

Family violence

Domestic violence is harmful to adults and children and sometimes carries long-term emotional consequences. Without help, violence can escalate, causing serious injury or even death. Children who experience or witness violence can grow up to intentionally or unintentionally inflict violence on others or to suffer other emotional problems.

What is it?

Domestic violence – when one household member mistreats another – occurs in all economic and social classes. It includes emotional abuse, such as threats, insults and ridicule; neglect, such as inadequate physical or emotional care; physical abuse, such as slapping, hitting and burning; and sexual abuse, such as fondling and incest.

Violence can occur between any household members; 95 percent of domestic cases nationwide involve a male abusing a female or children. Most cases also involve alcohol or other drugs and may follow a stressful situation.

Cycle of violence

Domestic violence often is cyclical and affects every member of the family. The person who inflicts violence needs power and control, usually because he or she is emotionally needy inside. So he or she may begin a cycle of violence by gaining that control. As an example, an abusive husband may control the family money, forbid his wife to go anywhere but straight to work, and straight home, and demand dinner at a specific time. If he believes his wife doesn't meet his demands – he may lose control, with violence as a result.

Since this portion of the cycle is gradual, the wife may try harder and harder to please her increasingly demanding spouse. By the time violence actually occurs, she may be surprised, frightened and may actually blame herself.

The emotional or physical incident is usually followed by a calm period, possibly with remorse from the husband. He may either apologize outright or at least behave more calmly. This period may be followed by a renewed romantic interest, with both spouses on their best behavior.

However, family members may feel as if they're "walking on eggshells," and tension eventually builds again, with new demands and stresses – and a new cycle of violence. If the couple doesn't get counseling, violence likely will result again.

While women are more likely to be physically maltreated, men experience emotional abuse and are less likely to report it.

In cases of spouse abuse, children also suffer. The abuser may act violently toward the children. Or the abused partner – in trying to cope with violence and stress – may not have emotional energy to give to the children.

Every family member suffers from violence

Victims may suffer serious emotional or physical injury, temporary or permanent. They may experience depression, loss of self-esteem, unreasonable fear, feelings of helplessness and worthlessness. Family violence may result in death. Also, the emotional and physical abuse may create work problems. For

instance, a child raised by perfectionist parents may not gain emotional security. As an adult, this person may react defensively to co-workers or bosses, resulting in a loss of a job or income.

Abusers may experience depression, desperation, guilt and shame. They may lose self-esteem, leading to continued violent impulses, which can affect one or many relationships. Legal difficulties may arise. In addition, they are at risk for violent retaliation by victims. Counseling is required to halt the cycle.

Children who witness violence are especially vulnerable.

Boys, particularly, are at risk if their fathers are violent. They may model themselves after their fathers and become violent also – possibly at an early age – or they may exhibit emotional or behavioral problems. For example, when they begin dating, they start the cycle by seizing power and control in the relationship and act violently with their girlfriends, in effect, behaving as their fathers behave.

Girls who witness violence may form unhealthy male-female relationships similar to the violent relationship between their own parent and his or her partner.

A healthy parental bond is necessary to emotional growth. Children without a healthy emotional bond may lose self-esteem and feel as if they have no control over their lives. They may learn not to trust the opposite sex, adults or anyone.

Contributing factors

So why are some people violent toward family members? Feeling isolated inside can create the need for power and control, which can escalate to violence. Because it works for the abuser, violence continues. In addition, stress such as job worries, unpaid bills and strained relationships can mount until the person feels overwhelmed and resorts to violence against others. Alcohol and other drugs add to the problems.

Studies show that some people learn to be violent toward family members as they grow up. Social and emotional isolation also is a factor. In today's mobile society, many people lose contact with family and friends who could provide emotional support. These people can feel trapped, not knowing where to turn for help.

Where to get help

If you are a victim or an abuser, seek counseling right away. Whether it's emotional or physical abuse, find safety. Don't let small problems turn into larger ones.

If you need more advice, talk to the clergy, family doctor, police, or call GHS' Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740 or toll-free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. You may also call the Flint YWCA domestic violence shelter at 238-SAFE (238-7233). © www.genhs.org