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## **DOMESTIC/PARTNER VIOLENCE INFORMATION SHEET**

### **(For adults)**

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#### **WHAT?**

✧ What is Domestic / Partner Violence?

Domestic violence or battering is defined as any act that is intended to coerce or control another individual. Violence and threats are commonly used to solve problems. There are three primary types of violent behavior: psychological, physical, and sexual.

Verbal / Psychological violence occurs when someone engages in verbal behavior that is: (1) threatening or intimidating toward another person or (2) coerces them into doing something against their will. Examples of emotional abuse include controlling the household money, restricting activities (e.g., not allowing partner to have a job, to socialize with others), using custody of the children to manipulate their partner, isolating someone, name calling, and intimidation through the use of threats and/or destroying property and pets.

Physical abuse and sexual violence are a part of the system of abusive behavior which the perpetrator uses against his/her partner. Physical abuse involves using physical force (i.e., hitting, slapping, pushing, shoving) to gain control over an individual. It involves any behavior that results in personal injury.

Most often, sexual violence involves forcing the partner to engage in some sexual act against his/her will. This may or may not involve direct physical contact. A partner may be coerced into a sex act with someone other than the batterer or forced to view sex acts.

Violence within the relationship may begin with verbal altercations and escalate to involve other forms of violence that result in more serious physical injuries (e.g., bruises, broken bones). The cycle of violence consists of three stages. In the First Stage, there is a build-up of tension in the relationship which is inevitably followed by the Honeymoon Stage, involves the batterer being loving and charming in effort to make amends for the violent behavior. The batterer vows his love for his partner, asks for his partner's forgiveness, and generally promises that the violence will not recur.

✧ What can you do to prevent domestic violence?

To break the cycle of violence, talk to your children about violence. Send a clear message that violence is unacceptable and teach them non-violent strategies to solve problems. Help females understand that they do not have to accept violence in their relationships; that they deserve to have positive, healthy, non-violent interactions with others. Teach males that all people should be treated equally with respect.

✧ What are the consequences of domestic violence for the children in the home?

The effects of witnessing domestic violence on children are varied. Thirty to 70 percent of men who abuse their partners also physically abuse their children. In families where their mother is abused, children may be inadvertently injured by flying objects or while attempting to intervene during these fights. However, children who are exposed to violence in the home can be emotionally traumatized even if they are not physically abused; For example, it has been shown that these children may exhibit aggressive behavior, anxiety, withdrawal, depression, and irritability. Younger children (toddlers and preschoolers) are, by definition, more limited in their ability to think and verbally express themselves, and are most likely to experience physical symptoms ( e.g., stomach problems, crying, irritability, upsetting dreams), and to regress to earlier stages of functioning (e.g., wetting their beds).

Children may also exhibit a long-standing pattern of symptoms called Post-traumatic stress disorder which is similar to the problems exhibited by children who have experienced any kind of a trauma (e.g., physical and /or sexual abuse, witnessed violence). These symptoms include nightmares, recurrent thoughts of the violence, fear for their safety, avoidance of particular persons, place or things, and or jumpiness.

Children raised in violent homes are 74% more likely to commit assault. Children may learn from the behavior that their adult caregivers model for them. For example, female children may learn they should endure violence in their relationships. Male children may learn to relate to others with violent behavior. They may have poor difficulty getting along with peers.

Children who witness violence are more likely than other children to feel helpless and powerless because they can't stop the abuse or they feel they need to solve the problem, but get hurt when they try to intervene during these domestic altercations. They may experience guilt related to their belief that they caused the violence. They may feel angry at the victim for not leaving, as well as the batterer for hurting the victim. They are often confused about choosing sides. They fear that their mother will be hurt or that the batterer, which is frequently their father, will be taken out of the home as a result of the violence. They see the person that they love and care about as being loving at one point and hurting at another. This sends conflictual messages to children about the use of violence as a method for solving problems.

Once the violence stops, some children return to relatively normal behavior and emotions. The support and protection of the people close to them is very important in helping children get back to normal. However, some children have symptoms that persist long after the abuse itself has ended. That's why it's important for children who witness violence to receive treatment if necessary. It is important that parents recognize that children may experience different problems related to their abusive experiences as they go through different developmental stages. Therefore, even though a child may have successfully completed therapy soon after the violence stopped, or a child may not have shown previous difficulties, he/she may need to go to counseling at some later time.

