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## Understanding How Domestic Abuse Affects Our Mental Well-being

It often starts quietly. A friend stops texting. A co-worker seems quieter and more withdrawn. There's less laughter and more avoidance – less eye contact, changing topics or shrinking away when certain discussions happen. On the surface, you wouldn't think too much of these subtle changes, but you may not realize that something may be very wrong behind closed doors. These changes in behaviour are little indications that can be hard to detect but should not be ignored.

For many people who experience domestic abuse, silence and retracting from situations is a means of survival. It's the quickest way for them to address the fear that they live with of not being believed, ashamed, or worried that speaking out about their circumstances will only make things worse. Domestic abuse has often and continues to be thought of as private – something that must be kept hidden within the walls of a home. But when it's treated this way, where experiences are concealed, and we shy away from having conversations that matter, we allow the harm to stay hidden.

There's a misconception that the abuse is always physical. That's not necessarily the case. It can be emotional, exploitative and based on an abuser's narcissism – like gaslighting, name-calling and put-downs. It can also be psychological – like isolating someone from social situations, friends, and the community or making them question their recollections and memories of events. It can also be financial – like controlling money and spending or preventing someone from working or studying on their own terms. All these forms of abuse are deeply affecting and leave marks, though they may not be immediately or obviously visible.

That's why conversations about domestic abuse matter. Talking openly helps others understand that they are not alone and that there is hope. With transparency, it's possible to replace shame with support. We can create a supportive environment where people feel safe to reach out and where others can extend a hand and reach in.

In this article, we will examine the broader scope of domestic abuse, including signs, cycles, mental health risks and long-term repercussions. We will also share statistics and perspectives from many points of view. At the same time, we'll share methods for seeking and obtaining help and note some resources and support systems that can make a difference “because people see issues and challenges differently when they have increased knowledge... [so they can] make more educated and balanced decisions.”<sup>1</sup> Having access to hotlines, shelters, and support groups can provide people experiencing domestic abuse with the support, guidance and protection they need to escape abusive situations. Domestic abuse is a community issue that we can all help to address and bring the possibility of healing to the forefront.

### Understanding domestic abuse: it's more than physical harm

Domestic abuse is not always visible. It's a complex and harmful pattern of behaviours someone uses to gain power and control over another person. Often, it comes from “a current or former intimate partner or spouse,”<sup>2</sup> It can happen to anyone, no matter their age, gender, or background.<sup>3</sup> It can also be called intimate partner violence, spousal abuse, or gender-based violence. This type of abuse happens in all kinds of relationships. It can affect people whether they live together or not, whether they are married or dating, and regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>4</sup> While many people think of women as victims of domestic abuse and men as the perpetrators, “there is violence in same sex relationships—from women to women, men to men [but also abuse can be carried out by] women to men in heterosexual relationships.”<sup>5</sup> Understanding the diversity of abuse helps develop better awareness.

### Domestic abuse can take on many different forms:

- **Physical**

Hitting, slapping, choking, and sexual abuse are common. There's also a form of abuse called reproductive coercion, where one partner tries to control the other's reproductive choices. There could be intense pressure to become pregnant or even attempts to sabotage a partner's birth control.<sup>6</sup>

- **Emotional**

Name-calling, belittling, and spiritual manipulation are all forms of emotional abuse.

- **Psychological**

Isolation, stalking, mind games, and gaslighting are forms of psychological abuse.

- **Financial**

Controlling someone's finances and economic resources by preventing them from accessing money, stopping them from working, extorting funds, or forcing them into debt to affect their credit history negatively is another form of abuse. This kind of abuse can also extend to preventing someone from participating in educational opportunities.

- **Technology-facilitated**

This involves cyber abuse, where someone controls, reviews, or severely limits another's access to technology, including phones, the Internet, or television. This abuse could include requiring knowledge of private passwords on devices or accounts. Sometimes, one partner will demand to see and approve correspondence or social media posts and interactions.



## Who is affected?

Women in Canada (15+)	44% have experienced abuse (self-reported) <sup>7</sup>
Women in the U.S.	33% have experienced physical violence <sup>8</sup>
Men in the U.S.	25% have experienced physical violence <sup>9</sup>
Members of the 2SLGBTQ1+ community	Are “all significantly more likely to have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes.” <sup>10</sup>
Visible minorities	
Women living with disabilities	
Indigenous Women in Canada	3.5 times more likely to experience spousal violence <sup>11</sup>
Indigenous Youth (Under 18)	75% of sexual assault survivors are young women <sup>12</sup>

**Note:** This article cannot do justice to fully address the critical issue of domestic abuse in Indigenous communities (including missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW)). The severity of the problems and the vulnerability that Indigenous women face deserve dedicated focus and attention. Research completed with resources from the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) emphasized this issue. They stated that, “Statistics Canada does not have enough data [and] there are no data sources...making it virtually impossible to compare figures.”<sup>13</sup> The NWAC “holds the only national database on the number and circumstances of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada.”<sup>14</sup> We acknowledge responsibility and understand that so much more can be shared on this topic exclusively.

