



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #11:

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE



The breakdown of any relationship into one where violence and abuse become the norm can terrify the victim and damage the family members.

This month, we're talking about something that's often kept silent: intimate partner violence. We'll look at what intimate partner violence is, the alarming statistics, examine the implications of COVID-19, and identify some warning signs. We will also focus on tools to help someone you believe is experiencing domestic violence and taking action to leave an abusive relationship.

Intimate partner violence can occur in any relationship where there is an imbalance of power. Most often, abusers use a combination of physical force, emotional intimidation, and psychological terror to either threaten or abuse the victim. The victim lives in constant fear for themselves or others that the abuser has targeted. As a result, victims often live with chronic stress and stay silent as they try to protect themselves and/or others. They may hope that the abusive situation can be explained away as a reaction to someone having a bad day. They often try and convince themselves that it won't be repeated because it's not bad all the time or that people around them will notice something.

There's a tremendous amount of social stigma around intimate partner violence. Victims may think that it will be easier to stay in a toxic relationship and project an image that everything is wonderful. They believe that if they revealed anything to the contrary, it could be catastrophic. They may become stuck in a cycle and endure repeated abuse for an extended period, perhaps years. Victims often fear judgment from society, friends, and family for living in an abusive relationship. Exposing the abuse would mean that they need to share details about situations that may be embarrassing and painful to reveal. If children are involved, the victim may fear airing this information because they are worried that they will be considered a "bad parent" for letting it continue. As a result, intimate partner violence is grossly under-reported. Ultimately, its fear and a lack of confidence that keep victims quiet. One researcher found that victims have tended to "return to the relationship seven times before they leave for good."¹

Quick facts

- 79% of police reports show that women the most frequent victims of intimate partner violence. That's 4x the rate for men.²
- Women are "twice as likely to report being sexually assaulted, beaten, choked or threatened with a gun or knife" and have "higher rates of injury compared to male victims (40% of female victims to 24% of male victims)."³
- Women are more affected by long-term PTSD than men.⁴
- In same-sex relationships, women who identified as lesbian or bisexual reported significantly higher rates of violence by an intimate partner.⁵
- It's estimated that 1/3 of victims are male. Men often experience verbal and emotional abuse rather than physical violence.⁶ Still, they are reluctant to report because of embarrassment, stigma, fear of not being believed, religious beliefs, lack of resources, denial and revenge.⁷
- Women between the ages of 15-24 present the highest rates of violence while dating.⁸

"She sent text-message after text-message demanding to know where I was and why I wasn't responding instantly."

~ a 27-year-old man who lived with his abuser for four years

*Names have been removed to protect identities.

Violence against Indigenous women

For years, reports have shown that Indigenous women have been experiencing disproportionate incidents of violence. Though we could locate some statistics to illustrate the situation, it's anticipated that these numbers are significantly under-reported.

In Canada, data collected by Statistics Canada in 2018 showed that "59% of First Nations women, 64% of Metis women and 44% of Inuit women suffered from psychological, physical or sexual intimate partner violence. Overall, the data represented 61% of Indigenous women."⁹

In the U.S., the Department of Justice found that "American Indian and Alaska Natives are two and a half times more likely to experience violent crimes" when compared to the national average for all ethnicities."¹⁰

In both countries, grassroots efforts to identify the plight of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women continue in their attempts to bring awareness to the complexities of the situation.

There are many contributing factors, such as but not limited to:

- The isolation of Indigenous communities; food, water, and housing insecurity; and the lack of access to comprehensive healthcare and victim services organizations
- Victimization that has been perpetuated and cycled. It relates to the colonization process that intentionally destroyed Indigenous communities, families, and culture. It has introduced layers of intergenerational trauma that has manifested today in the destructive legacies of substance abuse, suicide, addiction, incarceration, serious illness, and unemployment.

What are the main types of intimate partner violence?

Intimate partner violence can be grouped into three main types: physical, emotional, and psychological.

Victims of physical abuse may be hit, slapped, kicked, pushed, punched, and spat upon. They could face sexual violence or be assaulted with a weapon.

With emotional abuse, victims can face verbal assaults of abusive language or yelling. They can also experience violent acts or threats against their property, pets, or even children. Often, the abuser tries to isolate the victim so that they no longer interact with family or friends.

Psychological abuse can include neglect, preventing a victim to leave home and earning an income, and withholding money to create economic or financial hardships purposefully. The abuser may also levee severe criticism of the victim's abilities to manage money, maintain relationships, and critically damage their self-esteem and self-worth.

Victims often feel vulnerable because of the social inequalities they face, such as food, labour, or housing insecurities and their strained ability to access healthcare. One study by Western University's Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children found immigrants and BIPOC are "more exposed and less protected."¹¹

"He was careful to never hit my face, only areas that would be covered by clothing. It never occurred to me that what had started as teasing would escalate to harassment and then violence like this. It can happen to you."

~ a 34-year-old woman who endured escalating abuse in her marriage *Names have been removed to protect identities.

How does intimate partner violence affect a victim's health?

Intimate partner violence certainly takes its toll on a victim's health. Physical violence can result in sprains, broken bones, wounds, scars, and severe hearing and vision problems. There can be injuries to voices, teeth, and hair loss. Victims can also be affected with chronic pain and headaches, or even experience Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Sexual health can also be affected where victims experience STDs, ongoing pain, infections, unplanned pregnancies, or infertility.

