

The Cycle of Family Violence

Most people, when beaten or intimidated by someone in their own family, feel helpless, afraid, embarrassed, and guilty. These emotions, plus a belief that what happened was not really a crime, often keep victims from taking any action.

Everyone hopes it won't happen again. Unfortunately, abusers follow a predictable cycle—tension builds and erupts into an attack, then remorse and a period of reconciliation follow until tension again builds and is released by violence.



Myth: Children do not suffer long-term effects from family violence.

FACT: Children of abusive parents often are abused physically or sexually. In many cases, they continue the cycle of violence by abusing their own children. Statistics show that children who witness violence are more likely to commit acts of violence later.

Myth: Family violence is not widespread.

FACT: Domestic violence is a widespread and serious problem in America, with devastating consequences for individuals, families, and communities.

Myth: Family violence happens only to women in low-income groups.

FACT: Although violence in families is drastically underreported, it affects all kinds of people regardless of gender, race, culture, age, sexual orientation, class, or citizenship status.

Myth: Victims of family violence can easily leave before violence becomes a serious threat.

FACT: Economic dependence, fear, complex family emotional ties, low self-esteem, and lack of safe places to go make leaving almost impossible for many abused family members.

Myth: Family violence is not a crime. It occurs in the home and is strictly a private matter that doesn't affect anyone else.

FACT: Any threat or attack against a person is a crime, no matter where it happens or who does it.

How to Protect Yourself Against Abuse

- Call 911 or leave home immediately if you feel you are in real physical danger. If you think relatives may not want to help, seek a shelter for battered women. Law enforcement, hospitals, churches, and community mental health centers can give you information.
- Save evidence of the assault. Keep torn or bloodied clothing and go to the emergency room for treatment. Get the names, addresses, and phone numbers of any witnesses.
- Report the assault to your local law enforcement agency as soon as possible. Deputies will investigate to see whether they can make an arrest. They can tell you about local assistance, counseling, and shelters, and take you to the hospital. They can also stay while you pack clothing and other personal items if you choose to leave.
- If you have children, don't leave them alone with the batterer. They may also be in danger of abuse. Also, leaving them may constitute abandonment, which could hurt your chances of getting custody in the future.

How Can You Use the Legal System?

Many battered family members do not report abuse, perhaps because they fear breaking up the family, retaliation by the abuser, or loss of income if the abuser is jailed. Depending on the charges, judges

usually impose a fine and an order for counseling rather than a prison sentence when offenders in family violence cases plead guilty. The victim may request that the abuser receive counseling rather than jail time.

Why bother to have someone arrested? It lets the abuser know that violence will not be tolerated. It gives you as a victim some control over the situation and allows the court to mandate treatment for the abuser.

What Else Can You Do?

- The abuser's power is based on secrecy. Abuse must be brought into the open and talked about. Many women's health centers and mental health agencies sponsor support groups for abused partners and children. Call and give yourself the chance to talk to other victims. You'll find out that you are not alone!
- Mediation centers, usually operated by courts and law enforcement, have been successful in helping couples resolve their conflicts, particularly when the abuser has relied more on threat and intimidation than physical abuse.
- No single tactic may work by itself. In many cases, a combination of legal intervention and counseling is the best way to protect victims, help the batterer, and minimize damage to family relationships.

It Happens to Someone You Know...

- Urge the victim to call the sheriff's office, a community mental health center's crisis hotline, or a battered women's shelter.
- Look at the community's resources for victims of family violence. Are they adequate and do people know about them? Volunteer to help.
- Encourage friends and family to channel anger constructively. Anger management classes, offered at community centers and mental health clinics, may be helpful.



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