Frequently Asked Questions About Domestic Violence

Why do victims stay with an abuser or return after they have left?

There are numerous reasons why victims maintain contact with abusers or feel they cannot leave an abusive relationship. Victims of abuse often love or care about the people who harm them. Keeping the family together may be very important to the victim for many reasons, including for the sake of children or religious and cultural beliefs. Some victims fear that they will be seriously hurt or killed if they leave their abusers. Others do not have the financial resources and/or housing they need to leave. Medical conditions and disabilities may make living on their own difficult or impossible or the abusive individual may need the victims care.

Everyone fights sometimes. How can I tell a fight from abuse?

Disagreements occur in most relationships. Sometimes those arguments are loud and people say things that hurt each other's feelings. However, in most relationships, adults say they are sorry and make up. No one gets physically hurt. When there is abuse, one person uses power and control to get what they want out of the relationship. There may or may not be physical abuse in the relationship, but the threat of harm is present. The person with the power uses many tactics to maintain their control in the relationship, including emotional and psychological abuse, threats of physical violence or abandonment, isolating the individual from family and friends, limiting the victim's use of phone, breaking assistive devices and denying health care. Individuals who use power and control tactics in a relationship can be very persuasive, often trying to convince family, friends and professionals that they are only trying to help. Abusive individuals rarely take any responsibility for their inappropriate behavior.

Why Does Abuse Occur?

Does anger cause abuse?

Anger is a normal and healthy emotion and does not cause abuse. Even though abusers can be anger at times, abuse happens when an individual chooses manipulative, threatening or physically violent behavior to gain power and control over another individual. Abusive tactics may occur without any anger evident in the abuser.

Does mental illness cause abuse?

Some mental illnesses may have challenging or violent behaviors as one of their symptoms. Contact a mental health expert or doctor to find out more information about specific mental illnesses and combinations of medications to learn if violent behavior is likely or possible. Keep in mind that some abusers have used mental illness as an excuse to continue with their abusive behavior.

Is abuse caused by stress?

While stress is a commonly used rationale for abuse, stress does not cause abuse. Everyone experiences stress. Most stressed people do not hurt others. Most abusers under stress do not hit their bosses or law enforcement officers. They choose victims (such as family members) who have less power. At times providing care for an ill or frail elderly person can be stressful. Some abusers suggest that their negative behavior is due to caregiver stress because they are overwhelmed by the demands of providing care. Research does not support caregiver stress as a primary cause of elder abuse but rather an excuse used by abusers so they can continue their behavior without consequences such as intervention by social services or law enforcement.

Is abuse caused by a medical condition or combination of medications?

Some medical conditions or combinations of medications may cause a normally gentle person to become violent. Contact a doctor or health care provider to determine if the person has a medical condition and if aggressive behavior is related to the condition. Keep in mind that abusers may use a medical condition as an excuse for their behavior, so a medical opinion is important.

Does elder abuse occur because a victim of child abuse grows up and then abusers his/her parent(s)?

Abusive parents can unknowingly teach children that abuse is an effective way to control another individual. Abusive behavior is a choice. Individuals who grew up with abuse can choose to behave abusively or they can choose to stop the pattern of violence that may be all too familiar for them. Many adults who were victims of child abuse or witnessed domestic violence growing up, have healthy, happy adult relationships and do not hurt their children, spouse/partners or parents. Some individuals who are abused as children experience emotional problems and/or mental illness as adults. This may require specific treatment to deal with the effects of their victimization; however, this is not an excuse for someone to continue abusive behavior.

Does drug and/or alcohol abuse cause the violence and abuse?

Many people use drugs and/or alcohol and are never abusive. Drugs and alcohol do not cause abuse or violence, however, the violence may intensify when using drugs or alcohol. Sometimes abusers will use drugs and/or alcohol as an excuse for their behavior. Abusers who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol have two separate problems - abusive behavior and substance abuse. Drug and alcohol treatment programs are designed to help an individual stay sober, not to eliminate the abusive behavior.

How does domestic abuse affect a victim's health?

Domestic abuse is rarely a one-time event; it usually gets worse and happens more often. The damage to victims is real. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, men batter close to one million women a year. Untold numbers of women suffer permanent injuries—brain damage, blindness, deafness, speech loss through damage to the larynx, disfigurement and mutilation, damage to or loss of internal organs, paralysis, sterility, and so on.

Women who are victims of domestic violence are more likely to attempt suicide, suffer from depression, anxiety, general chronic pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, arthritis, and stomach ulcers. Many pregnant women miscarry as a result of beatings; and many birth defects are caused by assault on the mother during pregnancy. Many women have been infected with HIV by batterers who force them into unprotected sex. And every day in 1998, five women died violently at the hands of men who claimed to love them—accounting for one-third of all women murdered that year.

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