

FaithTrust Institute Q & A on Domestic Violence

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Q: What is domestic violence?

A: Domestic violence refers to a pattern of violent and coercive behavior exercised by one adult in an intimate relationship over another. It is not “marital conflict,” “mutual abuse,” “a lovers’ quarrel,” or “a private family matter.” It may consist of repeated, severe beatings or more subtle forms of abuse, including threats and control.

Q: Who are the victims of domestic violence?

A: According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 95% of domestic violence victims in America are women, although men may also be victims. Regardless of who is being victimized, domestic violence is a serious problem that needs to be addressed by religious communities.

Q: How prevalent is domestic violence?

A: Surveys from the U.S. and Canada indicate that domestic violence occurs in 28% of all marriages. Researchers believe this estimate is too low since most domestic violence incidents are unreported.

Q: What are the four basic types of domestic violence?

A: The four basic types of domestic violence are:

- Physical Assault
Includes, shoving, pushing, restraining, hitting or kicking. Physical assaults may occur frequently or infrequently, but in many cases they tend to escalate in severity and frequency over time.
- Sexual Assault
Any time one partner forces sexual acts that are unwanted or declined by the other partner.
- Psychological Assault
Includes isolation from family and friends, forced financial dependence, verbal and emotional abuse, threats, intimidation and control over where the partner can go and what she can do.
- Attacks Against Property and Pets
Destruction of property that may include household objects or treasured items belonging to the victim, hitting the walls, or abusing or killing beloved pets.

Q: How do I know if someone is a victim of domestic violence?

A: Among the more obvious signs of domestic violence is evidence of frequent bruises, broken bones and physical attacks. Often less obvious is emotional abuse, as evidenced by

harassment, stalking and excessively possessive, controlling or jealous behavior, which are also signs of domestic violence.

Another warning sign is isolation: Victims of domestic violence are often cut off from systems of support by their batterers, becoming distant from friends, relatives or neighbors.

Women who are being battered are as different from each other as non-battered women. They come from all walks of life, all races, all educational backgrounds and all religions. A battered woman might be the vice-president of your local bank, your child's Sunday school teacher, your beautician or dentist. Anyone experiencing any of the patterns of abuse listed above is a victim of domestic violence.

Q: Why does she stay?

A: She stays because she is terrified that he will become more violent if she leaves, that he will try to take the children, that she can't make it on her own. He has probably threatened her life.

She may also believe that divorce is wrong, that the violence is her fault, that she can change his behavior, that she can stop the abuse or that the violence is temporary. She may also be experiencing pressure from family, and her religious or cultural community. Since batterers often isolate victims, she might feel cut off from any social support or resources.

Q: Who are batterers?

A: As with their victims, individuals who batter fall into no specific categories. They come from all class backgrounds, races, religions and walks of life. They may be unemployed or highly paid professionals. The batterer may be a good provider, a sober and upstanding member of the community, and a respected member of his congregation.

Q: What can I do to be helpful if an abusive situation is revealed?

- Listen to the victim and believe her. Tell her that the abuse is not her fault, and is not God's will.
- Tell her she is not alone and that help is available.
- Let her know that without intervention, abuse often escalates in frequency and severity over time.
- Seek expert assistance. Refer her only to specialized domestic violence counseling programs, not to couples counseling. Help her find a shelter, a safe home or advocacy resources to offer her protection. Suggesting that she merely return home places her and her children in real danger.
- Hold the abuser accountable. Don't minimize his abusive behavior. Support him in seeking specialized batterers' counseling to help change his behavior. Continue to hold him accountable and to support and protect the victim even after he has begun a counseling program.
- If reconciliation is to occur, it can be considered only after the above steps have taken place.