

Supporting domestic violence survivors



A tip sheet for faith-based members and helpers

Domestic violence, or relationship abuse, is pervasive and does not discriminate. It can affect individuals of any religion, race, age, gender, sexuality, or education level. Whether someone is a survivor or an individual who chooses to engage in abusive behavior, **domestic violence** is impacting our communities in significant ways. It encompasses physical harm, intimidation, manipulation, control or otherwise force a partner to do things they do not wish to.

In fact, in the United States, nearly 3 in 10 women and 1 in 10 men have experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner and reported it having a significant impact on their functioning such as injury, fear, concern for safety, and needing services.¹ The purpose of this tip sheet is to aid members of faith communities in recognizing, supporting, and raising awareness about domestic violence within their congregations.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is a serious issue that violates the human dignity of another person. Faith-based communities share a collective mission to bring healing, advocate for the common good in society, and eradicate all forms of violence—whether physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal—in a loving, compassionate, and non-judgmental manner. Members of your faith community experiencing abuse may often seek counsel, support, and safety from those they are closest too. Faith-based individuals, like yourself, play a pivotal role in offering assistance to individuals of any gender who have endured or are currently experiencing domestic violence. We must also do more to hold those who choose to cause harm accountable for their actions.



¹ Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

What are the common types of domestic violence?

Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, relationship abuse or dating abuse, is a major public health crisis and a serious violation of human rights. Domestic violence manifests as a pattern of harmful or controlling behaviors used to exert power and control over an intimate partner, often through isolation and intimidation. Knowing the types of abuse is crucial for faith-based helpers, but it can also lead to more questions. Below are common types of domestic violence:

- **Physical Abuse:** **Physical abuse** is any intentional, unwanted contact with you or something close to your body, or any behavior that causes or has the intention of causing you injury, disability, or death.
- **Emotional and verbal Abuse:** Emotional abuse includes non-physical behaviors such as threats, insults, constant monitoring or “checking in,” excessive texting, humiliation, intimidation, isolation, or stalking.
- **Sexual Abuse:** **Sexual abuse** refers to any behavior that pressures or coerces someone to do something sexually that they don’t want to do.
- **Reproductive Coercion:** **Reproductive coercion** is often defined as threats or acts of violence against a partner’s reproductive health or reproductive decision-making.
- **Financial Abuse:** **Financial abuse** manifests when one partner exerts control over the other’s finances or impedes their ability to independently provide for themselves. It operates subtly, making it challenging to identify.
- **Digital Abuse:** **Digital abuse** or technology-facilitated abuse encompasses any abuse facilitated through the use of technology to harass, control, intimidate, stalk, embarrass or manipulate an intimate partner. Examples may include incessant or excessive texting, social media harassment, or using technology to stalk or intimidate a partner.
- **Stalking:** Stalking occurs when someone watches, follows, or harasses you repeatedly, making you feel afraid or unsafe.

Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse, often referred to as religious abuse, is a form of mistreatment that can take place within faith communities or intimate relationships. Spiritual abuse may involve an elder or faith leader inflicting abuse on members of the congregation, fostering a toxic culture through shame or control. However, it’s important to recognize that spiritual abuse can extend beyond organized religious settings and occur within intimate relationships. Individuals of any belief system, irrespective of their religion, can experience spiritual abuse. Examples include:

- Religion or spiritual beliefs of a partner are **ridiculed or insulted**
- **Denies the other partner the right to practice** their religion or spiritual beliefs
- **Manipulates or shames** their partner’s religious or spiritual beliefs
- Raising children in a faith that the **other partner does not agree with**
- Religion is used to **justify or minimize abusive behaviors** (such as physical, financial, emotional, or sexual abuse).

Since spiritual life is deeply personal, **spiritual abuse** is no less harmful or difficult to endure than other forms of abuse. Detecting spiritual abuse can be challenging, as many survivors may not realize they are being abused. Furthermore, the abusive partner may attempt to deflect scrutiny by using religion to manipulate and blame-shift, claiming that challenging their abuse is an assault on their religious freedom.

Identifying the warning signs of domestic violence

The use of religious traditions to justify abusive behaviors is often misinterpreted by those who choose to abuse. If your church member is experiencing relationship abuse, it can be difficult to spot unhealthy behaviors and abuse. It is important to know the [signs of abuse](#) and what you observe, as it can have a profound effect on your fellow believers. Here are common tactics abusers can use to watch out for if members of your faith-based community experience domestic violence:

- **Controlling household finances** such as taking money or refusing to provide money for necessary expenses.
- **Pressure to perform sexual acts** or pressuring their partner to engage in sex they have no interest in having.
- Intimidation through **threatening looks** or actions.
- Preventing or **discouraging time with friends**, family, or peers.
- Insulting or **demeaning others** in public.
- **Intimidation with weapons** such as guns, knives, bats, or mace.

