None of these causes domestic violence but may be used as an excuse and may increase the frequency of abuse
Children are not affected by their parents' abusive relationship	Witnessing domestic violence may cause emotional and behavioural issues for children

Where to go next

If you think that your relationship might be abusive, but you are not sure check out the *"Recognizing Domestic Violence Checklist."* Also speak to a family counsellor or other trusted professional.

If you think that your relationship might be abusive but sometimes things are ok. Or, if you find that you are covering up for the person who is abusing you, and trying to rescue them, check out the *"Cycle of Domestic Violence"* information. Also speak to a family counsellor or other trusted professional.

If you feel that you need to get out quickly because your situation is unsafe check out the *"Safety Plan"*, *"Red Flags"* and the *"Leaving Safely"* information. Also speak to a family counsellor, a trusted professional and if possible, a lawyer. If you need immediate protection, contact the RCMP.