



Survivor-Centered Domestic Violence Non-Traditional Media Guide

At The Hotline, we know how widely domestic violence occurs. [Intimate partner violence affects more than 12 million people every year](#). This includes men and women, [gender non-conforming folks](#), and people in straight and [LGBTQ+ relationships](#). Because it is so pervasive, domestic violence is discussed more than ever—in the news, podcasts, social media, books, and TV shows. While many talk about domestic violence, everyone should approach the subject as caring and survivor-centered.

Whether you are an influencer, Twitch streamer, or podcast host, in this guide, we will share with you the best practices on how you can talk about relationship abuse in a survivor-centered way. This guide will cover:

- Ethical storytelling and respect survivor's experiences
- The importance of survivor language
- Survivor-centered language
- Terms to avoid
- Ways to keep in touch with The Hotline

Practice ethical, trauma-informed storytelling

Whether you are speaking to a survivor directly about their experience or talking about someone's experience with domestic violence, it is essential to ensure that you are doing so in an ethical and trauma-informed manner to avoid re-traumatizing survivors, exploiting them and/or reinforcing harmful narratives and stereotypes about domestic abuse. Ethical storytelling requires you to consider who benefits, who is harmed and who is part of the story collection, development and sharing process. A few tips for ethical storytelling include:

- Getting written consent from survivors
- Co-creating with survivors whenever possible
- Asking survivors for their feedback
- Sharing how stories will be used, how long and where

Respect survivor's unique experiences

Domestic violence looks different for each person who experiences it. There is no "one size fits all" approach for survivors who are trying to leave a violent situation, and there are many factors that may influence the decisions survivors make to keep themselves safe. It's important to honor survivors who choose to share their stories and respect their journeys without judgment.

The importance of survivor-centered language

Whether you are writing a book about domestic violence, hosting a podcast, or talking about it on social media, it's crucial to use survivor-centric language and accurate descriptions of abuse. Survivor-centered language recognizes that a survivor is a person before anything else, and their lived experience needs to be who should be treated with dignity and respect. It can show survivors that what they are going through is valid, real, and that they are not alone in their experience. Survivor-centered language, instead of victim-blaming, can help survivors feel comfortable talking about abuse or reaching out for support.

Accurate descriptions of DV can help survivors recognize the abuse they are experiencing and raise awareness of resources or programs that offer support. When diverse stories of abuse are discussed instead of stereotypes, people better understand the impacts of abuse. This raises awareness in communities not often centered in our society such as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+), and immigrant communities.

Survivor-centered language

There are many different words that are used when talking about domestic violence. Use the lists below to ensure you're talking about domestic violence in caring and survivor-centered ways.

Domestic violence, relationship abuse, or intimate partner violence – what do I use?

If you've been to our site, you've probably seen us use different phrases when talking about abuse. We define domestic violence as a pattern of behavior used by one romantic or sexual partner to gain and maintain [power and control](#) over the other.

There are many phrases that convey this uneven power dynamic – domestic violence, relationship abuse, intimate partner violence (IPV), dating abuse, or dating violence can all be used when talking about domestic violence. Other types of abuse, such as child or elder abuse, could also fall under domestic violence. If you're worried about confusing your audience, use intimate partner violence to clarify what you're discussing.

Example: I recently found out that Tanya was experiencing relationship abuse. I just thought her partner was cranky and rude, but he was actually being emotionally abusive. I had no idea that it was intimate partner violence.

Survivor or victim - what's the difference?

At The Hotline, you will see us consistently refer to someone experiencing domestic violence as a 'survivor.' Our goal is to shift power back to those experiencing IPV, so we use the term 'survivor' to empower those experiencing relationship abuse and emphasize their strength and agency.

While the term 'victim' is not an incorrect way to talk about someone experiencing abuse, we believe survivor is a more empowering and positive term. The term 'victim' is often used by law enforcement, medical professionals, or the court system, so it is appropriate to use that term when discussing those parts of domestic violence.

Example: Ben now felt ready to tell his family that he was a survivor of domestic violence. It was scary to share with them, but he was grateful he could now have their support as he made his plan to leave.

