

What Is Domestic Violence?¹

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Understanding the Term

In the state of Florida, the law defines domestic violence as “assault, aggravated assault, battery, aggravated battery, sexual assault, sexual battery, stalking, aggravated stalking, kidnapping, false imprisonment, or any criminal offense resulting in physical injury or death of one family or household member by another family or household member” (Domestic Violence; definitions, 2013).

Behind the complicated language and confusing legal terms, what does this really mean? Domestic violence, a term also known as *intimate partner violence*, happens when one partner is abusive to the other partner in an intimate relationship (e.g., dating, marriage, parental). Domestic violence can come in many forms and can happen to anyone. This is an issue that is found all across the world and has a long-standing history in nearly every society (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010). Domestic violence can present itself in many different ways, including sexual violence, physical violence, and emotional violence. We will break down each of these types of abuse further to better understand what they really mean.

Sexual Violence

One of the most dangerous myths that exists about sex in romantic relationships is that permission is not needed to initiate sex acts. Rape is something that many people consider only possible outside of romantic relationships. This idea is untrue; in fact, 1 in 10 women have experienced rape by an intimate partner in their lifetime, and 8% of

men have experienced some form of sexual violence by an intimate partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCADV], 2011). The truth is that if both partners did not agree to the sexual act, then rape or an act of sexual violence was committed. Unfortunately, because of the stigma that comes along with the term rape and the fear that no one will believe them, many people refuse to report rape as a crime of domestic violence (NCADV, 2011). If both people involved did not give consent, regardless of whether they are dating, married, or in some way intimately connected, the sexual act should be considered an act of rape or sexual violence and should be reported.

Physical Violence

Physical violence is the form of violence that is most commonly reported as domestic violence, and is often the easiest to see. Physical violence includes things like hitting, punching, kicking, shoving, and all other forms of physical hostility. Physical violence can be extremely dangerous in intimate relationships and can lead to serious injury and death if the violence is allowed to continue (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). As soon as the first act of physical violence is committed in an intimate relationship, it should be reported and well documented. No amount of physical violence is acceptable in an intimate relationship. If an intimate partner has acted violently toward you, do not expect this to be an isolated event. Abuse often happens in a cycle that includes the following (Mayo Clinic, 2013):

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1. Threats
2. Hitting or other forms of physical violence
3. Apologies and gifts
4. Repetition

Emotional/Verbal Violence

Emotional and verbal abuse can often be the most difficult form of abuse to identify and report. This form of abuse does not leave physical scars, and the law does very little to protect people from this form of abuse. This type of abuse uses beliefs and emotions to control the victim by breaking down self-esteem and self-worth. By chipping away at self-confidence, many victims of abuse lose their will to leave or to end the abuse because they believe that they are unlovable. The abuser will convince the victim over time that something is wrong with him/her and that he/she will never be loved by anyone else (University of Michigan Health System, 2007). Over time, victims begin to believe the lies that abusers tell them. Victims begin to see themselves as “weak,” “dumb,” “ugly,” and all the other abusive words that have been used to describe them. Over time, the person experiencing this type of abuse sees no purpose in fighting the abuse any longer and begins to adopt these concepts into his/her self-image, which makes it less likely for him/her to leave the abuse (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994). It is also common for verbal abusers to become physically abusive over time (Campbell, 2002).



Figure 1. Emotional abuse does not leave physical scars but can injure a person's self-worth.

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Six signs your partner may be verbally abusive:

1. **You feel like you can never win.** You are always the “wrong” one in a fight, no matter how agreeable or kind you may be acting.
2. **You have little or no self-confidence.** Your partner is constantly criticizing you and correcting your every move, acting as if he/she is better than you and that the things being said are “for your own good.”
3. **Your partner tells you that you are just too sensitive.** When you try to explain that your feelings are hurt by his/her actions, the response is that you took it the wrong way or that you get your feelings hurt too easily.
4. **Your partner often makes jokes about you that make you feel bad.** You feel as though you are always the brunt of jokes that are often hurtful. Your partner just plays it off as harmless fun.
5. **You are constantly walking on eggshells.** When you are around your partner, you are always scared of doing or saying something that may make him/her mad.
6. **The verbal abuse sometimes turns into threats or physical attacks.** When your partner becomes angry, sometimes the anger moves beyond threats into violence or threats of violence.

I Am Experiencing Violence in My Relationship. What Should I Do?

If you, or someone you know, identify with one or more of these forms of violence in an intimate relationship, there are people and agencies that can help end the violence and get you out of harm's way. Please call the national domestic violence hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) for consultation.

If you are in immediate danger, please call 911 or your local police.

In the state of Florida, the domestic violence hotline is 1-800-500-1119, and the best resource for information and assistance related to domestic violence is the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence (<http://www.fcadv.org/>).

For information regarding resources available within other states, please visit <http://www.womenshealth.gov/violence-against-women/get-help-for-violence/violence-help-hotlines.html>.

By creating an exit strategy, you can be prepared to leave whenever it is necessary (NCADV, 2011). Here is a sample to help you formulate an exit strategy: http://www.wcasa.org/file_open.php?id=334.

The process of ending any relationship is hard, but ending a violent relationship can be more than emotionally taxing—it can be deadly. That is why safety planning is key after you have identified your relationship as being violent.

For additional information on what to expect in the legal process, please see the EDIS publications [FY1454, Reporting Domestic Violence in Florida](#), and [FY1455, Staying Safer After Leaving or Escaping Domestic Violence: Filing an Injunction in the State of Florida](#).

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