
What is family violence?

Summary

- Family violence (also called domestic violence) is not only physical abuse; it can also be sexual, psychological, emotional, economic, spiritual or legal abuse.
- All forms of family violence are illegal and unacceptable.
- If you're affected by family violence, help and support are available.

In Victoria, family violence covers a range of behaviours committed by a person against a family member. All the behaviours aim to control a family member through fear, and include the following:

- physical abuse, for example pushing or hitting
- sexual abuse, including forcing a person to have sex or engage in sexual activity
- emotional or psychological abuse, including calling the person by names and controlling their behaviour
- intentionally damaging a family member's property
- economic abuse – this includes controlling a family member's bank accounts and money without their consent
- any other behaviour that causes the family member to feel fear for their safety, the safety of another person or an animal
threatening to do any of the above.

An act of family violence also occurs if a child hears, sees or is around family violence. The law then protects that child as well as the family member who was the victim of the violence.

Anyone can be affected by family violence, regardless of their age, gender, sexual identity, cultural background, ability, religion, wealth, status or location.

Family violence is the **leading contributor to preventable death, disability and illness among Victorian women** aged 15 to 44 years.

If you are affected by family violence, **help and support** are available. You are not alone.

Examples of family violence

Physical abuse is when an abuser uses physical force against another person in a way that injures the person or puts them at risk of being injured. Physical abuse ranges from physical restraint to murder. Some examples are:

- grabbing, pinching, shoving, slapping, hitting, biting, arm-twisting, kicking, stabbing, shooting, pushing, throwing, kicking, punching, beating, tripping, battering, bruising, choking, shaking
- holding, restraining, confining
- breaking bones
- assaulting with a weapon, such as a knife or gun
- burning
- stopping a person from having what they need for their health, such as medication, medical care or hygienic assistance
- forcing a person to drink alcohol or take drugs.

Psychological or emotional abuse can be verbal or nonverbal, and the actions or behaviours are less obvious than with physical abuse. Physical abuse may seem worse, but verbal or nonverbal abuse can be very emotionally damaging. Some examples are:

- undermining a person's self-worth through constant criticism, belittling, name-calling or insults
- threatening or intimidating a person to gain compliance
- destroying personal property and possessions, or threatening to do so
- being violent towards an object or pet
- yelling or screaming
- constantly harassing a person
- not trusting a person's decision making
- telling a person they are worthless without their abuser
- being excessively possessive
- isolating a person from friends and family
- excessive checking-up on a person
- saying hurtful things while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and using the substance as an excuse to say hurtful things
- blaming a person for the abuser's own acts or feelings
- making a person feel there is no way out of the relationship.

Sexual abuse is often linked to physical abuse. Some examples are:

- any sexual contact without consent, such as rape (including marital rape), attacks on the sexual body parts, forced prostitution, unwanted touching, forced sex with others, being denied contraception when you want to use it.
- attempting to undermine a person's sexuality, such as being sexually derogatory, criticising sexual performance and desirability, making accusations of infidelity, withholding sex.

Economic abuse includes:

- making or attempting to make a person financially dependent, such as maintaining total control over financial resources, withholding money or credit cards, or forbidding attendance at school or employment
- stealing from or defrauding a partner of money or assets
- exploiting a partner's resources for personal gain
- withholding physical resources such as food, clothes, necessary medications, or shelter from a partner
- preventing a partner from working or choosing an occupation.

Spiritual abuse includes:

- using a person's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate them
- preventing a person from practising their religious or spiritual beliefs
- ridiculing a person's religious or spiritual beliefs
- forcing the children to be reared in a faith that the partner has not agreed to.

Legal abuse is when a person exploits the family law system to intimidate, exhaust, exploit or disempower their partner or family member.

Stalking is also family violence. It's a pattern of unwanted contact that makes a person feel afraid, nervous, harassed or in danger. Stalking can occur in person or online.

This list covers only some examples of family violence. If you think you might be experiencing **family violence**, seek help.

Family violence – who is a family member?

The Family Violence Protection Act 2008 defines '**family member**' broadly. Family violence can occur in any familial relationship – for example, between:

- current or former intimate partners who are or were married or in de facto relationships, in heterosexual and same-sex relationships

- between parents (or step-parents) and children
- between siblings
- between grandparents, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins.

Family violence can also occur in relationships that are considered to be 'family-like' – for example, in certain cultural traditions or between a person with a disability and their unrelated carer.

Possible consequences of family violence

Family violence can cause physical and psychological harm. And it can pass from one generation to the next – some children who experience family violence become violent adolescents due to learned behaviour and a feeling that their world needs controlling.

Family violence can affect physical and mental health, and lead to social and community issues, including homelessness.

Some immediate health impacts of family violence may include:

- physical injuries – such as cuts, scrapes and bruises, fractures, dislocated bones
- hearing loss
- vision loss
- miscarriage or early delivery
- sexually transmitted diseases
- knife wounds
- gunshot wounds
- homicide.

