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Effects of Domestic Violence

Families or individuals who have experienced domestic violence are in the process of healing both physically and emotionally from multiple traumas. These traumas can have various effects on the mind, body and spirit. It is natural to experience these, and acknowledging the effects can be an important first step in embarking on a process towards restoration and healing.

People who are exposed to domestic violence often experience physical, mental or spiritual shifts that can endure and worsen if they are not addressed. According to a study done by the Centers for Disease Control, nearly **three in every 10 women**—about 32 million—and **one in 10 men** in the United States who experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner reported at least one measured impact or effect related to forms of violent behavior in that relationship.¹

Even though survivors may experience similar types of abuse, the response to trauma may vary from person to person. Many factors can influence how a person responds to short- and long-term effects of the abuse, such as the frequency of abusive incidents, degree of severity and the effects on physical health. The overall impact of domestic violence also depends on the individual's natural reactions to stress and ways of coping with stressful situations. Other factors can include age in which the trauma occurred, previous exposure to unrelated traumatic incidents and extent of therapy or timing of intervention.

It's important to know that the effects of domestic violence can be overwhelming to experience, and even to learn about. It's common for someone in an abusive relationship to not recall many aspects of their personality before being abused, especially if they have been exposed to violence for an extended period of time. Sometimes, it may seem as if the violence defines their identity. But know the effects of domestic violence are possible to overcome, and it is possible to break the cycle of violence. Recovery from exposure to domestic violence is possible, and although it requires addressing painful realities, it also entails discovering new inner strengths, a process that needs time, space and safety to begin.

Trauma in the Body

When a physical danger threatens our control, ability to escape, or is something we can't stop, we enact a natural instinct for survival. This includes the body summoning a tremendous amount of energy to fight or flee—short circuits. These short circuits ricochet through a person's body and mind. This can result in shock, dissociation and many other kinds of involuntary responses while the violence is happening.

The short circuit stays with us long after the violence ends, and is the origin of the mental, physical and spiritual effects of domestic violence.

Many people who go through traumatic events may find that it can take some time to re-adjust and cope for a period after the event. The residual mental, physical and spiritual effects of domestic violence can permeate the daily lives of survivors, which make it difficult to heal. For some, there are severe effects in the immediate aftermath of an assault that may or may not last. For others, the effects come in waves and are not felt until the shock of the event wears off.

Effects of Domestic Violence

Abuse can have a serious impact on the way a person thinks and interacts with the world around them. The chronic exposure to domestic violence—and the stress fear resulting from this exposure—can cause not only immediate physical injury, but also mental shifts that occur as the mind attempts to process trauma or protect the body. Domestic violence affects one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors and can significantly impact one's mental stability. Increased anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms are commonly observed among survivors of domestic violence.

PTSD. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event. Some common symptoms associated with PTSD are flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety and uncontrollable thoughts about the event. Many people who go through traumatic events have difficulty adjusting and coping for a while. But with time and support, such traumatic reactions usually get better.

Depression. Depression is more than common feelings of temporary sadness. Symptoms can include prolonged sadness, feelings of hopelessness, unexplained crying, changes in appetite with significant weight loss or gain, loss of energy or loss of interest and pleasure in activities previously enjoyed. Depression can affect a person's outlook, which can lead to feelings of hopelessness. This, in turn, can impact his or her thought process and ability to make decisions. In extreme cases of depression, people may even experience suicidal thoughts and/or attempts. If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, refer them to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK.

Depression remains the most common symptom exhibited by survivors of domestic violence. According to a study done in 2000, 60 percent of battered women reported feeling sad or depressed for extended periods of time.² For a full list of symptoms, click [here](#).

Dissociation. Dissociation usually refers to feeling like one has “checked out” or is not present. In some instances of dissociation, people may find themselves daydreaming. But in situations where dissociation is chronic and more complex it may impair an individual's ability to function in the “real” world, such as not being able to focus on work related duties or being able to concentrate on schoolwork.³

One in seven people who have experienced domestic violence sustain a physical injury.⁴ Given the nature of the crime, it is extremely common to retain bruises on the arms from being gripped, broken bones or other physical injuries from abusive incidents. People experiencing domestic violence often cover up their injuries to avoid being questioned by others. Oftentimes injuries are explained by stating one tripped and fell, or breaking something that resulted in an injury. A survivor may avoid speaking openly about his or her injuries due to feelings of shame or because speaking openly about the injuries can place the person at a greater risk of being abused. If you or someone you know is experiencing physical injuries frequently, it might be indicative of an abusive relationship. There are resources to help you here.

Common physical evidence of domestic violence includes:

- Bruises or that look like they came from choking, punching or defending oneself
- Black eyes
- Red or purple marks at the neck
- Sprained or broken wrists

There are also physical effects of domestic violence that affect a person's overall health. These result from trauma and can manifest immediately after an incident of abuse or later after the abuse has ended. Common physical effects of trauma include:

- Chronic fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle tension
- Involuntary shaking
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Sexual dysfunction
- In women, issues with menstrual cycle or fertility

Coping with the effects of domestic violence can be overwhelming, often because the survivor's control over the situation has been taken away by the perpetrator. When this has occurred, a survivor may have the need to self-medicate or use drugs or alcohol to help him or her cope with the overwhelming feelings. Engaging in self-injurious behaviors can also bring a sense of control over a person's environment and serve as a release of tension. It is an action that is not always performed with suicidal intent, although occasionally it can result in severe harm or death. These are temporary coping strategies that can lead to deeper issues in the future.

In addition, domestic violence can change one's worldview and outlook on life. Being in a situation where a person is being controlled by another can create feelings of hopelessness. A survivor may develop a negative outlook in which he or she may feel “damaged” or unworthy of a better life. A perpetrator can chip away at a person's self-esteem with constant criticism or insults, which can lead the survivor to question her sense of self in relation to the world. A faulty belief system can contribute to feeling discouraged and apprehensive about the future. Domestic violence can also take away a person's sense of safety and security, influencing his or her ability to trust others. Conflicts with spirituality are also common, especially in situations where the perpetrator used the person's faith to control him or her. Survivors might feel unmotivated, empty or like reaching out is not worth the effort.

But know that the effects of domestic violence are possible to overcome. Although it often requires addressing painful realities, it also entails discovering new inner strengths, a process that needs time, space and safety to begin. With time spent healing, developing strong positive coping mechanisms and taking care of oneself, such reactions tend to become less severe and it is possible to reclaim positive relationships with others and yourself.

[Next section: Resources](#)

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¹ Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report, (2011), Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov.

² Barnett, (2000).

³ National Alliance on Mental Illness, via rainn.org, “Dissociative Identity Disorder,” (2000). www.nami.org.

⁴ Black, M.C. et al, (2011).