## The Mental Health Impact of Domestic

Survivors of abuse often carry invisible wounds that affect their mental health for years. These can include:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Panic attacks
- Sleep problems
- Low self-esteem
- Low self-worth

Sometimes, survivors may also struggle with self-harm or other harmful behaviours to cope. When someone idealizes their abusive partner and feels sympathetic to them despite the harmful treatment they have endured, they can form a trauma bond without realizing it. It means that the survivor can try to “rationalize or justify their behaviour.”<sup>15</sup> Trauma bonds “tend to form subtly, often without the abused partner even realizing it. People with a

history of child abuse or who have lived in unstable family environments are vulnerable because they often have an altered perception of what a healthy relationship looks like.”<sup>16</sup>

**Here are some survivor experiences. \*Names have not been shared to protect privacy.**

- One person shared that their partner had been stalking them at school and work. For years after the relationship ended, they would freeze or panic every time they saw a car similar to their abuser’s, sometimes needing to pull over to the side of the road or change course to hide. They avoided roads and locations that were tied to the trauma.
- Another survivor talked about how they could not walk to their car alone at work or their residence. They felt it was necessary to change their routines to hide from their abuser. They felt anxious and fearful to leave the safety of the buildings. They would have a manager walk them to their vehicle at night or choose to get a ride to and from their workplace so the abuser would not know when they were working by seeing their car in the parking lot.

- Someone else spoke about technology-based abuse and how, with their police department's strong recommendation, they needed to change their online behaviour – ensuring all their social media was private – and even changing their phone number. Additionally, they asked friends and family not to accept questions or attempts to contact them from the abuser and not to share any information.
- Finally, one survivor was able to pursue court-ordered protection, which prevented their abuser from any form of contact with them, physically or digitally, for a specific timeframe. This kind of legal support can be in the form of a peace bond or a restraining order.

Resources like the She Is Your Neighbour Website and podcast, plus the Signal for Help podcast, share many more stories.

<https://www.sheisyourneighbour.com/all-seasons/>

<https://canadianwomen.org/podcast-signal-for-help/>

### The Cycle of Abuse: Why It's Hard to Leave

Domestic abuse usually follows a painful cycle.

First, tension builds. Then, an incident of abuse happens. Next, the abuser apologizes and promises to change, resulting in reconciliation. Finally, things seem calm, perhaps better than they have been in a while. However, the abuse starts over.

The cycle can be confusing and emotionally exhausting. That can make it difficult for a survivor to consider leaving. Instead, they may minimize what's happening or even blame themselves, diminishing the severity of the situation. PTSD symptoms often worsen over time, making it even harder to know what to do.

### Recognizing the signs of abuse

Being able to recognize signs of domestic abuse is key to being able to listen, understand and offer support to someone in need. It's essential to keep in mind that "physical abuse is usually not the first form of control or abuse" in the relationship.<sup>17</sup>

Here are some descriptions of what to look for:

- **Physical** – If someone has frequent injuries or vague explanations for bruises, withdraws from social activities they used to participate in, is wearing clothing that doesn't align with the season, wearing heavy makeup or sunglasses inside buildings, they may be trying to cover signs of physical abuse. They may have unexplained or lengthy explanations for bruised eyes and arms, marks on their neck, or even sprained wrists.<sup>18</sup>

- **Emotional** – When someone is experiencing anxiety, showing fear around their partner, or withdrawing from close relationships with others, they may be experiencing emotional abuse. They also could be engaging in substance use, talking about changes in sleep patterns, seeking more isolation and cancelling plans, often at the last minute. They could also be uncharacteristically late to an event or gathering.
- **Behavioural** – Someone could have sudden mood swings, a fear of criticism, or show signs of depression.
- **Control** – Having a partner who keeps checking in and provides little freedom or exhibits an overt desire to control the person is another sign. It could extend to dictating what they should wear or how they should look. They could also be accusing the person of infidelity or having an affair. Sometimes, they withdraw access to transportation. Other signs are when they are constantly texting or seemingly tracking to know the person's location, what they are doing and who they are with.
- **Financial** – When someone has limited access to personal money or resources and must rely on their partner, asking permission for discretionary funds, especially if they are employed, it could be another sign of domestic abuse.