Longer term health impacts of family violence may include:

- gastro-intestinal disorders associated with stress
- headaches
- back pain
- fainting
- seizures
- gynaecological problems
- anxiety
- depression
- eating disorders
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- sleep disturbances
- alcohol and substance misuse
- smoking throughout pregnancy
- homelessness
- suicide
- homicide.

Some victims of family violence are murdered or die as a result of their injuries.

Socially, family violence weakens family and community structures. Victims of family violence may find it difficult to go to school or get a job, or they may turn to crime, alcohol or other drugs.

Family violence checklist

Family violence is a pattern of behavior that intimidates or belittles or physically hurts you. If you answer 'yes' to any of these questions, you may be experiencing family violence, and need help.

- Has your partner or family member ever threatened to harm or kill you?

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- Does your partner physically hurt you, damage property, throw things or make you feel unsafe or frightened?
- Does your partner make you feel like you can't do anything right or make you feel bad about yourself?
- Does your partner constantly put you down, criticise your looks or call you names?
- Do you feel forced or pressured into having sex, even when you don't want to?
- Has your partner made you do something humiliating or degrading?
- Does your partner control the household finances or your money (such as take money away from you or control how you spend it)?
- When you talk to members of the opposite sex, does your partner act jealously or suspicious for no reason, or accuse you of flirting with the other person?
- Does your partner try to control your contact with your family and friends (such as monitor or limit your phone calls, conversations and emails) or stop you from seeing them?
- Does your partner constantly need or demand to know where you are (for example, does your partner check your car odometer to try to work out where you've been)?
- Does your partner treat you like a possession?
- Has your partner used force or coercion to make you do things against your will?
- If your partner has been aggressive, did they say their anger and violence was your fault?
- Has your partner denied using violence or said it wasn't that bad or you were asking for it?
- Is it difficult to disagree with your partner or to say 'no' to them?
- Has your partner stalked, or constantly harassed you?
- If you have children, has your partner threatened to take the children away from you?
- Has your partner threatened to hurt your children, family, friends or pets?
- Does your partner question your children about where you've been and who with?
- Has your partner encouraged your children to insult you or tell you inappropriate things?
- Do your children hear or see things that might be damaging to them?
- Does your partner threaten to kill him or herself?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, you may be experiencing family violence and need help. Even if it has only happened once.

How common is family violence?

Violence against women is recognised to be a serious and widespread problem in Australia, with enormous individual and community impacts and social costs.

Five per cent of male and **17 per cent of female respondents to a 2013 survey** had been physically or sexually assaulted by a past or current partner on at least one occasion since the age of 15.

Twenty-five per cent of female and 14 per cent of male respondents had been emotionally abused by a past or current partner since turning 15 years old.

The **Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence** noted that while males were more likely to be victims of violence generally, this was most likely to occur at the hands of men outside the family home. By contrast, violence against women is more likely to be perpetrated by an intimate partner.

Female victims are more likely to be a current or former partner of the perpetrator, while men are more likely to experience violence in different familial relationships – for example, as a son or a sibling.

The **Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey 2012** showed that 95 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women who had experienced violence from a current partner had never contacted the police. It also showed that:

- one in three women had experienced physical violence since the age of 15
- nearly one in five women had experienced sexual violence since the age of 15
- 16 per cent of women had experienced violence by a current or previous partner since the age of 15.

Intimate partner violence especially affects pregnant women. The ABS 2012 survey found that 22 per cent of

women who experienced intimate partner violence by their current partner were pregnant at the time of the violence. 25 per cent of women who experienced intimate partner violence by their previous partner were pregnant at the time of the violence. Of these women, 25 per cent were pregnant when the violence started.

On average there are 129 domestic/family homicide victims in Australia each year (between 32 and 47 percent of all homicides annually). Two in five victims are killed by a family member and these victims are most commonly partners, parents and children.

Women aged 18–24 experience significantly higher rates of physical and sexual violence than women in older age groups.

There is growing evidence that women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 35 times more likely to experience family violence and more severe forms of violence compared to other women.

Of those women who experience violence, more than half have children in their care.

Remember...

- Family violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship where one person assumes a position of power over another and causes fear.
- Family violence (also called domestic violence) takes many forms: it can be physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, economic, spiritual or legal abuse.
- All forms of family violence are illegal and unacceptable.
- If you're affected by family violence, help and support are available.

Where to get help

- Call **000** at any time if you are worried about your safety, your children's safety, or the safety of anyone else in your household.
- **Sexual Assault Crisis Line (SACL)** 1800 806 292
- **1800Respect (National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line)** Tel. 1800 737 732
- **safe steps Family Violence Response Centre** Tel. 1800 015 188
- **Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria**
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **MensLine Australia** Tel. 1300 78 99 78
- **White Ribbon** (list of national hotlines and state and territory helplines)
- **Salvation Army** Tel. 1800 627 727
- These booklets offer useful advice for women leaving a family violence situation:
 - **Planning for your safety** (multiple languages)
 - **Safe from Violence**

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South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault

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