

# Understanding Domestic Abuse: A Resource for Patients

This handout is designed to provide information about domestic abuse, help you recognize its different forms, and guide you toward resources and support if you or someone you know is experiencing it. You are not alone, and help is available.

## What is Domestic Abuse?

Domestic abuse, also known as domestic violence or intimate partner violence, is a pattern of behaviors used by one person to maintain power and control over an intimate partner or family member. It can happen to anyone, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. It can occur in current or former relationships.

## Recognizing the Types of Abuse:

Domestic abuse isn't just physical. It can take many forms, including:

- **Physical Abuse:** Any intentional use of physical force with the intent to cause fear or injury, such as hitting, slapping, choking, Pushing, or using weapons.
- **Emotional/Psychological Abuse:** Undermining a person's self-worth and/or mental health. This can include constant criticism, insults, humiliation, intimidation, threats, isolation from family and friends, and gaslighting (making you doubt your sanity).
- **Verbal Abuse:** Using words to demean, frighten, or control. This includes yelling, swearing, name-calling, and constant put-downs.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Any sexual act without consent. This includes unwanted touching, sexual assault, rape, forcing someone to perform sexual acts, or demeaning sexual behavior.
- **Financial/Economic Abuse:** Controlling or limiting access to financial resources to make a person financially dependent. This can involve preventing someone from working, withholding money, stealing money, or forcing them to account for every penny spent.
- **Digital Abuse:** Using technology to harass, stalk, or control someone. This includes sending threatening messages, monitoring online activity, demanding passwords, or sharing intimate photos without consent.

- **Coercive Control:** A pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation, and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence.
- **Stalking/Harassment:** Repeatedly watching, following, or harassing an individual, causing them to feel fear.

### **Warning Signs of an Abusive Relationship:**

It can be difficult to recognize an abusive relationship, especially early on. Some common warning signs include a partner who:

- Is excessively jealous or possessive.
- Tries to isolate you from family and friends.
- Constantly checks up on you (calls, texts, social media).
- Has a quick temper or unpredictable mood swings.
- Blames you for their problems or abusive behavior.
- Controls your finances or decisions.
- Pressures you into sexual acts you are not comfortable with.
- Threatens you, your children, pets, or themselves if you try to leave.
- Physically harms you or damages property.

### **The Cycle of Abuse:**

Abusive relationships often follow a pattern known as the "cycle of abuse":

1. **Tension Building:** Stress and tension build. The victim may feel like they are "walking on eggshells."
2. **Incident:** An abusive incident occurs (physical, verbal, emotional, etc.).
3. **Reconciliation/Honeymoon Phase:** The abuser may apologize, promise it won't happen again, blame the victim, or deny the abuse. They might be overly affectionate and loving.
4. **Calm:** The incident is "forgotten," and a period of calm may return before tension starts to build again.

This cycle can make it very difficult to leave, as the "honeymoon phase" can give false hope for change.

### **Effects of Domestic Abuse:**

Living with domestic abuse can have severe and long-lasting effects on victims, including:

- **Physical injuries**
- **Chronic pain**
- **Mental health issues** like depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)
- **Low self-esteem**
- **Difficulty trusting others**
- **Substance abuse** as a coping mechanism

**Children who witness or experience domestic abuse** can also suffer serious emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems. They may feel scared, confused, angry, or guilty. They are at higher risk for anxiety, depression, academic problems, and repeating the cycle of violence in their own adult relationships.

### **Seeking Help and Resources:**

If you are experiencing domestic abuse, please know that confidential help is available.

### **National Resources:**

- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline:**
  - Call: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
  - TTY: 1-800-787-3224
  - Chat: TheHotline.org
  - Text: "START" to 88788
- **StrongHearts Native Helpline (for Native Americans and Alaska Natives):**
  - Call: 1-844-7NATIVE (762-8483)
- **National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline:**
  - Call: 1-866-331-9474
  - Text: "LOVEIS" to 22522
  - Chat: loveisrespect.org

### **North Carolina Resources:**

- **North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCCADV):** Provides information and resources. Website: [nccadv.org](http://nccadv.org)
- **Legal Aid of North Carolina:** Offers free legal services to eligible individuals, including help with protective orders.
  - Helpline: 1-866-219-LANC (5262)
  - Website: [legallaidnc.org](http://legallaidnc.org)

- **NC Department of Justice** - Domestic Violence Information: [ncdoj.gov/public-protection/domestic-violence/](https://ncdoj.gov/public-protection/domestic-violence/)
- **Local Law Enforcement:** In an emergency, always call 911. You can also contact your local police department or sheriff's office for assistance.

## How to Leave Safely: Creating a Safety Plan

Leaving an abusive relationship can be the most dangerous time. It's crucial to create a safety plan. Consider the following steps:

- **Tell Someone You Trust:** Confide in a trusted friend, family member, coworker, or a professional at a domestic violence agency.
- **Develop an Escape Plan:**
  - Identify safe places to go (friend's house, family member's home, shelter).
  - Determine the safest time to leave.
  - Practice your escape route if possible.
  - If you have children, discuss a safe plan with them if age-appropriate.
- **Prepare an Emergency Bag:** Keep it in a safe, hidden place or with someone you trust. Include:
  - Important documents: Driver's license, social security cards (yours and children's), birth certificates, passports, restraining orders, lease/rental agreements, medical records, insurance information.
  - Money: Cash, credit cards, bank account information (consider opening a separate account in your name).
  - Keys: House keys, car keys (a spare set).
  - Medications: Prescription medications and copies of prescriptions.
  - Clothing: A few changes of clothes for yourself and your children.
  - Phone and Charger: A fully charged phone. Consider a pay-as-you-go phone if your abuser monitors your current phone.
  - Important phone numbers: Friends, family, doctors, schools, domestic violence hotlines.
  - Comfort items for children (small toys, blanket).
- **Gather Evidence of Abuse (if safe to do so):** This could include photos of injuries, threatening messages, police reports, or medical records. Keep this evidence in a safe place.

- **Protect Your Digital Safety:**
  - Change passwords to email, social media, and bank accounts.
  - Be aware of tracking devices on your phone or car.
  - Use a safe computer (e.g., at a library or trusted friend's house) when looking for help or resources.
- **Consider a Protective Order (Restraining Order):** This is a legal order that can help protect you from your abuser. Legal Aid or the Family Justice Center can assist with this.
- **After Leaving:**
  - Change your locks if you remain in your home and the abuser has left.
  - Vary your routines and travel routes.
  - Inform your employer, school, or daycare about the situation if you feel comfortable and it's safe to do so.
  - Continue to seek support from counselors, support groups, and trusted individuals.

**Remember:**

- You deserve to be safe and respected.
- The abuse is not your fault.
- Help is available, and you don't have to go through this alone.
- Leaving is a process, and it's okay to ask for help every step of the way.

**This handout provides general information. Please reach out to the resources listed for personalized support and guidance.**