Family violence and women with disabilities

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Summary

- Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and for more extended periods of time.
- There are many barriers that prevent women with disabilities from seeking help, including reliance on the abuser, fear and service gaps in disability and women’s agencies.

Types of violence

The different types of domestic violence experienced by women with disabilities can include:

- Hitting, punching, choking, kicking, pushing, burning with lit cigarettes.
- Threats, such as threatening physical harm or threatening to have the woman institutionalised.
- Threats against the woman’s children, pets or guide dog.
- Verbal abuse such as criticisms, putdowns and insults.
- Taking control of the woman’s disability aids against her wishes, such as moving her wheelchair around.
- Damaging or threatening to damage belongings, including disability aids.
- Neglect, such as refusing to wash or feed the woman or to hand over medications.
- Performing care in cruel ways, such as washing her in cold water.
- Refusing to offer help until the woman consents to sex.
- Unwanted sexual advances, ranging from unwanted touching to rape.
- Withholding information.
- Making decisions on the woman’s behalf without her consent.
- Taking control of the woman’s finances without her consent, including withholding money or not allowing her to shop for herself.
- Isolating the woman from family, friends and services.

The abusers

According to Western Australian research, the abusers are:

- Male spouse or partner - 43 per cent
- Parent - 15 per cent
- Female spouse or partner - 11 per cent
- Other relative - 8 per cent
- Child - 7 per cent
- Another person such as a neighbour - 6 per cent
- Carer - 4 per cent
- Work colleague - 2 per cent
- Healthcare professional - 2 per cent
- House or flat mate - 1 per cent
- Clergy - 1 per cent.

Women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence

Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and for more extended periods of time. Some of the many reasons for this include:

- Social myths - people with disabilities are often dismissed as passive, helpless, child-like, non-sexual and burdensome. These prejudices tend to make people with disabilities less visible to society, and suggest that abuse, especially sexual abuse, is unlikely.
- Learned helplessness - people with disabilities, particularly people with cognitive disabilities or those who have been living in institutions for a long time, are encouraged to be compliant and cooperative. This life history can make it harder for a woman to defend herself against abuse.
- Lack of sex education - there is a tendency to deny sex education to people with intellectual disabilities. If a woman with no knowledge of sex is sexually abused, it is harder for her to seek help because she may not understand exactly what is happening to her.
- Dependence - the woman may be dependent on her abuser for care because her disability limits her economic and environmental independence.
- Misdiagnosis - authorities may misinterpret a cry for help; for example, a woman’s behaviour might be diagnosed as anxiety rather than signs of abuse. In other
situations, workers may not be aware that domestic violence also includes financial or emotional abuse, or may not be sensitive to the signs.

- The abuser takes control - if the woman seeks help, follow-up may be difficult because the abuser isolates her and prevents her from using the phone or leaving the house.

**Reasons for not seeking help from authorities**

One US study found that women with disabilities tend not to report the abuse themselves. Some of the many reasons why women with disabilities may not seek help from authorities and support agencies include:

- Shame.
- Belief that she somehow deserves to be abused.
- Belief that she is being abused because she is disabled.
- Not knowing that she has any rights or that there are laws to protect her.
- Not realising that the treatment she receives is abusive, because she has been treated this way her whole life.
- Staying where she is and enduring the abuse may seem like a slightly better option than poverty, homelessness or institutionalisation.
- Belief that the police and the courts don’t take domestic violence as seriously as other kinds of violence.
- Prior bad experiences with authorities - for example, a woman with a psychiatric illness may have had an upsetting experience with police in the past, which is why she won’t consider contacting them for help.
- Isolation - for example, the abuser may not allow her to use the phone or leave the house.
- Lack of access to information, because the abuser chooses to withhold information from her.
- Fear of negative outcomes.

**Fear can stop women from seeking help**

Common fears include:

- Fear that no one will believe her.
- Fear that no one will be able to help her.
- Fear of being punished by the abuser for reporting the violence.
- Fear of being shamed, punished or shunned by her family, friends and community.
- Fear of loss - for example, she may be afraid of losing her home or having her children taken away from her.
- Fear of being institutionalised.
- Fear of having no one to help her if she leaves the relationship.