✧ What kind of treatment is available for child witnesses?

Many therapy formats have been applied for families in which domestic violence has occurred. These include individual, family, and group therapy formats. The therapy techniques used have been derived from a wide range of psychological theories including psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive, insight-oriented, and structural and strategic theories of family therapy. There has been only limited research regarding the effectiveness of these varying approaches in assisting children exposed to violence to deal with the difficulties they experience as a result of the violence. However, there is preliminary research indicating that cognitive behavior therapy applied in both individual and group settings effectively decreases the problems experienced by children.

Cognitive behavioral interventions may be applied to work with the abused child as well as his/her nonoffending parent(s). The cognitive behavioral therapist may help nonoffending parents cope with their own thoughts and feelings about the violence/abuse to which the child has been exposed. At the same time, they teach parenting skills that will help parents respond more effectively to their children's distress and abuse or violence-related difficulties. Cognitive behavioral interventions for the child should be individually tailored to target the particular child's difficulties. However, educational, coping skills and gradual exposure exercises are usually included within the treatment plan. Gradual exposure refers to exercises that encourage children to confront memories, thoughts and everyday reminders (e.g., bathrooms, sleeping alone, undressing, showering, etc.) of the abuse/violence in a gradual fashion over time. This may be accomplished through a variety of means including guided imagery, doll play, drawing, reading, writing, poetry, singing, etc. By reducing the anxiety associated with abuse/violence-related discussion, gradual exposure exercises help children to express their thoughts and feelings more openly. This process increases their ability to better understand and emotionally process the violent/abusive experience(s).

Individual and group therapy are also available in the community for women who have been battered.

## **WHO?**

✧ Who is the victim of domestic violence?

Domestic violence occurs in families from all social, racial, economic, educational and religious backgrounds. It occurs in cities, suburbs, rural areas, inner cities, and neighborhoods. Domestic violence can occur not only in married relationships, but also in dating and cohabitating relationships. Both heterosexual and homosexual couples may experience violence within their relationships.

Surveys of married couples report that 1 out of 6 wives reports she has been hit by her husband at some point in the marriage. According to the Surgeon General, domestic violence is the leading cause of injury in women between the ages of 15 to 44 more common than automobile accidents, muggings, and cancer deaths combined.

However, it is not only the battered individual who is affected by domestic violence. Everyone living in the home is affected by domestic violence. It is estimated that 3.3 million children annually in the United States witness violence in the home. Children need not witness violent episodes to be traumatized or affected. They may simply hear their mother's screams or the abuser's threats. Even more threatening to the child are the consequences on their mother of the abuse.

✧ Who commits acts of domestic violence?

Although a small percentage of batterers are women, the majority are male (95%). Batterers are generally NOT "psychopaths" or mentally disturbed individuals. In fact, research suggests no significant differences on psychological tests between men who batter and non-batterers. In fact, batterers are often successful, well liked individuals who are kind, loving, and charming towards their partners at times. There is no clear cut description or profile of a batterer, and it is extremely difficult to recognize a batterer. Violence may occur early on in the relationship or may take some time to develop.

Many batterers have been exposed to domestic violence themselves. Reports state that 81% of men who batter women had fathers who abused their mothers. Some may feel insecure and vulnerable themselves. Some batterers may have problems with alcohol or drugs, but research indicates that men who abuse alcohol tend to do most of their battering while sober

## WHY?

✧ Why does domestic violence occur?

There's no one simple answer to this question although it is one that is frequently asked by children and their parents who experience domestic violence. The main thing to remember is that the victim or the child is NEVER to blame. The batterer is responsible for the domestic violence regardless of the problems which may have contributed to his/her abusive behavior (as discussed above).

Battering is a behavior that is learned through childhood experiences and from social messages condoning violence against women. Walker (1981) found that batterers had learned that violence was an appropriate response to anger during their childhoods. Batterers are not in control. In fact, the opposite is true. They are attempting to gain control over their partner with demands, threats, and physical abuse. They are not concerned with anyone or anything other than getting their own way.