Equally alarming is the prevalence of psychological issues affecting victims of domestic abuse. Someone might present initially with low self-esteem, but over time the abuse escalates psychological responses. Victims may begin to harm themselves, experience acute anxiety and develop extreme reactions to their situation such as uncontrollable fear, crying, or anger. They may also experience insomnia or have nightmares. All these events could even result in memory loss. Serious conditions such as depression, thoughts of suicide, PTSD, eating disorders or even conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder may manifest in victims over time.

How has COVID-19 made intimate partner violence a bigger problem?

Worldwide, COVID-19 has created a situation where people are living in constant stress and having trouble coping. Lockdowns have kept people in close quarters, and the United Nations has sounded the alarm regarding the need to "combat the worldwide surge in domestic violence," referring to it as a "shadow pandemic."¹²

Social and physical distancing measures instituted by Public Health and Governmental responses have reduced access to victim supports and services but increased exposure to abusers. It also seems that abusers are taking advantage of the COVID-19 situation and using it as part of their measures undertaken to control or frighten their victims.

They may:

- Share misinformation (closed shelters, or false reports of outbreaks).
- Restrict movement inside or outside the home or withhold cleaning products or PPE.
- Lie about the scarcity of items the victim needs saying that basics such as medication or essential items are unavailable (i.e., birth control or hearing aid batteries).

- Isolate and manipulate someone by restricting Internet access.
- Threaten a victim's health by inviting people over or threatening to infect them deliberately.
- Imply that someone with COVID-19 could face repercussions such as losing custody of children or face deportation.
- Remove or harm pets and animal companions, saying that they are a risk of transmitting COVID-19.

"A small sign with the word HELP printed in capital letters appeared in the corner of the neighbour's second-floor window. It had never been there before. You never see them outside, so we called the police to report it."

~ a 50-year-old woman who noticed a silent plea for help from a neighbour *Names have been removed to protect identities.

What are some warning signs of intimate partner violence?

Apart from the more obvious physical harm that victims may present, it may be possible to identify trouble from behaviour patterns that abusers tend to display. Controlling, monitoring, manipulating, and creating isolation, plus imposing financial restrictions, deserve careful observation because they may be warning signs. Similarly, you should never ignore incidents of harassment and verbal ridicule, intimidation or threats, or any signs of verbal abuse and gaslighting. Abusers may try to gain control over a victim through technological means and use apps to track communication, online activities, mobile phone usage (including text messaging).

Children exposed to intimate partner violence can exhibit misinformation or express beliefs that can act as a red flag to dangerous situations at home. They may normalize violence as part of a loving relationship and develop the idea that you can be the aggressor or the victim in a relationship, that they are unequal, and that it's not necessary to treat others respectfully.¹³ Keep in mind that children can also be neglected or victims of physical abuse themselves.

If you notice that someone has:

- Frequent absences or illnesses at work or they are constantly late
- Abrupt changes in clothing/dress (trying to hide bruises or physical violence)

- Behavioural changes (depression, fear, suicidal thoughts, lack of interest in daily activities, changes in sleep habits, last-minute cancellations, excessively private and distant)
- To obtain permission before going anywhere, has little money or no access to transportation, and refers to their partner as “jealous” or “possessive,”¹⁴

...then, there may be cause for alarm that they could be experiencing domestic abuse.

How to help someone experiencing intimate partner violence

Don't be surprised if they deny it. There are several things you can do to try and help.

- Keep in contact with them, despite any attempts by the abuser to isolate them.
- Encourage the victim to call 911 if it is an emergency. If you know they are in immediate danger, call yourself.
- Be observant of signs or signals (constant calling or texting to know where the victim is, who they are with, what they are doing)
- Come up with a code word.
- Help them store emergency cash, clothing, documents, phone numbers, etc. safely, outside of their home.

A hand signal for help

Learn the “Violence at home hand signal for help” developed by the Canadian Women's Foundation in response to increasing rates of domestic violence during COVID-19. It indicates that someone wants you to “reach out to them safely” and is now “being shared by partner organizations around the world.”¹⁵



Things to remember if you are preparing to leave a relationship with intimate partner violence

Remember that you are not to blame. You did not cause the abuse. You and any children involved deserve to be safe, happy and treated respectfully. It's not likely that your abuser will change. They may make promises to stop, but eventually, the abuse will return. If you stay or believe you need to help them sort things out, you may enable the abuser to continue rather than fix it. Leaving the relationship must be based on who the abuser is now rather than who they could be. You should go if it's at all possible. Don't retaliate or try to get revenge. It could be disastrous.

- Be technologically smart and protect your privacy
 - Make calls from a public phone or a friend's or neighbours. You may want to consider getting a second prepaid mobile phone.
 - Numbers called from a home phone, or mobile phone can be accessed on monthly bills, so your abuser could track you down.
 - When using a shared computer or tablet, change usernames and passwords frequently and be aware of spyware that could be installed. If the abuser has access to these devices, be cautious about deleting your web browsing history. Abusers can be worried you are trying to hide information.
 - Beware of GPS tracking devices that can be attached to a car, placed on a phone or tucked into a purse. You should also be aware that your abuser could have hidden cameras or baby monitors to watch your activities. There are also smartphone apps that will allow an abuser to track movements, record conversations, or monitor device usage. If you discover any of these, don't turn them off as it could alert your abuser that you know about them.
- Collect evidence and report incidents
 - Keep an incident journal and evidence of tracking or tampering with your mobile phone.
 - Memorize emergency contacts.
 - Move any important documents to a safe place (possibly outside of your home).
 - Connect with the police to report abuse. This can help kickstart support services, including restraining orders or peace bonds.

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- Seek advice and assistance from an intimate partner violence program, shelter, or crisis hotline.
- When you get out, keep your new location a secret and change your routine.
- Take steps to build new, healthy relationships and move forward from the trauma.



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