**Barriers to women with disabilities getting help**

Some of the reasons why women with disabilities may not get help include:

- Disability policies tend to rely on family members taking care of the person, which is disastrous if the carer is also the abuser.
- Since the abuser is often the caregiver, the woman is denied information and access to help services.
- The wide range of disabilities means there is no distinct ‘group’, so there is no ‘one size fits all’ policy to adopt nor any easy way to access all of the women who need help.
- Domestic violence workers may not be educated about the issues facing women with disabilities, and disability workers may not be educated about domestic violence.
- The various agencies that help people with disabilities aren’t cross-referenced as thoroughly as they could be, which creates service gaps. For example, a woman might be referred back and forth between two agencies, such as sexual assault services and disability services, without receiving help from either because she falls outside the guidelines of both agencies.
- Studies and statistics on women with disabilities and domestic violence are few and far between, so agencies may not be aware of service gaps.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Police Tel. **000**
- Ambulance Tel. **000**
- The Women’s Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria (24 hour) Tel. **1800 015 183**
- Domestic Violence Outreach Workers - call The Women’s Domestic Violence Crisis Service for the telephone number of your local outreach worker
- Domestic Violence Crisis Centre (national number) Tel. **1800 633 937**
- **Women With Disabilities Australia** Tel. (03) 6244 8288 (Tasmania)
- National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service (Australia) Tel. **1800 737 732** – free telephone counselling hotline (24 hours, 7 days)

**Things to remember**

- Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and for more extended periods of time.
- The male spouse or partner is the abuser in 43 per cent of cases according to one Western Australian study.
- There are many barriers that prevent women with disabilities from seeking help, including reliance on the abuser, fear and service gaps in disability and women’s agencies.

**References**


betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

1/4 How would you rate this website?

- □ Excellent
- □ Good
- □ Average
- □ Fair
- □ Poor

Next Submit Now Cancel

Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

2/4 Your Comments

Tell us who you are: Select an option □

Enter your comments below (optional)

Next Submit Now Cancel

Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

3/4 Questions

What are you here to do? Looking for information on □

Did you find what you were looking for?

- □ Yes
- □ No

Next Submit Now Cancel

Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

4/4 Your details

Postcode

Email Address

Submit Now Cancel

Send us your feedback

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Thank you. Your feedback has been successfully sent.

More information

Relationships

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Relationships basics
- Developing relationships
- Family relationships
- Separation and divorce
- Remarriage and repartnering
- Relationship difficulties
- Violence and abuse
- Work and relationships
- Getting help

Relationships basics

- Relationships – tips for success
  A good relationship doesn’t just happen - you have to work at it...

- About child, family and relationship services (video)
  Services include parent education to maternal and child healthcare, child care, crisis support, child protection, family violence and relationship services...

- Managing a relationship breakdown
  Breaking up is a tough time. It can be better or worse depending on how you deal with it. Here is some information to help you recognise how you’re feeling, and why. You’ll also find...

- Parenting on your own
  A person can become a single or sole parent for many different reasons. You may have chosen to start a family on your own, you may be separated or divorced, or your partner may have died. As a...

- Relationships and communication
  Good communication is about the way we talk and listen, and about our body language...

- Relationships - dealing with conflict
  With the physical and emotional closeness of a partnership, it is inevitable that there is sometimes conflict...

- Relationship support services
  You may need outside help to resolve problems and ensure your relationship stays healthy and strong...

- Strong relationships, strong health
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

Developing relationships

- 10 tips for being assertive
  Practise speaking in an assertive voice... 10 tips for being assertive...

- 10 tips for making new friends
  Forget about gossip and build strong relationships... 10 tips for making new friends...

- Assertiveness
  It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity...

- How to volunteer and boost your health
  Volunteering is great for our health - it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process...

- Making friends
  Friendships are an important part of life, but many of us find it difficult to find, make or keep friends...

- Peer pressure

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life.

- Relationships and communication
  
  Good communication is about the way we talk and listen, and about our body language.

- Relationships - creating intimacy
  
  Intimacy in a relationship means being able to share a whole range of thoughts, feelings and experiences that we have as human beings.

- Relationships – tips for success
  
  A good relationship doesn't just happen - you have to work at it.

- Secrets to healthy ageing
  
  Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

- Strong relationships, strong health
  
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

Family relationships

- Happy families
  
  It might be valuable to occasionally evaluate the dynamics of your family to ensure that everyone is as happy as they could be.

- 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry
  
  Teach your children to sort out minor differences themselves. 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry.

- Children and sibling rivalry
  
  Sibling rivalry is a common problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age.

- Family conflict
  
  It is normal to disagree with each other from time to time and occasional conflict is part of family life.

- Managing a relationship breakdown
  
  Breaking up is a tough time. It can be better or worse depending on how you deal with it. Here is some information to help you recognise how you're feeling, and why. You'll also find.

- Parenthood and your relationship
  
  The birth of your first child can significantly change your relationship with your partner and may impact on other relationships.

