

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is all about power and control. It is defined as a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners. It's not an isolated or one-time event, but rather a pattern of events that occurs over time. These behaviors may include physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic abuse. They occur in intimate relationships where the batterer and victim are currently, or have been previously, dating, living together, or married. They may have children together, but this is not always the case. The relationship may be long-term or very short-lived, and domestic violence can occur in heterosexual, gay, or lesbian relationships. Domestic violence occurs in all racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, educational, occupational, and religious groups.

Domestic violence revolves around the batterer's pattern of abusive acts, which are directed at gaining control over the victim. It can encompass every aspect of the victim's life so that independent thought and action become impossible. The batterer wants the victim to be focused on fulfilling the needs and requirements of the batterer, and selectively chooses tactics that work to control the victim. These tactics can include any or all of the following forms of abuse.

Physical abuse can include some of the more obvious actions such as hitting, slapping, and tripping, as well as locking the victim out of the house, withholding medical attention or medications, or withholding food or sleep.

Sexual abuse can include rape, coercion of offensive acts, denying the victim the use of contraceptives (or forcing the victim to use contraceptives), and deliberately infecting the victim with STDs.

Psychological or emotional abuse can include humiliation of the victim by the batterer, ignoring the victim's feelings, withholding affection or approval, harassment about "affairs," and undercutting the victim's sense of reality. Although physical abuse is the easiest to identify as domestic violence, batterers often are able to gain control by using emotional or psychological abuse, convincing the victim that they are to blame for the abuse, that they are too stupid, ugly, crazy, etc. for anyone else to want, that they can never get away, that the batterer will gain custody of the children if the victim leaves, or that the batterer

will commit suicide or kill the victim or loved ones if the victim tries to leave. Psychological abuse is every bit as harmful as physical or sexual abuse.

Economic abuse occurs when the batterer controls all financial assets, either preventing the victim from working or going to school, or sometimes forcing the victim to work to support the family, with all of the victim's money still going to the abuser. Economic abuse can also include the abuser ruining the credit rating of the victim.

In addition to physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, there are other forms of control that abusers also use at times, including isolating the victim from any friends, family or others who might serve as a support system for the victim. Sometimes the batterer may use the children to control the victim's behavior, either by being unusually harsh with them when the victim "misbehaves," forcing them to watch the victim being abused, or using the children as unwitting spies and allies (i.e. "What did Mommy do today while I was at work?") Some batterers also attack the victim's property or the family pets to demonstrate to the victim that this can also be done to them.

In spite of all of this, victims of domestic violence are strong, resilient individuals. They have found a way to survive that works for them, and are their own best experts for what they need to do to continue to survive. They need a lot of support and understanding, and need to know that help is available. The RACS hotline can be a starting point for this. That number is 634-8346, or 1-800-303-0013.