Our society condones violence against women by our sex-role stereotypes that portray men as dominant and women as submissive. These attitudes may also be responsible for maintaining the problem. For this reason, it is essential that we communicate our concerns about domestic violence clearly and openly. As a society, we must become more aware of the seriousness and prevalence of the problem, and we must increase our present prevention efforts.

✧ Why don't women take their children and leave?

In fact, many women who are battered/abused do leave the abusive relationships. Many women divorce their partners, but do not disclose that there was violence in their relationship. Women do not provoke or deserve to be battered. They deserve a life free of violence. Nonetheless, many women do suffer in silence. There are many reasons that make it difficult for women to leave their abusive relationship. Many women do not leave their abusive relationships, because they fear retaliation from the batterer. In many cases, a batterer may have threatened to inflict serious harm on her or the children if she attempts to leave. The batterer may also threaten to kill themselves if their partner leaves or abandons them. Others do not leave for economic reasons. They fear that they will not be able to financially support their children or fear the batterer will get custody of the children given that he has more resources to support the children and/or hire an attorney. Still yet other women blame themselves for the violence and believe that the violence will stop if she does all the things, "a good wife," should do. Other reasons include attempting to keep the family together for the children's sake. There are many complex reasons why women remain in abusive relationships.

**WHEN?**

✧ When should you suspect domestic violence?

Domestic violence can be a difficult problem to detect. In fact, 1 out of every 250 partner assaults go unreported. The victim and/or their children often make excuses for the batterer's behavior or don't tell anyone about their experiences because of their fear and/or embarrassment. Due to her embarrassment, the women may wear clothing that covers her injuries, or she may offer excuses of clumsiness as the cause of her recurrent injuries when presenting to emergency rooms or doctors in an effort to hide the domestic violence. Women and children frequently avoid friends and family. There may also be dramatic changes in the child's behavior.

Children's reactions to the batterer are quite varied. Some children are fearful and/or avoid the batterer; others talk very negatively about the batterer but behave positively to him or her. Still others remain very attached and loving to the batterer. Whether they are positive, negative or ambivalent, the child's feelings towards the batterer should be accepted. Children need to know that none of their feelings are wrong. The victim of domestic violence may also feel ambivalent about the batterer, and her feelings should be accepted as well.

**HOW?**

✧ How should you respond if your child expresses feelings about domestic violence?

The most important thing you can do is to try to remain calm. You may be exploding inside, but you need to try to get a hold of your feelings and approach your child in a matter-of-fact way. Children, including adolescents, are very sensitive to their parent's emotional reactions, and if they see or feel how upset and angry you are, they may be very frightened and "clam up." You want to convey to your child that it's good that he or she can talk to you about his/ her feelings.

If you can't talk to your child calmly by yourself, it is better to wait for help from a professional. Be careful not to say anything that sounds like you blame him/her, and be sure to emphasize that this is not his or her fault.

Don't encourage your child to "forget about it" and shut off the conversation. On the other hand, it's not helpful to push the child or to pry beyond what he/she is ready to say. Just be open to whatever your child can tell you and to any questions. Try to understand that your child may have mixed feelings about the batterer and what has happened.

## **WHERE?**

✧ Where should you go for help?

If you need further help for issues related to domestic violence, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Other resources are also available for you and your children.

Anyone who suspects that a child has been sexually abused should contact the Washington, District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) reporting hotline at 202-671-SAFE (202-671-7233). You can find additional information about CFSA from the following website: <http://cfsa.dc.gov/cfsa>. This site will provide definitions for mandatory reporters in Washington, DC, information that is required to make a report, and additional signs to recognize sexual abuse.

If you are considered a mandatory reporter, then you will be required to provide your name, occupation, and contact information. The caseworker will ask you many important questions about the child victim, the possible abuser, and the circumstances. Once the report is complete, then CFSA may file, assess, and investigate the report. CFSA may investigate the sexual abuse allegation and then provide guidance and help to the child and family.

The aforementioned information was obtained from several sources:

Deblinger, E. & Heflin, A. (1996). *Treating sexually abused children and their nonoffending parents: A cognitive-behavioral approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Harway, M & Hansen, M. (1994). Spouse abuse: Assessing and treating battered women, batterers, and their children. Sarasota, Florida: Professional Resources Press.

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Rape and Abuse Crisis Center (1992). Domestic violence resource packet.