

Couple Violence

The public, government, and mental health professionals have been paying more attention to couple violence during the past 10 years. Psychologists have done research on couple violence in order to prevent or stop it once it has started. Mental health professionals have many ways to prevent and treat couple violence.

What Is Couple Violence?

Many types of behavior are thought of as couple violence. First, there are physical acts, such as pushing, slapping, punching, scratching, biting, hitting with objects, choking, burning, attacking with weapons, and rape. Even though they are less likely to be thought of as couple violence, a more common type of violence is emotional acts, such as threatening to harm or leave someone, insulting, bullying, harming property and pets, and controlling access to money, friends, and family. Even though these acts seem to be very different, they are both designed to force the partner to do something he or she does not want to do. Therefore, many professionals consider a couple to be violent when it has a pattern of emotionally and/or physically harmful behavior by one or both partners that limits the freedom of the partner.

How Common Is Couple Violence?

Couple violence is very common. Statistics vary depending on who's counting what when. The Center for Disease Control says that one out of six families experiences some form of "marital violence" and one out of eighteen families experiencing serious violence (like beatings or the use of weapons). Some national surveys have found that as many as 28% of domestic partners, married or unmarried, experience some physical violence at some point during their years together. These surveys have also found that one out of six American couples experiences physical violence during any given year.

The higher numbers mean that as many as 8.7 million American couples could experience at least one episode of physical violence during the year. They also mean that up to 2 million adults are seriously harmed by their partners every year. Surveys of dating couples show that about 30% to 35% of these couples are physically violent. These surveys include high school and college student couples. We do not know how common emotional aggression or abuse is.

Who Experiences Couple Violence?

The Department of Justice reports that 97% of couple violence victims are women. Other studies have shown that up to 75% of murdered women were killed by current or former male partners. Two thirds of these women had been physically abused before being murdered. Even though women are more commonly abused, men are also often abused by their partners. Many believe that abuse against males is often not reported.

Couple violence happens in all types of families. It happens in all ages, races, religions, and professions. However, research has found some common characteristics of abusive partners. Abusers tend to be younger and less educated. They are often unemployed or less satisfied with their jobs and have lower-status jobs and lower incomes. Abusers are more likely to have grown up in homes with by couple violence. They are also more likely to use or abuse alcohol and drugs, to approve of domestic violence, and to report more daily stress than nonabusers. Things like low self-esteem, jealousy, lack of assertiveness, and blaming others for their actions have been found to increase the risk of being abusive. Abusive relationships are likely to have poor communication between partners, high levels of conflict, and unequal distribution of power.

What Are the Effects of Couple Violence?

Victims of couple violence often suffer from a variety of physical and emotional problems. They often have physical injuries like bruises, broken bones, cuts, and burns. They also often have restlessness, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, chronic headaches and backaches, and tiredness. Victims' emotional symptoms include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suspiciousness, shame, loneliness, inferiority, helplessness, and hopelessness. Couple violence can also lead to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Victims of couple violence are more likely to die from suicide and homicide as well.

Unfortunately, the effects of couple violence are not limited to the abused person. Couple violence also has a negative effect on the children growing up in violent homes. Although not all children from violent homes develop problems, children who see or know about their parents' violent relationship are more likely to have conduct problems, like violent behavior, skipping school, lying, and stealing. They are also at risk for emotional problems, like depression and anxiety. The effects of couple violence on children are worse if the children are also abused.

What Help Is Available?

Victims of domestic violence often feel ashamed. They also often feel as if they are responsible for the abuse. They therefore often do not seek help. In these cases, the first step is for the victim to admit that no person is responsible for his or her own abuse. The second step is to step forward and ask for help.

There are three major forms of help for couple violence: legal, community, and therapeutic help.

- Legal help for couple violence includes the arrest of abusers and court orders of protection. Victims of couple violence can contact their local police, district attorney's office, or battered women's shelter or hotline for information and help with legal resources.
- Community help includes local women's shelters that can offer temporary housing and services for battered women and their children. Battered men typically do not have access to shelters. The public is often not told the location of shelters in order to increase the safety of shelter residents and staff. People who need help from a shelter can call shelter hotlines or their local police to find help. When possible, shelter networks also will offer housing at a lower cost for a longer period of time to help women who decide to leave their abusive partners for good.
- There are many types of therapy available for the abused partner and the abuser. The major goal of all types of therapy is to end the violence.

What Types of Therapy Are Available?

Therapy for couple violence usually includes either individual therapy, group treatment, or marital therapy. All three types of treatment generally have similar goals and stress the importance of the abuser accepting responsibility for the violence and the ability to control anger. The treatments differ in what they think causes couple violence, the specific things addressed in therapy, and the methods used to meet treatment goals.

Behavior therapists and cognitive-behavior therapists believe therapy should be goal-oriented. They also believe it should focus on current or ongoing problems. Behavioral or cognitive behavioral therapy focuses on the individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that come before and after abuse occurs. It also focuses on the characteristics of the abusive relationship.

