

Domestic violence - common factors

Family violence (also called domestic violence) is the use of violence, threats, force or intimidation to control or manipulate a family member, partner or former partner. In such a relationship, there is an imbalance of power where abusive behaviour or violence is used to control others.

Not all family violence is caused by men, but research shows that men are most often the perpetrators of violence in domestic relationships, and women and children are often the victims. International research has shown that, globally, one in three women experience violence from a partner.

Family violence can occur in any kind of family relationship, including between couples, family members, in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, and against people who are elderly or disabled.

Although family violence can affect anyone, regardless of their social or economic status, or their racial and cultural background, some women are at greater risk, including:

- Indigenous women
- women in regional or remote areas
- young women
- women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- pregnant women
- women living with a disability.

Family violence is an under-reported crime.

Common factors in family violence

Gender inequality between men and women is a significant factor that contributes to the high rate of violence by men towards women in relationships.

There is no such thing as a 'typical' perpetrator of family violence. However, researchers have found that perpetrators often:

- use violence and emotional abuse to control their families
- believe that they have the right to behave in whatever way they choose while in their own home
- hold certain beliefs about masculinity, including that a 'real' man should be tough, powerful and the head of the household. They may believe that they should make most of the decisions, including about how money is spent
- believe that men are entitled to sex from their partners
- don't take responsibility for their behaviour and prefer to think that loved ones or circumstances provoked their behaviour
- make excuses for their violence – for example, they will blame alcohol or stress
- report 'losing control' when angry around their families, but can control their anger around other people. They don't tend to use violence in other situations, for example, around friends, bosses, work colleagues or the police
- try to minimise, blame others for, justify or deny their use of violence, or the impact of their violence on family members.

Some perpetrators have grown up in an abusive household themselves, but the majority have not.

Family violence and the alcohol myth

It is commonly thought that family violence is primarily caused by alcohol abuse. This isn't true. While alcohol can be a trigger, it is seldom the cause. The perpetrator is sober in about half of domestic violence cases where the police are called. Also, not all alcoholics or binge drinkers resort to violence when angered or frustrated.

If a man abuses family members and also tends to have difficulty with controlling his alcohol consumption, he needs to recognise that he has two separate problems.

Resistance to seeking help for violence

While some men who are violent may think about getting help, the majority of them don't. Some of the reasons men do not seek out help include:

- Acceptance of violence – a man who thinks that he is entitled to dominate family members, and that it is okay to solve problems with violence, may not believe that he needs help. He may blame the victim for 'provoking' his behaviour.
- Notions of masculinity – for many men, the idea of what it means to be a man includes silence and strength. A man may avoid seeking help because he doesn't want to look 'weak' or feminine.
- Fear – feelings of shame can prevent many men from seeking help.

Getting help for family violence

Regular counselling with a trained counsellor can help family violence perpetrators to understand and change their behaviour. Counselling and behaviour-change programs focus on examining and addressing deeply held beliefs about violence, masculinity, control of others, the impact of their use of violence towards others, self-control and responsibility for one's actions.

Men's behaviour change programs encourage male perpetrators to examine motivations for violence and teach practical strategies, including:

- learning that violence and abuse is not caused by anger, but the desire to hurt or dominate others
- learning how violent behaviour damages his relationship with his partner and children, and how he can behave in more respectful ways
- self-talk and time out – the man is taught how to recognise signs of anger, and how to use strategies like self-talk and time out. A man can use self-talk messages, such as 'Anger will not solve this problem', to remind himself to remain calm.

A trained counsellor can help a man find his own effective self-talk messages. Time out means walking away from the situation until the man feels calmer. Time out must be discussed with the man's partner, so that both parties understand how and why to use it. However, time out is not an avoidance technique, and the man must try and work out the problem at a later opportunity.

Rehabilitation after family violence

Women and children who live with violent men live in a constant state of anxiety and fear. A man who is undergoing counselling for his violent behaviour needs to recognise that regaining the trust of his family, and the behaviour-change process, will take time. He also needs to accept that his partner has a right to end the relationship if she wishes.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)

For men:

- Men's Referral Service—a confidential and anonymous telephone service for men who want to stop their violent or abusive behaviour towards family members Tel. 1300 766 491 website: www.mrs.org.au

For women:

- Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre—the Victorian statewide service for women experiencing violence and abuse from a partner or ex-partner, another family member or someone else close to them Tel. 1800 015 188 (24 hours, 7 days) website: www.safesteps.org.au
- To find out about local support services, contact the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria Phone (03) 9486 9866 (Monday–Friday, 9.00 am to 5.00 pm).
- 1800 RESPECT: National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service – free telephone counselling helpline. Phone 1800 737 732 (24 hours, 7 days). website: www.1800respect.org.au

Things to remember

- The causes of family violence include deeply held beliefs about masculinity.
- Perpetrators tend to blame other people, alcohol or circumstances for their violent outbursts.
- Perpetrators often minimise, blame others, justify or deny their use of violence or the impact of their violence.
- A man who is undergoing counselling for his violent behaviour needs to recognise that regaining the trust of his family will take time, and that his partner has the right to end the relationship if she chooses to.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria – DVRCV

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