# What is domestic violence?

## Importance of Understanding Domestic Violence

The U.S. Surgeon General recently declared domestic violence to be the number one health concern in our country today. Understanding the definition of domestic violence can help you take action against it. Some people may not even realize that they are inflicting domestic violence on someone else. On the flipside, victims will not know to take action against their abusers if they do not realize that what is being inflicted upon them is, in fact, domestic violence. Likewise, friends and loved ones of victims are in a better place to help if they understand what domestic violence looks like. Therefore, it is important that people understand the definition of domestic violence and the many forms it can take.

## Definition of Domestic Violence

According to the United States Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, the definition of domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain control over another intimate partner. Many forms of abuse are included in the definition of domestic violence:

- **Physical abuse** can include hitting, biting, slapping, battering, shoving, punching, pulling hair, burning, cutting, pinching, etc. (any type of violent behavior inflicted on the victim). Physical abuse also includes denying someone medical treatment and forcing drug/alcohol use on someone.

- **Sexual abuse** occurs when the abuser coerces or attempts to coerce the victim into having sexual contact or sexual behavior without the victims consent. This often takes the form of marital rape, attacking sexual body parts, physical violence that is followed by forcing sex, sexually demeaning the victim, or even telling sexual jokes at the victims expense.

- **Emotional abuse** involves invalidating or deflating the victims sense of self-worth and/or self-esteem. Emotional abuse often takes the form of constant criticism, name-calling, injuring the victims relationship with his/her children, or interfering with the victims abilities.

- **Economic abuse** takes place when the abuser makes or tries to make the victim financially reliant. Economic abusers often seek to maintain total control over financial resources, withhold the victims access to funds, or prohibit the victim from going to school or work.

- **Psychological abuse** involves the abuser invoking fear through intimidation; threatening to physically hurt himself/herself, the victim, children, the victims family or friends, or the pets; destruction of property; injuring the pets; isolating the victim from loved ones; and prohibiting the victim from going to school or work.

- **Threats** to hit, injure, or use a weapon are a form of psychological abuse.

- **Stalking** can include following the victim, spying, watching, harassing, showing up at the victims home or work, sending gifts, collecting information, making phone calls, leaving written messages, or appearing at a person’s home or workplace. These acts individually are typically legal, but any of these behaviors done continuously results in stalking crime.

- **Cyberstalking** refers to online action or repeated emailing that inflicts substantial emotional distress in the recipient.

## Who Can be Victims of Domestic Violence

The definition of domestic violence goes on to say that victims can include anyone, regardless of socioeconomic background, education level, race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. Domestic violence used to be referred to as wife abuse. However, this term was abandoned when the definition of domestic violence changed to recognize that wives are not the only ones who can fall victim to domestic violence. The definition of domestic violence now recognizes that victims
can be:

- Spouses
- Sexual/Dating/Intimate partners
- Family members
- Children
- Cohabitants

Many people think that a victim of domestic violence can only obtain a protective order against his or her spouse. This is actually a myth. Most states allow victims of abusive cohabitant lovers to obtain protective orders (also referred to as temporary restraining orders or emergency protective orders). Some states allow victims of abusive adult relatives, roommates, or even non-cohabitating partners to obtain protective orders. The laws in each state are different. As recognition for the need for protection grows in each state, the law evolves to reflect it, so be sure to check the most updated laws in your state.

**Dating Violence**

Dating violence is another form of domestic violence. The Violence Against Women Act defines dating violence according to the relationship between the abuser and victim. Dating violence is committed by a person in a social, romantic, or intimate relationship with the victim. The existence of such relationship is determined using the following factors:

- The length of the relationship
- The type of relationship
- The partners frequency of interaction

**Help for Victims**

- National Domestic Violence Hotline
  1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
  1-800-787-3224 (TTY)
  www.ndvh.org
- Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network
  1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
  www.rainn.org
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)
  1-877-739-3895
  www.nsvrc.org
- National Center for Victims of Crime, Stalking Resource Center
  1-800-394-2255
  1-800-211-7996 (TTY)
  www.ncvc.org
- National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline
  1-866-331-9474
  1-866-331-8453 TTY
  www.loveisrespect.org

**Help for Abusers**

- EMERGE: A Men's Counseling Service
  617-547-9879
  www.emergedv.com
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