- Individual therapy. Individual cognitive-behavior therapy for couple violence is based on the idea that the abuser's beliefs or behaviors are responsible for the violence. The goal of this therapy is to discover and change the abuser's characteristics that cause him or her to choose violence to solve conflicts. Therapy focuses on the abuser's background, current experiences, thoughts, and behavior. Treatment is usually designed based on cognitive-behavioral ideas about human behavior. These ideas stress that it is important to focus on what and how we think and how our thoughts affect our behavior. Anger control, problem-

solving, and social skills training are often used in individual therapy for abusers. The abusive partner must be willing to enter therapy for this to work.

- Individual cognitive-behavioral therapy for victims of couple violence is also available. Therapy for the victim may happen at the same time as therapy for the abuser or can take place independently. A therapist's choice to treat both the abuser and the victim or only one partner depends on his or her training and beliefs. It also depends on the availability and willingness of each partner to be treated. Individual therapy for the victim tries to correct the emotional damage created by the violence and to help the victim feel more powerful. It is hoped that this will help him or her to make a personal decision regarding whether to stay in the relationship. Usually, cognitive-behavioral therapy tries to lower anxiety and depression, to help with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, to improve self-esteem, and to develop or strengthen assertiveness and problem-solving skills.
- *Group cognitive-behavior therapy.* Often, abusers are treated in a group. Group treatment is based on the idea that couple violence is not caused only by the personality or psychological characteristics of the abuser. Couple violence is also thought to be affected by the environment. Group therapy addresses things such as attitudes about women's and men's gender roles and society's view of family violence. Hearing about the experiences of other abusers in the group is thought to help the abuser to reject social beliefs that lead to couple violence. It is also hoped that this will help the abuser accept responsibility for his or her use of violence. Taking responsibility for domestic violence is viewed as the key to change. Group treatments combine the support provided by the group with cognitive-behavioral methods to change thoughts and behaviors. Like individual therapy, group treatment focuses on the abusers' background, current experiences, beliefs, and behaviors. Groups often focus on anger management, problem solving, and social skills training. How well groups work depends on how willing the abuser is to change. Abusers sent to treatment by the courts may be likely to change than abusers who go to therapy on their own.
- Groups are also often used to help victims. Group therapy uses the support of other group members to help victims take a realistic look at their relationships and to follow through on choices they make about those relationships. Like in groups for abusers, victim groups talk about beliefs about the roles of men and women. The focus of the group treatment is on members' backgrounds, current experiences and beliefs, and choices they can make. Cognitive-behavioral strategies are used to help with anxiety and depression, to increase self esteem, and to build problem-solving skills. Information about legal rights and services is often provided to group members.
- Marital therapy. Cognitive-behavioral marital therapy is also used to address couple violence. Marital therapy is based on the idea that conflict and violence is the result of problematic patterns of interaction between the partners. The abuser is seen as wanting to control the partner. Violence is thought of as one extreme method the abuser uses to do so. Marital therapy tries to reduce the amount of conflict in a relationship and to change the ways they try to solve conflict. The focus of marital therapy is the couple. The couple discusses how they see each others' behavior and the cues and signals they give each other when they interact. Communication and listening skills and problem-solving skills are taught to help couples talk about their differences without violence. Even though marital therapy helps both partners recognize how each plays a role in the relationship patterns, the abuser is taught to accept responsibility for choosing violence as a way to solve problems. Often, individual therapy with the abuser is used at the same time or before marital therapy to help with accepting responsibility and with anger management.

What Is the Best Way to Treat for Couple Violence?

Currently, there is no agreement on which method of treatment is best. Therapists choose a treatment based on their experiences with couple violence. They also choose treatments consistent with their training. It is therefore important to ask potential therapists about their training and beliefs about the causes of couple violence before choosing one. Many people find behavior therapy and cognitive-behavior therapy helpful for the problems that come with an abusive relationship because these treatments are short-term and goal-oriented and teach problem-solving. Other factors affecting your choice of treatment are the availability of types of therapy and the willingness of each partner to take part in therapy. If the abusive partner is not willing to enter therapy, for example, marital therapy is not an option. However, marital problems can be improved even if only one member of the couple seeks help.

It is important to make sure the type of treatment you choose includes several important factors. First, it needs to help the abuser take responsibility for his or her behavior. Second, it needs to teach the abuser ways to control anger. It also needs to teach nonviolent ways of disagreeing and solving problems with a partner. The therapy should also help the abused partner become able to set limits about psychological and physical assaults. Research in cognitive-behavior therapy with family and couple violence has shown it to be effective. Above all else, choose a therapist who uses treatments that are sensitive to the safety of the victims of couple violence and that keep track of that safety during treatment.

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or Goals might involve:

- a way of acting - like smoking less or being more outgoing;
- a way of feeling - like helping a person be less scared, less depressed, or less anxious;
- a way of thinking - like learning to problem-solve or get rid of self-defeating thoughts;
- a way of dealing with physical or medical problems - like lessening back pain or helping a person stick to a doctor's suggestions; or
- a way of adjusting - like training developmentally disabled people to care for themselves or hold a job.

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well, with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.

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