

Domestic Violence Changes Everything

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■ What is domestic violence?

Legal definitions of domestic violence vary slightly from state to state, so consult your lawyer. As to its social definitions, domestic violence occurs when one intimate partner uses physical violence; coercion; threats; intimidation; isolation; and/or emotional, sexual, and economic abuse to maintain power and control over another intimate partner. It is both a crime and a serious family matter.

■ What causes domestic violence?

Abusive behavior is chosen behavior used to gain power and control. It may be learned behavior from childhood and reinforced in other ways that involve cultural norms or oppression.

■ Is the abusive behavior my fault?

If you are the victim, absolutely not. Even in the heat of anger, abusers make the choice to use violence and/or coercion. Abusers do not have to be angry to use violence. Some abusers admit that they use stress, alcohol, drugs, and mental health issues as an excuse for their abusive behavior.

■ Should I stay with him/her?

No one can answer this question for you. However, your first consideration should be safety for you and your children. Excellent local support programs are available in many areas of the country. Your partner may pressure you to remain in the relationship during treatment. This is a

common tactic to control you. An abuser may become more dangerous once you decide to leave because of feelings of losing control. If you decide to leave, a safety plan is very important.

■ What is a safety plan?

Living with or leaving an abuser is downright dangerous. Sit down with your lawyer to work out a plan to protect you and your children, including emergency arrangements for safety; escape routes; fail-safe telephone service; access to car keys, money, and important papers; and telephone numbers of victim services or a shelter.

■ How can I keep the abuser away from me?

The legal tool for stopping domestic violence is called a protective order or temporary restraining order (TRO), although terminology differs from state to state. A TRO is an order signed by a judge that requires the abuser to stay away from you and stop abusing you. The order may require, for example, that the abuser stay away from the family home, your work or school, and possibly other places you frequent (such as a particular church). The order also prohibits further acts of violence.

■ How do I get a protective order?

Many states make it easy for victims to obtain a protective order or temporary restraining order (TRO). In some states, for example, the court clerk will hand you a package of forms. In many locales, staff or volunteers will even assist you in filling them out. When you've completed the forms, you'll go before a judge to show evidence of the abuse, such as hospital or police records.

■ What if the violence occurs when the courts are not open?

Call 911 or your local emergency number.

■ What if the abuser is sorry?

Apologies and promises (to end the violence, stop using alcohol or drugs, go to church, attend counseling) are part of a common pattern of

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an abuser, and too often are just another way to maintain control.

■ How can I identify a real change?

Trust your gut instincts, regardless of other signs.

Ask yourself:

- Has your partner completely stopped saying and doing things that frighten you?
- Can you express anger toward your partner without being punished for it?
- Do you feel safe bringing up topics that upset your partner?
- Can your partner listen to your opinion and respect it, even though disagreeing?
- Can your partner argue without being abusive or domineering?
- Does your partner respect your wishes about sex and physical contact?
- Does your partner respect boundaries that you or the court have established?
- Has your partner stopped expecting you to do things for him/her?
- Can you spend time with friends and family without being afraid of retaliation?
- Can you do other things that are important to you, such as go to school or get a job?
- Are you comfortable with the way your partner interacts with the children?
- Is your partner supportive and complimentary?
- Does your partner do his/her share of housework and child care?
- Do you have equal access to money/finances?

■ What warning signs forecast a risk of violence in a relationship?

- Does your partner control who you see or what you do?
- Is your partner jealous and possessive?
- Does your partner threaten physical force to control you, your friends, or your family?
- Is your partner easily angered?
- Does your partner pressure you to

use drugs/alcohol?

- Does your partner shift responsibility for abusive behavior to you?
- Are you afraid to end the relationship?
- Are friends or family worried about you?

■ I know I have a problem with anger, but I'm trying to deal with it, what else can I do?

Classes or therapy directed at anger management may be necessary. If your instinctive method of dealing with anger is to respond aggressively, even physically, you may need professional help to learn methods to reduce or redirect your emotional responses to people or things that make you angry. A professional may also be able to help you identify particular things that trigger your anger and develop strategies to keep from losing control.

■ I admit I've been out of control in the past, but does the judge have to know about that?

You should assume that the other side will attempt to use any past incidents that reflect poorly on you. You also must assume that efforts to conceal or distort the truth about past events are likely to backfire, making an even worse impression on the judge. The weight that may be placed on past behavior will depend on how far in the past the incident was, whether it reflects a pattern of behavior or an isolated occurrence, and the particular issues in dispute.

■ When it comes to custody, will the judge give me a chance to explain how I've changed?

Probably so. However, concrete actions rather than just statements of good intention will carry the most weight. In addition, if the change has been recent, don't be surprised if the court is skeptical of a real change, as opposed to a period of good behavior motivated by court proceeding. **FA**

Can an abuser change?



Change is possible. However, the abuser must see a need for change and then want to change. You cannot change the abuser. If the process occurs at all, it may be slow. A personal commitment to change and domestic violence treatment can help abusers identify and address abusive behavior.