- Parenting on your own
  
  A person can become a single or sole parent for many different reasons. You may have chosen to start a family on your own, you may be separated or divorced, or your partner may have died. As a,

- Recent arrivals, asylum seekers and family support services
  
  Provides an overview of family support programs and health services available to refugees and asylum seekers living in Victoria.

Separation and divorce

- Family breakups - supporting children
  
  Separating parents can help children by giving them honest explanations and emotional support.

- Family break ups - tips for children
  
  A family breakup may be even harder for children if they have to move house as a result.

- Managing a relationship breakdown
  
  Breaking up is a tough time. It can be better or worse depending on how you deal with it. Here is some information to help you recognise how you're feeling, and why. You'll also find.

- Stepfamilies
  
  Becoming part of a stepfamily involves adjusting to a number of changes.

Remarriage and repartnering

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
10 tips for happier step-parenting

Give your undivided attention when your child asks for it ...

Managing a relationship breakdown

Breaking up is a tough time. It can be better or worse depending on how you deal with it. Here is some information to help you recognise how you’re feeling, and why. You’ll also find ...

Relationships – remarriage

A step-family will be different from your previous experience of family ...

Relationship difficulties

- Work-related stress
  Work-related stress causes an increase in sick days and absenteeism, a higher turnover of staff and a drop in productivity ...

- Breastfeeding and work
  You can successfully combine breastfeeding with work if you have support from your employer, colleagues and family ...

- Tertiary studies - mature age students
  Returning to study as a mature age student presents many challenges and rewards ...

- Computer-related injuries
  Using a computer can contribute to problems of the muscles and joints, eyestrain and overuse injuries of the arms, wrists and hands ...

- Tertiary studies - managing stress
  Stress is a common issue for all tertiary students, but there are lots of ways to manage your stress ...

- Holiday stress
  Holidays are supposed to offer relaxation and recuperation, but some people find them disappointingly stressful ...

- Workplace safety - overuse injuries
  Occupational overuse syndrome, also known as RSI, is caused by repetitive movements or awkward postures ...

- Look after your health at harvest time
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness ...

- Shiftwork
  A person working the night shift is at greater risk of various disorders and accidents ...

- Christmas can be stressful
  The expense of gifts and food, the pressure of shopping, and the expectations of the season can make Christmas an extremely stressful time ...

- Workplace safety - coping with a critical incident
  Stress responses can develop over time after trauma, and support may be required by some workers or groups ...

- Christmas – tips to reduce the stress
  Christmas doesn’t have to be a financial headache if you plan ahead ...

- How to volunteer and boost your health
  Volunteering is great for our health – it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process ...

- Work and your health
  Work can provide satisfaction, but loss of a job or work-related problems can affect our physical, emotional and mental health ...

- Anger - tips to resolve arguments
  There are many people you can talk to who can help you overcome feelings of wanting to lash out ...

- Anger - how it affects people
  Well-managed anger can be a useful emotion that motivates you to make positive changes ...

- Assertiveness
It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity.

- Making friends
  Friendships are an important part of life, but many of us find it difficult to find, make or keep friends.

- Strong relationships, strong health
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

- Peer pressure
  Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life.

**Violence and abuse**

- Family violence explained
  Perpetrators often make excuses for their violence, for example, blaming alcohol or stress.

- 10 tips for being assertive
  Practise speaking in an assertive voice, 10 tips for being assertive.

- 10 tips for happier step-parenting
  Give your undivided attention when your child asks for it, 10 tips for happier step-parenting.

- 10 tips for making new friends
  Forget about gossip and build strong relationships, 10 tips for making new friends.

- 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry
  Teach your children to sort out minor differences themselves, 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry.

- 1800RESPECT
  1800RESPECT is a national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service.

- About child, family and relationship services (video)
  Services include parent education to maternal and child healthcare, child care, crisis support, child protection, family violence and relationship services.

- Anger - how it affects people
  Well-managed anger can be a useful emotion that motivates you to make positive changes.

- Anger - tips to resolve arguments
  There are many people you can talk to who can help you overcome feelings of wanting to lash out.

- Assertiveness
  It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity.

- Breastfeeding and work
  You can successfully combine breastfeeding with work if you have support from your employer, colleagues and family.

- Children and sibling rivalry
  Sibling rivalry is a common problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age.

- Christmas can be stressful
  The expense of gifts and food, the pressure of shopping, and the expectations of the season can make Christmas an extremely stressful time.

- Family breakups - supporting children
  Separating parents can help children by giving them honest explanations and emotional support.

- Family break ups - tips for children
  A family breakup may be even harder for children if they have to move house as a result.

- Family conflict
  It is normal to disagree with each other from time to time and occasional conflict is part of family life.

