Overview

People often picture domestic violence as abuse between romantic partners. Although definitions vary by state, domestic violence frequently includes the abuse of children, other family members, household members, and partners. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a term that specifically refers to the abuse of a current or former romantic partner. This can include people who have dated, spouses, and other romantic or sexual partners.

Each year, more than 10 million people in the United States experience IPV. However, it is difficult to truly understand the prevalence of IPV because of how it is underreported. This is especially true in cases involving people with disabilities. It is understood though that having a disability increases the risk of being abused. In particular, women with disabilities were found to be twice as likely to experience IPV than women without disabilities. Also, IPV can lead to an individual acquiring a temporary or permanent disability. The acknowledgement that people with disabilities are more likely to experience abuse and unlikely to report it demonstrates that it needs to be addressed and understood better. One important step is to learn about what abuse can look like for ourselves and for others.

Types of Abuse

It can be difficult to recognize abuse when it happens in a romantic relationship. Also, people with disabilities may experience abuse in ways that people without disabilities do not. Some of these examples are listed in the table below. IPV includes many forms of abuse and people often experience more than one kind in the same relationship. Furthermore, some acts of abuse can fall into more than one category.

| Physical<sup>2,5,6,9</sup> | - Punching, kicking, choking, hairpulling  
- Damaging property such as punching walls or throwing objects  
- Preventing partner from eating or sleeping  
- Damaging or denying access to assistive technology such as wheelchairs, communication devices, or prostheses  
- Withholding, manipulating, or forcing medication  
- Denying access to transportation and doctor’s appointments |
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| Emotional/Verbal<sup>2,5,6</sup> | - Name calling  
- Continually criticizing or insulting  
- Isolating you from friends and family  
- Withholding affection as punishment  
- Controlling appearance, such as clothes or makeup  
- Shaming or telling partner they deserve the abuse because of their disability |
| Psychological | - Changing description of events  
|              | - Threatening to kill partner or themselves  
|              | - Threatening to or harming children, pets, or service animals  
|              | - Threatening to take children or report partner to child protective services  
|              | - Threatening to have partner deported  
|              | - Gaslighting or invalidating partner’s disability by saying they are faking it or it is in their head  
| Sexual       | - Forcing one to perform sexual acts with them or others  
|             | - Pressuring sex after one has said no  
|             | - Using alcohol or other drugs to lower partner’s inhibitions  
|             | - Making partner feel scared about what will happen if they say no  
|             | - Videotaping or taking pictures of sexual acts without consent  
|             | - Inappropriately touching while assisting with hygiene or dressing  
| Financial/Economical | - Not allowing partner to have job  
|                  | - Intentionally ruining partner’s credit  
|                  | - Misusing, controlling, or taking partner’s money  
|                  | - Stealing or withholding partner’s Social Security check  

**Risk Factors and Barriers**

IPV can happen in many forms, but the intent is the same. IPV is characterized by purposeful behaviors that are part of a pattern about power and control. If an individual relies on their partner for help with activities of daily living, then the risk of IPV increases as their partner can abuse and control them in other areas. Many reasons why people with disabilities are at a higher risk of IPV also contribute to why they often experience IPV for longer periods of time and experience more barriers with reporting and seeking help. For example, if an individual relies on their partner for transportation, they may have trouble getting to a shelter. Also, people with disabilities have an increased risk of isolation which can make reaching out for help even more challenging. Many people with disabilities who were in abusive situations said they chose not to report because they were afraid or did not know how to make a report. The most common reason, however, was believing that nothing would happen if they did report. Another concern people with disabilities may have is how they will get help with their care or activities of daily living after reporting.

**Resources and Tips**

It can be difficult to think calmly during a crisis; this is why creating a safety plan, in advance, can be helpful. A safety plan is a personalized plan that outline the steps to take, family/friends to reach out to, and resources to use if you are in a bad situation. Your safety plan should be tailored to whatever stage you are in and can take other factors besides domestic violence into consideration. For example, plans can be made for when an individual currently lives with an abusive partner, when they are about to leave, and after they leave. Also, safety plans can be made for other factors such as if the individual is pregnant, has children, and/or does not US citizenship. The National Domestic Violence Hotline has helpful information about making a safety plan on their website and is also available.
in Spanish. You can also call their hotline (1-800-799-7233) and speak with an advocate to create a safety plan. The National Domestic Violence Hotline also provides services for individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

When family members are made aware of abuse, the rate that people with disabilities report IPV rises.¹ This is one reason why it is important for family and friends to be supportive if they suspect IPV or other domestic violence and when it is disclosed. If a family member or friend discloses IPV to you, acknowledge their situation and do not place blame on them. If someone discloses IPV to you, it was likely difficult for them to do and validating their emotions is an important part of being supportive. Another tip is letting them know there are resources available. You can use this domestic violence resource locator to find IPV resources nearby. This site also lets users select their language when using the resource locator.

IPV is never okay. If you or someone you know is experiencing IPV, please know there is help available and your well-being is important. Crime victim compensation programs exist in every state and can help pay for mental health counseling as well as other services.¹ For more information about crime victim compensation programs and to locate your state’s program, please visit www.benefits.gov which also offers a Spanish translation option.

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References


