

Family Violence

Author: Helen van Roekel

Reviewers: Monica Ostigh (RAN, Jabiru); Kaz Knudsen (RAN, WA); Vivien (RAN, Amata); Jane Kollner (RAN, Ampilatwatja); Teresa Bowmen (RAN, Papunya)

What is family violence?

Family violence is behaviour by one family member that causes physical, sexual and or emotional damage to others in the family, including causing them to live in fear by threatening to harm people, pets or property. Family violence is most commonly perpetrated by one partner towards another and/or by an adult towards a child or children. Other forms include elder abuse or sibling abuse. Whether the violence is physical, sexual or emotional it has long-term health effects.

The overwhelming majority of cases of violence against women involve a male perpetrator and his wife or de facto. It is estimated that violence occurs in as many as one in four relationships. Violence against women in Aboriginal communities is reported to be far greater than in many other populations.¹

A high proportion of female homicide victims are killed by their spouse or de facto, approximately 30% Australia-wide, approximately 50% in the NT.²

When to suspect abuse (behavioural indicators)

- Injuries that are difficult to account for as accidental
- The patient may seem evasive, embarrassed or ashamed of the injuries
- Injuries are on areas of the body normally covered by clothing
- There has been a substantial delay between the time of the injury and presentation for treatment
- An accompanying partner or family member wants to speak for the patient, and insists on staying close by
- There is repeated use of emergency services
- Her medical history reveals many 'accidents' with injuries of suspicious injuries
- She has vague complaints or pain without physiological cause
- There may have been suicide gestures or attempts
- Alcohol or drug abuse seems to be occurring, or frequent use of tranquillisers
- She presents with symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Types of violence

Mostly, we think of physical abuse, but there is usually a pattern of controlling behaviours occurring. Most commonly, the emotional abuse being experienced is the most devastating, eroding self-esteem and strength needed to resist the abuse.

Types of behaviours that may be experienced could include:

Physical abuse: punches, burns, choking, blows to stomach during pregnancy, threats with weapons, assaults with weapons, eye gouges, twisting limbs, destroying possessions, smashing furniture or crockery, hurting or killing family pets.

Sexual abuse: demanding sex, rape, demanding sexual practices she doesn't agree with, forcing her to have sex in front of the children, using tactics or language to humiliate her.

Social abuse: controlling what she wears, who she sees and where she goes, preventing her from seeing her own family and friends, smothering (i.e. constantly checking up on her with surprise phone calls and visits), accusations that she is sleeping with other men, verbally degrading her in front of other people, demanding she spend all her spare time with him.

Psychological abuse: mind games, threats to kill her, her children or her family, threats of suicide, or have the children taken away by welfare, verbal abuse, put downs, mind games, insults, 'silent treatment', unpredictable angry outbursts.

Financial abuse: controlling how much money she has, ensuring she never has enough to pay bills and provide food, not allowing her to have savings, taking money from her (especially on pension day) and spending it on himself.

Cycle of violence

Violent relationships are rarely bad all of the time, which makes the situation highly confusing for women. Often, there is a series of violent and dangerous times, with periods in between where the violent partner can be caring and loving. Frequently, but not always, the pattern looks something like this:

Build-up stage: The violent partner slowly begins to put down and threaten his partner.

Explosion: There is an incident of violence or threats, and the woman may try to escape from her partner.

Buy-back stage: The violent partner begs forgiveness, or threatens her into returning to him. He may minimise or deny the violence at this stage, or appear to be truly sorry.

Pursuit stage: If the woman doesn't return, he will pursue her. This may include stalking, threats to kill her or the children, or threats to kill himself. Most murders of victims occur at this stage.

Honeymoon stage: If she returns to him, he tries hard to treat her well, and be a loving partner, he may cease consuming alcohol for a time, and try to be a good father.

The cycle starts again, and there is usually a repeat of the violence. Over time, the cycle tends to happen over a shorter time frame (days or weeks rather than months), and gets more violent.

Why women stay or keep returning to violent relationships

- Threats of violence, often carried out (most murders occur as women are trying to leave, or just after they have left the relationship)
- Religious reasons ('Til death do us part', 'for better or for worse')
- Family pressures to stay in the relationship
- His promises to change, or get counselling
- His threats to kill himself if she leaves him
- She wants to keep the family together, for children to know their father
- She believes that she can't live without him, that she is incapable of surviving on her own (a result of chronic emotional abuse, reduced self-esteem)
- She has no or little family support, and is socially isolated
- She doesn't know where to go for help
- She may still love her partner and want to stay with him, she just wants the violence to stop.

Additional issues for Aboriginal women

As stated above, violence and murder is reported to be far more frequent for Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal women, although domestic violence does occur in all communities. For a health worker in a remote setting there are often no easy solutions to stop the violence.

Aboriginal women report that they prefer the term 'family violence' to 'domestic violence', because this term takes into account the additional family factors that can occur for women with extended family intervention.³ Often, other family members may get involved, including some who will continue to abuse or threaten the woman, even if her partner is no longer doing so. However, some women are able to negotiate with sympathetic family members in order for them to put pressure on her partner to stop his violence. These family ties can improve the situation in some cases.

