

The Effects of Traumatic Brain Injuries on Those Impacted by Domestic Violence



We know domestic violence (also known as intimate partner violence or relationship abuse) may significantly affect the health outcomes of those who experience it and even those who witness it. When we think of relationship abuse, physical harm comes to mind. Many people may think of broken bones, black eyes, or bruises. But this stereotypical view of domestic violence doesn't account for the serious harm caused by nonphysical forms of violence, including emotional, financial, digital, and other forms of abuse. It is important to recognize that all forms of abuse cause significant harm, and they're not always easy to spot; they may even seem invisible.

Women in violent relationships are significantly more likely to experience mental health concerns than women in nonviolent relationships, specifically depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Temple, Weston, and Marshall, 2010). Overall poor and chronic health problems—including headaches, memory loss, chronic pain, and gastrointestinal disorders—are common among women who have experienced abuse (World Health Organization, *Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women* 2012). One serious health issue related to abuse is traumatic brain injuries (TBI).

The effects of TBI can last a lifetime, and symptoms often go untreated for domestic violence (DV) survivors. Families, friends, and loved ones can play a crucial role in helping survivors identify the signs and seek the healthcare they need. Here are some important things to know if you or someone you know is experiencing or at risk for abuse.

1

What are TBI?

- **TBI occurs when sudden trauma causes damage to the brain.** TBI can result when the head suddenly and violently hits an object or when an object pierces the skull and enters brain tissue.
- **TBI can occur as a result of physical abuse** or assaults such as causing a fall, being shoved, being struck by an object, or from gunshots near the head. Strangulation is one of the **most lethal** forms of DV. It's possible to show no symptoms at first but die weeks later due to lack of oxygen and other internal injuries.

2

What are the common symptoms?

- **Symptoms of TBI can be mild, moderate, or severe,** depending on the extent of the damage.
- Someone with **mild TBI** may remain conscious or experience a loss of consciousness for a few seconds or minutes.
- **Other symptoms of mild TBI include:**
 - headache
 - confusion
 - lightheadedness
 - dizziness
 - blurred vision or tired eyes
 - ringing in the ears
 - bad taste in the mouth
 - fatigue or lethargy
 - change in sleep patterns
 - behavioral or mood changes
 - trouble with memory, concentration, attention, or thinking
- **A person with a moderate or severe TBI** may show these same symptoms but may also have:
 - A headache that gets worse or does not go away
 - Repeated vomiting or nausea
 - Dilation of one or both pupils
 - An inability to awaken from sleep
 - Convulsions or seizures
 - Slurred speech
 - Weakness or numbness in the extremities
 - Loss of coordination
 - Increased confusion, restlessness, or agitation

3

Intersections of DV, primary care for TBI assessment & treatment

- **A TBI evaluation is essential when abuse or physical force to the head, neck, or face occurs.** Here are some resources for talking to a healthcare provider or finding a center near you.
 - Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funded **health centers** are designed to serve medically underserved populations.
 - For your overall health and well-being, communicate certain things to your doctor, like if your partner has strangled or attempted to strangle you.
 - Many doctors are starting to screen for intimate partner violence in their **initial intake** with patients, whether in person or through medical history forms.
 - Your doctor can help with **safety planning**, provide local resources, and **document** what you're going through.
 - If you are concerned about TBI symptoms, ask if your doctor can use more sophisticated imaging techniques for screening. TBI *will not appear* on an X-Ray, MRI, or CT scan.

4

You are not alone

- **If you need support** and want to learn more about keeping yourself or your loved one safe in the face of abuse, our advocates are here 24 hours a day, seven days a week.