### The effects of domestic abuse are far-reaching

Survivors of domestic abuse can live with the repercussions of their experiences long after the abusive situation has ended. They often:

- Experience triggers that re-ignite traumatic, painful memories.
- Have difficulty trusting other people.
- Have a fear of relationships due to their past trauma, so they often avoid them.
- Live with difficulties related to PTSD, depression and anxiety.

Survivors often feel overwhelming shame, fear or guilt, which prevents them from speaking up about their abusive circumstances. They may also think no one will believe or want to help them. Facing daily abuse can be mentally exhausting, so much so that someone can enter an instinctive stress response, by pleasing the person posing the threat to avoid harm. The survivor's brain focuses on the perpetrator's needs instead of their own to avoid conflict.

We often focus on how domestic abuse affects the people directly involved – survivors and perpetrators, but there are also people affected peripherally to consider. For example:



- Children living in a home with domestic abuse may develop anxiety or aggression or have trouble concentrating or with social interactions at school. They often feel responsible and powerless. It can result in long-term trust issues and PTSD. Children who grow up in abusive homes often experience what researchers call “Adverse Childhood Experiences.” These early traumatic events can influence brain development and lead to mental health difficulties like anxiety or aggression, as well as a higher risk of chronic illness, substance use and even early death.
- Extended family members may not know about the domestic abuse, be aware of what is happening or, conversely, may suspect something but choose not to speak about it. They can feel helpless, confused and unsure of how to offer support. They can also have to weigh cultural norms that may influence whether they decide to intervene or stay silent.
- Friends, co-workers, or community members may see someone's uncharacteristic behaviours or moods but don't always know what to say. They could notice signs of domestic abuse, like isolation, withdrawal from events or even anxious behaviour.

The reality is that domestic abuse affects our schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods, so it needs to be addressed in our communities.

### What about the perpetrators?

Perpetrators of domestic abuse may have substance use issues, control problems, or unresolved and untreated trauma and mental health issues. There could be an intense fear of the social stigma they will experience if people discover the abuse. They may also feel particularly vulnerable to job loss and other consequences. Without developing understanding and empathy and taking accountability for their actions, preventing abuse in the future is difficult. Instead, abuse may continue further in both current and future relationships. Studies show that 20 to 30% of domestic abuse perpetrators re-offend “within six months of their initial assault” and 37% of the repeated abuse occurs within three months.<sup>19</sup> To reduce the chance of re-offending, perpetrators need support such as targeted therapy, relationship skills training, and help with anger management issues.

### Seeking Help: Resources and Supports

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic, you're not alone. While you may feel hopeless or afraid, there are many resources to help:

- Shelter Safe helps you find nearby shelters in Canada through an interactive digital map. There are over 600 shelters in Canada supporting people experiencing domestic abuse and children accompanying an adult. They offer emergency housing, counselling and legal help.<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sheltersafe.ca>
  - Canadian helplines and online resources are available at this link <https://www.domesticshelters.org/resources/domestic-violence-provincial-groups-canada>
  - The Trans Lifeline site is a peer-based support service that connects trans people to the community, support, and resources they need to survive and thrive. <https://translifeline.org>
- Many of these online services operate with discretion to keep people experiencing domestic abuse safe. For example, digital resources may include a prominently placed “quick exit” button that hides the page instantly.
- Law enforcement teams also offer special units focused on domestic abuse where trained officers and practitioners offer compassion and confidentiality when reporting incidents. Tools like no-contact orders are also available to protect survivors.
  - Professional counselling and therapy can offer safe spaces for survivors to share their experiences and work through the trauma of the abuse they have experienced.

### How can the community help survivors

Domestic abuse affects the entire community. Speaking out about domestic abuse helps to reduce stigma and ensure survivors feel safe enough to talk about their situations. Communities can offer support by:

- Listening without judgement.
- Believing survivors.
- Encouraging and supporting access to mental health services.
- Participating in and endorsing education campaigns such as “The Violence at Home Signal for Help,” which allows people to show a signal that identifies them as needing assistance. [https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/SFHR-Action-Guide\\_English\\_03.03.2025.pdf](https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/SFHR-Action-Guide_English_03.03.2025.pdf)

- She Is Your Neighbour provides support, resources, and interviews with experts and professionals who can help, real survivor stories) <https://www.sheisyournighbour.com>

## Building a path toward recovery

Recovery is possible. It begins when we are patient enough to listen, believe, and support those affected. Survivors need time, safe spaces, and access to ongoing mental health services to begin rebuilding their lives and regain their confidence. Start simply by not looking away. If you know someone who needs help, please reach out.

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