- Family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience both far higher rates and more severe forms of family violence compared to other women.

- **Family violence and children**
  Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems.

- **Family violence and culturally diverse women**
  All forms of family violence (also called domestic violence) are illegal and unacceptable in Australia. But for women from culturally diverse backgrounds, the situation is complex.

- **Family violence and the LGBTIQ communities**
  Within Australia, intimate partner violence is the most common form of family violence. Evidence presented to the Royal Commission into Family Violence suggests intimate partner violence is as...

**Work and relationships**

- **Breastfeeding and work**
  You can successfully combine breastfeeding with work if you have support from your employer, colleagues and family.

- **Work-related stress**
  Work-related stress causes an increase in sick days and absenteeism, a higher turnover of staff and a drop in productivity.

**Getting help**

- **Family violence services for women**
  Family violence can have an enormous impact on the health of women and their children.

- **Parenting support to help prevent abuse**
  There is a range of non-government agencies available to help families under stress in caring for their children.

- **Relationships Australia**
  Relationships Australia is a nationwide community-based organisation that provides relationship support services for individuals, families and communities.

- **What is family violence?**
  Family violence can be physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, economic, spiritual or legal abuse. All family violence is illegal and unacceptable.

- **Getting help for someone with a mental illness**
  The sooner a person with a mental illness receives treatment, the better the outcome is likely to be.

- **Personal and relationship services**
  There are personal and relationship services available to you that offer counselling and relationship advice.

- **About child, family and relationship services (video)**
  Services include parent education to maternal and child healthcare, child care, crisis support, child protection, family violence and relationship services.

- **Relationships, family and mental health**
  When you, your partner or someone in your family has a mental illness, it can cause stress and worry for everyone.

- **St Kilda Crisis Contact Centre**
  The St Kilda Crisis Contact Centre offers support, information and referrals to people who are in difficult situations.

- **Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault Forum**
  The 15 Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) that are spread throughout Victoria support women, men and young people who have been sexually assaulted.

- **Social worker**
  Social workers are trained to help people experiencing a range of issues including family problems, anxiety, depression, crisis and trauma.

- **Victoria Legal Aid**
  Victoria Legal Aid provides free advice to people with legal problems, focusing on criminal law, family law and some civil law matters.

- **Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service**
  The Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing or recovering from family violence or sexual assault.

---

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
• safe steps Family Violence Response Centre
  safe steps is a service for women and children experiencing family violence...

• Victims of crime
  Victims of crime in Victoria are entitled to free help and may also obtain victims of crime compensation and receive victim support services...

• Anger - tips to resolve arguments
  There are many people you can talk to who can help you overcome feelings of wanting to lash out...

• Relationship support services
  You may need outside help to resolve problems and ensure your relationship stays healthy and strong...

• Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria
  DVRCV provides support, information and referrals to people experiencing family violence...

• Men’s Referral Service
  The Men’s Referral Service is a free, confidential telephone helpline that offers counselling, advice and support to men who have anger, relationship or parenting issues...

• Sexual Assault Crisis Line
  SACL is a telephone crisis counselling service for people who have experienced sexual assault...

Related Information

• Family violence - tips for women with disabilities
  Traditional strategies for escaping abuse are often of little use to a woman who has restricted mobility or who depends on her abuser for care...

• People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect
  People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect can seek help from a range of services specifically designed to help them...

• Family violence and children
  Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems...

• Family violence explained
  Perpetrators often make excuses for their violence, for example, blaming alcohol or stress...

• Family violence and culturally diverse women
  All forms of family violence (also called domestic violence) are illegal and unacceptable in Australia. But for women from culturally diverse backgrounds, the situation is complex...

Home

Related information on other websites

• Department of Victorian Communities - Office of Women's Policy.
• Silent voices: women with disabilities and family and domestic violence.

Content Partner

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria ? DVRCV

Last updated: June 2014
Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

1800RESPECT

1800RESPECT is a national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service that is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Call (toll free) 1800 737 732.

Service Search

Find services near you

Service: Select a service

Location:

Type a minimum of three characters then press UP or DOWN on the keyboard to navigate the autocompleted search results

Find a service

- Health topics
  - Conditions and treatments
  - Healthy living
  - Services and support

- Explore
  - Recipes
  - Healthy pantry
  - Videos
  - Consumer medicine information
  - Multilingual health information - Health Translations Directory

- About
  - About us
  - Accessibility
  - Content partners
  - Privacy
  - Terms of use
  - Contact us

- Connect with us
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - YouTube

Page last reviewed: 30 Jun 2014


Betterhealth.vic.gov.au
This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria ? DVRCV

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au