Women often report a great fear of payback or retaliation from family members should her partner kill himself because she left him, or as punishment for him being jailed or reported to police.

Aboriginal women are most often not able to leave their community and family in order to move away from their violent partner. They also would not be able to move to a new anonymous location where he could not find her again. The mere remoteness of many communities makes it even more difficult for many women to seek additional services or outside assistance.

Many women report that their partners are never violent unless they have been drinking. While alcohol is not an excuse for violent behaviour, alcohol consumption can make matters worse. However, much of the violence that does occur in the Northern Territory does not involve alcohol or drug use.²

Pregnancy

Pregnancy is no protection against domestic violence; in fact, it often is the trigger that starts domestic violence in a relationship.

Women in violent relationships are:

- Twice as likely to miscarry
- More likely to be prescribed medication through their pregnancy
- More likely to experience asthma and epilepsy and
- More likely to abuse drugs, alcohol and minor tranquillisers.⁴

As a practitioner be attentive to injuries on women's abdominal and genital areas, because these are often the areas targeted on pregnant women.

Children's issues

Exposure to domestic violence has a profound and long-term effect on children. Recent research indicates that children between 0-4 yrs show measurable neurological delays in brain development when witnessing violence, and the psychological effects are the same as if they had directly experienced the violence themselves.⁵ This is the age where we normally assume children don't know what is happening. In fact, infants show clear disturbances in response to spousal violence from at least six weeks of age.⁶

Child witnesses of domestic violence are found to develop post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in the same way as child victims of war or natural disasters. That is, they are more likely to have dreams and recurring memories related to the event, show hyper-vigilance, sleep disturbances, psychosomatic disorders, withdrawal and anxiety, and have a lower level of cognitive performance.

Other behavioural indicators can include:

- Nervousness and anxiety
- Withdrawn behaviour

- Adjustment problems, few interests and poor school performance
- Enuresis (bed wetting)
- Psychosomatic illnesses (asthma, stomach aches, headaches etc.)
- Excessive cruelty to animals
- Aggressive behaviour and language
- Pseudo-maturity
- Boys imitating aggressive behaviours, bullying/ abusing their mothers.

Also be aware of mandatory notification requirements. If you believe that their home environment is adversely harming a child including psychological harm from exposure to violence, you are required by law to report the matter to Family and Children's Services.

Practical strategies

Principles of working with victims of violence

Listen to the victim and show her you believe her:

- Be non-judgemental and respect her decisions, even if you don't agree with them
- Be aware of your own feelings, and remain calm
- Tell her she is not responsible for the violence
- Ask clear, direct, sensitive questions
- Provide accurate information, including the forms violence can take (physical, emotional, sexual, financial, social), and the cycle of violence
- Ensure that she has the opportunity to make decisions about events, which affect her life (i.e. whether to report to police, tell family or friends)
- Explore and dispel myths: it's not her fault, she's not the only one, she can't stop his violence, and it does affect her children.

Raising the issue

It's easy to focus on treating the injury, and feel awkward about raising the topic with victims of violence. But women are unlikely to raise the subject themselves, and often do respond well to direct, clear, open questions. The following 'openers' can help this process:

- That's a really serious injury, how did it happen? It looks like someone hurt you. Did someone hit/kick/burn you?
- Does your partner ever make you feel frightened?
- You seem scared of your partner. Has she/he ever hurt you?
- Have you ever been in a relationship where you have been hit, punched, kicked or hurt in any way? Are you in a relationship like that now?
- Does your partner ever call you names or put you down?
- Does your partner ever force you to do things you don't want to do? Has he ever forced you to have sex when you didn't want to?
- Are you ever afraid for your safety, or your children's safety?
- Because abuse and violence are so common, I ask many female clients about it routinely.
- You mentioned that your partner uses alcohol/drugs. How does he act when he is drinking/on drugs?
- Has anyone ever forced you to do sexual things when you didn't want to?
- Has your partner ever threatened to hurt you or your children?
- Does your partner accuse you of sleeping with other men, and watch you all the time?

Protective behaviours

Women may acknowledge the violence, but they may not be willing to immediately leave their partners. While this may feel extremely frustrating, there is still a course of action that you can recommend.

Talk to her about developing a plan of action to get her away from the violence when she can see that it is about to happen again. Ask her to think about things such as:

- Warning signs when she knows her partner is likely to get violent again
- Spare change, clothes, emergency supplies she can keep hidden in case she needs to leave in a hurry
- A close personal friend or extended family member she can disclose to, who she may be able to run to at any time
- A plan of action for children to run to a friend or neighbour's house when fighting is occurring.

By encouraging her to plan she can possibly safely escape the violence next time it starts again. It is also worth discussing these plans even if the woman wants to leave her husband. Often, women do return to violent partners as a part of the violence cycle; at least with the plan they will have this information the next time they need to leave.

Restraining orders

The domestic violence legislation in the NT covers a range of relationships, including spouses, extended family through to great-great-grandparents, neighbours and people who have shared a residence.

