



# Intimate Partner Violence

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International Society  
for Traumatic Stress Studies

Intimate partner violence is a pattern of physical, sexual, psychological, or stalking behaviors between people who are or have been in an intimate personal relationship. It may involve violence or threats by one or both partners in the relationship. Its severity can range from mild to extreme life-threatening acts. Threatened or actual intimate partner violence can produce intense fear, horror, or helplessness. When it does, intimate partner violence is considered a traumatic experience. Specific behaviors that make up the pattern of intimate partner violence include the following:

Physical violence includes hitting with a fist or object, shoving, slapping, beating, hairpulling, twisting arms, kicking, strangling, using a weapon, or other acts of physical aggression.

Sexual abuse refers to force or coercion of unwanted sexual behavior, which may or may not involve intercourse. When there has been a history of physical violence in an intimate relationship, subtle behaviors can be used to threaten or coerce sexual behavior, which then is abusive.

Psychological abuse includes verbal threats, intimidation, isolation, victim-blaming, and humiliation. Basic human rights may be repeatedly violated such as control of daily activities, contact with family and friends, and access to transportation, communication, and money. Children may be used to manipulate and abuse the adult partner.

Stalking is a pattern of behavior that involves repeated unwanted contacts such as phone calls, messages, e-mails, letters, or notes. It may include repeatedly showing up at work or outside one's home, often remaining there for long periods.

### **Who experiences intimate partner violence?**

Intimate partner violence is found in all social, economic, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups of women and men. Nevertheless, rates of intimate partner violence may vary across some groups. Generally, persons with fewer economic, tangible, social, physical and other personal resources may be more vulnerable to the threat of violence or abuse posed by an intimate partner.

## Traumatic and other effects of intimate partner violence

The impact of intimate partner violence varies both in type and severity. Those persons who are vulnerable due to physical, psychological, economic, or social conditions or who have experienced prior victimization may be even more severely affected than those with financial resources, good health, favorable environments, and no other significant stressors or health problems. However, intimate violence can be traumatic for anyone. In some cases, the effects of prior intimate partner violence can be triggered for the first time or after a long period of remission months or years after the actual occurrence of violence has stopped.

Emotional distress is a common effect of intimate partner violence. Typical emotions include fear, anger, frustration, confusion, and sadness. One's sense of emotional wellbeing can be seriously damaged by intimate partner violence.

Physical injury is a major consequence of intimate partner violence. Injuries may range from mild to severe. Examples include bruises, sprained muscles, cuts, broken bones, lost teeth, lost hair, dislocations, broken eardrums, and permanent disfiguration. Pregnancy is a time of increased risk for women to be physically attacked.

Traumatic stress responses refer to certain psychological symptoms severe enough to interfere with day-to-day functioning. These psychological symptoms include increased startle response, nightmares, intrusive images, emotional numbness, difficulty sleeping, increased irritability, and difficulty with concentration. Commonly, these symptoms are diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Depression, anxiety, and alcohol and drug abuse problems often accompany symptoms of psychological trauma.

Change in belief systems means that previously held beliefs are seriously altered. Such beliefs have to do with trusting others; feeling safe in one's home, community, or the world; feeling worthwhile and seeing others as worthy; having a sense of control over one's life; and feeling connected to oneself and others. These beliefs can be disrupted by intimate partner violence.

Impaired physical health status can also result from exposure to intimate partner violence. Physical symptoms can include headaches, lower back pain, gastrointestinal problems, and other stress-related problems.

Loss of resources can result from intimate partner violence through property damage, relocation involving the loss of one's home or possessions, and loss of childcare, medical insurance, or transportation. Lost income from missed work or being prevented from seeking employment or education is another effect of intimate partner violence. Medical expenses and costs of legal representation also drain resources.

Disruption of social relationships can occur as a result of isolation from family and friends. Some abusers make deliberate efforts to cut off their partner's contact with family and friends, intercept their mail, listen to or limit phone conversations, and forbid private visiting with others. Embarrassment or efforts to keep the violence private may also lead victims to withdraw from their family and friends.

## **Impact of intimate partner violence on children**

Children typically witness intimate partner violence when it occurs in the home. They may be present when it occurs or they may hear it in another room, be awakened from their sleep, observe the bruises, and notice damaged property. Children can experience emotional distress when their daily routine, school, and friendships are disrupted.

Children experience a loss of resources when they no longer have access to familiar surroundings and personal belongings. Children can also be affected by the emotional distress of the abused parent. Children also suffer when parents use them to threaten one another.

For all of these reasons, children can be affected profoundly by intimate partner violence. These detrimental effects can impair cognitive and emotional development, physical functioning and health, school and cognitive performance, and friendships. Children can also experience psychological symptoms of traumatic stress similar to those found in adult victims.

## **Getting help for the effects of domestic violence**

Help is available for victims of intimate partner violence and their families.

Develop a safety plan to create an escape, to gain protection from or to avoid further violent incidents. You may want to consult a domestic violence advocate for help in developing an individualized safety plan for your situation.

Consult a domestic violence advocate or your local shelter or domestic violence program. An advocate can help you make decisions about what to do and can assist you in obtaining important information and resources.

Obtain a protection order from a judge who can order the abuser to avoid contact with you and your children; issue custody and supervised visitation orders; require the abuser to attend counseling, provide financial support, vacate the home; and make provisions to increase your safety. A protection order is not intended to put the abuser in jail.

Discuss legal charges with a counselor. The criminal justice system can punish an abuser who is considered guilty of a crime by ordering the abusive partner to be monitored and supervised by a probation officer, requiring the abuser to serve time in jail or pay restitution to the victim, ordering the abuser to attend counseling, and issuing other sanctions.

Talk to a health care provider or clergy person about your situation and ask him or her to put you in contact with a domestic violence expert. You may also talk with health care providers about medication for relief of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, or other psychological symptoms to help you think more clearly about what you want to do about your situation.

Talk to a counselor who understands domestic violence. These counselors can help you sort through the different feelings you may have about your situation. A counselor trained to work with traumatic stress can help you find ways to heal from the emotional damage of intimate partner violence.

People who have experienced intimate partner violence often find it difficult to ask for help because they feel ashamed or frightened. While it may be difficult to tell others about your situation, compassionate help is available.

A family doctor, clergy person, local mental health association, state psychiatric, psychological, or social work association, or health insurer may be helpful in providing a referral to a counselor or therapist with experience in helping people affected by intimate partner violence. For more information about traumatic stress or the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies, call 1-877-469-PTSD (7873).

## What is ISTSS?

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies is a nonprofit organization whose goal is to ensure that everyone affected by trauma receives the best possible professional response, and to reduce traumatic stressors and their immediate and longterm consequences worldwide.

ISTSS provides an independent community for supporting and sharing research, clinical strategies, public policy concerns and theoretical formulations on trauma. ISTSS members include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, counselors, researchers, journalists, clergy, law enforcement, correctional facilities administrators, advocates and others with an interest in the treatment and study of traumatic stress.

Members work in clinical and nonclinical settings around the world, including public and private health facilities, private practice, universities and research foundations.

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