

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/how-to-spot-the-signs-of-domestic-abuse

How to spot the warning signs of domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is an area fraught with misconceptions. For many people, what they understand by the term is physical violence – the classic pattern of abuse that leads to a woman seeking shelter. The severity of this problem shouldn't be minimised – each week, two women in England and Wales are killed by a current or former partner, along with 30 men a year.

However, there are many other forms that domestic abuse can take, some of them quite insidious. As Sandra Horley, chief executive of [Refuge](#), explains, it can be physical, emotional, psychological, financial, technological or sexual in nature.

"There are still so many myths surrounding [domestic abuse](#)," she says. "People often think that it only happens in poor families on council estates, but the truth is that domestic violence affects women of all ages, classes and backgrounds."

Although Refuge focuses its efforts on women and girls, the problem can affect men too. In fact, one in four women and one in six men will suffer domestic abuse over the course of their lifetime.

According to the UK government, it encompasses "any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality."

Unfortunately, the signs can sometimes be tricky to identify, and toxic patterns of behaviour can be swept under the carpet for too long. This can have an untold cost on the victim's quality of life, health and personal relationships, as well as seriously eroding their self-esteem.

"Every couple has arguments and disagreements – we all say and do things we later regret. However, domestic violence is systematic, purposeful and patterned behaviour designed to control another person," says Horley. "If a woman is forced to change her behaviour because she is frightened of her partner's reaction, then she is being abused."

'A strong woman in love with a troubled man'

In her TED talk, '[Why domestic violence victims don't leave](#)', writer Leslie Morgan Steiner tells the harrowing tale of an abusive marriage she entered aged just 22. In line with many other abuse survivors, she says her former partner idolised her at the start of the relationship.

"If you had told me that this smart, funny, sensitive man who adored me would one day dictate whether or not I wore make-up, how short my skirts were, where I lived, what jobs I took, who my friends were and where I spent Christmas, I would have laughed at you because there was not a hint of violence or anger or control in Connor at the beginning," she says in the TED talk. "I didn't know that the first stage in any domestic violence relationship is to seduce and charm the victim. I also didn't know the second step is to isolate the victim."

In Steiner's case, she moved with her partner to a remote town far away from family and friends, convinced 'you made sacrifices for your soulmate'. The campaign of physical violence began five days before their wedding, and continued throughout their marriage.

"Why did I stay?" she says. "The answer is simple. I didn't know he was abusing me ... I never once thought of myself as a battered wife. Instead, I was a very strong woman in love with a troubled man, and I was the only person on earth who could help Connor face his demons."

Only once the violence had escalated further – and Steiner had begun to fear for her life – did she leave. She also told the police what was happening, along with her family and friends.

It's important to point out that leaving an abusive partner can be dangerous for many victims. Charities like Refuge, [Women's Aid](#) and [Living Without Abuse](#) exist to help people in this situation. You can also call the free [Domestic Violence Helpline](#), which is run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge.

How to recognise abuse

At base, what all domestic abuse has in common is a misuse of power, which makes it different from ordinary squabbles. This can range from excessive jealousy and possessiveness, to constant criticism, to playing mind games that make you unsure of your own judgement. Refuge has a [list of questions](#) you can ask yourself to see if you may be experiencing domestic violence (change the pronouns as appropriate if your partner isn't male).

One common sign, for instance, is that the perpetrator is charming one minute and abusive the next - you might liken his/her personality to 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'. You might feel like you're walking on eggshells. They might control your money or pressure you to have sex when you don't want to, all the while implying you are getting what you deserve.

From the outside, these patterns can be difficult to see. If you're concerned about a friend or family member, some of the warning signs to look out for are a change in physical presentation, unexplained injuries, or a change in socialising patterns. Refuge has a section giving [advice](#) on how to help someone you care about.

However it manifests, abuse is never the fault of the victim. It is also illegal - and that doesn't apply only to physical violence. Coercive and controlling behaviour was made a [criminal offence](#) in 2015.

"For too long, domestic violence has been allowed to happen behind closed doors. People think what happens in the home is private and not their problem," says Horley. "Domestic violence is a crime. It is against the law. We are all affected by domestic violence, and we all have a responsibility to speak out against it. Only then will it end."

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Egton Medical Information Systems Limited has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. For details see our [conditions](#).

Last updated by: Abi Millar 24/09/2018	
Peer reviewed by: Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP 24/09/2018	

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/how-to-spot-the-signs-of-domestic-abuse

Discuss How to spot the warning signs of domestic abuse and find more trusted resources at [Patient](https://patient.info).



To find out more visit www.patientaccess.com
or download the app



Follow us