Restraining orders can be obtained when a person is likely to suffer violence, threats and damage to their property or provocative behaviour at the hands of their spouse or relative.

A 'Section 4' restraining order is a standard restraining order where the client is required to make a signed statement outlining the abuse, and the matter is brought before a magistrate within a few days or weeks, depending on when court is sitting in the area. The order needs to be served on the offender before the restraining order is active. These can be obtained if the danger to the woman is not immediate.

Alternatively, a 'Section 6' order can be taken out more quickly, if the danger is imminent and the victim has no safe place to go. In these instances, police can contact a magistrate by phone and the order can be in place within a much shorter time. However, the order still needs to be served on the defendant (that is, given to the perpetrator) before the order is active.

Both types of orders can also be used if the patient is unconscious, with an assumption of consent. Only police and magistrates can make the decision to take out a Section 6 order, but any police officer has the authority to do it.

Restraining orders can allow for some contact between the parties if desired. For example, it may be possible to allow the couple to live together, but he will be breaching the restraining order if he consumes alcohol. Such orders are rare, and have shown some problems, but could be considered in certain situations.

Assistance with obtaining restraining orders can be obtained from the Domestic Violence Police Unit (8951 8888), and the Domestic Violence Legal Service (8952 1391), both in Alice Springs.

Self-care for workers

Frequently, perpetrators of violence are only violent towards their partners, not other people. However, workers should never assume this to be the case, and should always consider their own safety in situations of contact with victims of violence.

Debriefing: Dealing with victims of violence can often be distressing and frustrating. Make sure you have access to support people you can talk over the incident with, including supervisors that may be located elsewhere.

Safety: Take whatever measures you can to ensure that you will be safe within the community. Talk over the matter with other health staff, or police if necessary. Take extra precautions, including not leaving the clinic alone at night, and having backup support through the day where possible.

Dealing with perpetrators of violence

Dealing with a perpetrator, or someone you know has been violent, can be very difficult, particularly if he attempts to talk to you about what his partner may have said to you.

- Don't reveal any information about her disclosure: this may make things much worse for her. Remember that her disclosure is confidential information.
- Don't ever minimise what he has done, or agree with excuses he may give for the violence. The violence is his responsibility.
- Don't assume that, because he has expressed remorse, he won't do it again, and it is safe for her to return to him.

If he is expressing a desire to see his children who have left with their mother advise him to contact the Family Court Counselling service in Alice Springs, or equivalent. The service in Alice Springs covers many remote areas of Central Australia.

If you are at all concerned about your safety, or that of other workers, talk to police or other staff about how you can keep safe, or who else can see this man if he approaches the clinic.

Unfortunately, there are currently no intervention services for men who have been violent, except if they have been jailed. A program is run in the Alice Springs and Darwin jails for perpetrators of violence and rape. Alternatively, some private psychologists outside of jail have engaged in this work.

Additional information

Hunter S. Domestic violence during Pregnancy. Office of Women's Policy. Occasional Paper no. 17. NT Government Domestic Violence Strategy, 1998.

Responding to Domestic Violence: A guide for GPs. Video produced by Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1995.

Memmott P, Stacey R, Chambers C, Keys C. Violence in Indigenous Communities. University of Queensland, 2001.

Catherine House, 86 Hartley St, Alice Springs. Phone (08) 8953 5914 during working hours. Collection of resources and information relating to a variety of domestic violence/family violence issues. An information folder is available for purchase.

Websites

www.ncp.gov.au

Website for National Crime Prevention, includes several papers and research projects re: Aboriginal communities and Domestic Violence.

www.aic.gov.au

Website for the Australian Institute of Criminology, featuring many discussion papers on child abuse, domestic violence and related topics.

www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au

Australian Domestic Violence Clearing House: articles and information on Domestic Violence projects and research from around Australia

Other services (Central Australia)

NPY Women's Council: provide domestic violence support services in the NPY language regions in SA, NT and WA. (08) 8950 5420

CAAFU: Central Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Unit, based in Alice Springs, providing legal support and information to Ntaria, Papunya, Yuendumu, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. (08) 8953 6355 or 1800 088 884
Alice Springs Women's Shelter: emergency accommodation and case management support for women and children escaping violence. (08) 8952 6075
Domestic Violence Legal Service: legal support with restraining orders and crimes compensation, based in Alice Springs. (08) 8952 1391
Domestic Violence Police Unit: Police unit in Alice Springs with a focus on restraining order applications and Family Violence matters. (08) 8951 8888
Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Social and Emotional Wellbeing Team: counselling and support team, part of Aboriginal medical service. (08) 8951 4444

[Editor: These agencies are likely to be able to put you in touch with local agencies in other areas.]

References

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- ^{5.} Perry B. ABC Radio National. 2000.
- ^{6.} McIntosh J. Thought in the face of violence: a child's need. Paper presented at 'The Way Forward' children, young people and domestic violence proceedings, Carlton Crest Hotel, Melbourne. Partnerships Against Domestic Violence. Canberra: Office of the Status of Women, April 2000.
- ^{7.} Territory Health Services. Manual for Domestic Violence Intervention. Darwin: THS, 1995.