Abusive partner, not batterer.

‘Batterer’ is a word that has been heavily used in the past when talking about someone who is abusive. This is an outdated term that focuses on one type of abuse (physical), when there are many different [types of abuse](#) someone can experience. The term reinforces stereotypes about people who cause harm, which can be a barrier to rehabilitation and choosing not to abuse.

Instead, use the phrases ‘abusive partner’ or ‘person causing harm’. These phrases are not limited to only one type of abuse. They also emphasize the fact that abuse is an active decision one partner makes against the other.

Example: After they first left, it was triggering anytime Jaime's abusive partner was mentioned. They didn't want to think about the person who had caused them so much harm.

Pattern of abuse vs cycle.

When we talk with survivors, we focus on the behaviors of the abusive partner, including how frequent or consistent they are. Focusing on the pattern of abuse clarifies that abuse is a choice, where ‘cycle’ makes it seem inevitable that the abuse will continue.

Example: Melanie had been stressed recently and decided to see a counselor. As she was describing how intense things had been with her husband, the counselor started to see a pattern evolve. The events weren't a onetime thing but were actually a pattern of abusive behaviors.

Gender-neutral terms

Domestic abuse does not discriminate. Anyone can experience abuse, and anyone can be abusive, regardless of their gender identity. Unless you are discussing or depicting a specific DV situation, using gender-neutral terms helps erase stereotypes about who experiences abuse and who is abusive.

Example: Intimate partner violence occurs when one romantic partner uses different tactics to gain and maintain power and control over their partner. One tactic is isolation – controlling what they do, who they see and talk to, and where they go.

Things to avoid when talking about domestic violence.

Don't repeat false or uncertain information.

While it can be tempting to react to information or claims that come out about domestic violence, it's important not to repeat false or unconfirmed information when talking about IPV. This often looks like using phrases such as “I know you might think that, but actually...” When we restate false or uncertain information, we give it more oxygen - even if we state that it's a lie in our next breath. People will remember the negative things, so be sure to lead with what you know is true.

Example: The court records show that the police were called to the house three separate times in response to abuse. I don't know why they didn't act at those times.

Stereotypes

Most people make assumptions about what domestic violence looks like and who experiences it. Anyone can experience abuse; a person's race, gender identity, education, or socioeconomic status does not determine whether they will be abusive or experience abuse. People can also experience many different types of abuse, and their experiences escaping an abusive situation may also vary based on their unique circumstances.

Avoiding stereotypes can help survivors and the public understand what abuse really looks like and that it can impact anyone. Showing the diversity of those who experience abuse also lets survivors know they are not alone in their experience.

Example: Don't use this: I'm not surprised her husband ended up being violent. He always seemed brute-ish to me.

Instead say: That's so upsetting that her husband ended up being violent. It just goes to show that you never know how people are behind closed doors.

Victim-blaming

It's important to remember that abuse is a choice someone makes. Survivors are often put in sticky situations that they cannot easily leave. It's important to highlight the choices an abusive partner makes, not blame the survivor. Respect the decisions that survivors make, regardless of what they are, for they are made under incredibly difficult circumstances.

Example: I can't imagine what it was like going through such an intense time. Having someone you love hurt you in that way sounds terrible. I don't know what I would do in that situation.

Humorizing DV

Domestic violence is a serious and life-threatening situation, so it's important to view it as such. Some people use humor to cope with the trauma DV brings up, while others find jokes about physical violence or controlling someone humorous. These jokes frequently contain sexist language and can be offensive, so it is important to avoid humorizing DV. When domestic violence is seen as serious, people are more likely to take it seriously when hearing about it.

Example: Don't say: Sometimes, I wish I could get a little aggressive with my partner. It sure would help stop the nagging.

Instead say: Sometimes my partner really stresses me out. When that happens, I let them know I need a break and go take some deep breaths in another room.

Let's Keep in Touch

If you have any questions or concerns about domestic violence or how your organization can support survivors and talk about relationship abuse with your audiences, please feel free to contact the communications team. Please find our contact information below:

The National Domestic Violence Hotline

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