How to talk about domestic violence

Speaking about relationship abuse can be challenging for survivors within a faith community. They might have encountered contradictory messages, fearing a lack of support, possible shunning, or fear not being believed. Additionally, there may be a hesitancy among faith-based members to help survivors on providing support without unintentionally causing harm. Here are some ways you, as a faith-based helper, can discuss relationship abuse with your fellow believers.

- **Listen and don't judge:** [Engaging in conversations](#) about abuse can be incredibly difficult for anyone, especially survivors. They are more likely to open up to faith-based helpers when they feel safe and not pressured. Practice active listening and be supportive, even if you don't fully understand or agree with their decisions. Acknowledge the difficulty and fear of their situation, recognizing their bravery in discussing the abuse. Avoid speaking negatively about the abusive partner, and focus on using behavior-centered language. For example, "It's not okay that your partner belittles you that way" instead of "Your partner is a terrible person."
- **Offer support and prioritize safety:** Leaving an unhealthy or abusive relationship is difficult and may be dangerous. Realize your faith member may not be ready to contact anyone. Helping them create a [safety plan](#) and find resources for their situation could be beneficial. Offer to go with them to any service provider or legal setting for moral support.
- **Continue to be supportive of them:** Understand that leaving a relationship is a dangerous time but it's often met with multiple barriers. If they decide to end the relationship and are experiencing loneliness, distress, or even a return to their abusive partner, maintain your support.
- **Remember that you cannot "rescue them,"** and that decisions about their lives are up to them to make.

Supporting fellow believers on the margins

Supporting faith-based members of marginalized communities may look different than helping individuals outside of those communities. Communities on the margins face unique barriers that may impact their ability to get support. They may also face additional challenges that are important to understand when providing support around their relationships. Below are links to articles that provide tips on how to support various members of different communities:

- **Black Community:** Due to systemic racism, which affects our social structures as well as our policies, both [Black women](#) and Black men experience domestic violence at higher rates than other communities.
- **Asian American Pacific Islander (APPI) Community:** Abuse in [Asian American](#) and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities occurs at high rates, especially with women experiencing intimate partner violence. According to the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, up to 55% of Asian women in the U.S. have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, while 18% of AAPI women experienced rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner.
- **Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing Community:** Survivors of domestic violence in the [Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing](#) communities face significant challenges when leaving abusive situations. This includes communication barriers, limited access to information, isolation, and interruption of care or support - especially if the abusive partner is the primary source of communication, transportation, or other support.
- **Disability Community:** Studies show that people with [disabilities](#) are more likely to experience abuse than people without them. Abuse is premised on power and control, and people with disabilities often face specific barriers to accessing help that make them more vulnerable to abuse.
- **Senior or Elderly Community:** Senior or Elderly Community: Abuse can begin later in life or start earlier and continue into later years. [Older men](#) and women are also more likely to experience domestic violence at this age if they enter a new relationship later in life.

Resources

If you know of a church member or someone in an abusive relationship, it can be very helpful to know about options and ways to locate safe shelters, or resources that could be of benefit. Here are a couple of national organizations that can help you in your research:

- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline:** If you know of a member or suspect someone in your congregation is experiencing relationship abuse, advocates at the National Domestic Violence Hotline are available 24/7 to identify available options to ensure their safety. Call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), text "START" to 88788, or chat at thehotline.org. You can also search our national directory of local resources and providers on our website under the "Get Help" section.
- **love is respect:** Is the national resource to disrupt and prevent unhealthy relationships and intimate partner violence by empowering young people through inclusive and equitable education, support, and resources. Call 1-866-331-9474, text "LOVEIS" to 22522, or chat at loveisrespect.org.
- **StrongHearts:** Offers 24/7 free, confidential, and culturally relevant support for Native American and Alaska Native teens and young adults experiencing dating abuse and sexual violence. Call 844-7NATIVE (762-8483) or chat live at strongheartshelpline.org.
- **Battered Women's Justice Project (BWJP):** Provides training and technical assistance on civil, legal, and criminal justice system issues related to violence against women, including survivors who have been charged with crimes. Call 1-800-903-0111 or visit bwjp.org.
- **The Trevor Project:** Provides 24/7 confidential crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ+ teens and young adults. Call 1-866-488-7386, text "START" to 678678, or chat live at thetrevorproject.org.
- **Cyber Civil Rights Initiative:** Offers emotional support, technical advice, and information to current victims of online abuse and provides access and communication to victims of nonconsensual pornography (NCP) 24/7 via phone, email, and chat. Call 844-878-CCRI (2274) or visit cybercivilrights.org.
- **National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence:** Provides training and consultation, promote collaboration and diversity to end domestic and sexual violence. For more information, visit ncdsv.org.
- **National Center on Elder Abuse:** Is a national resource center dedicated to the prevention of elder mistreatment. Since its inception, the NCEA has operated as a unique, multi-disciplinary consortium of equal partners with expertise in elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation. For more information, visit ncea.acl.gov