

# What every congregation needs to know about domestic violence

Information for clergy, members of congregations, abuse prevention programs, and service providers

## What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence (or Intimate Partner Violence) refers to a pattern of violent and coercive behavior exercised by one adult in an intimate relationship over another. It is not “marital conflict,” “mutual abuse,” “a lovers’ quarrel,” or “a private family matter.”

It may consist of repeated, severe beatings, or more subtle forms of abuse, including threats and control.

## Who are the victims of domestic violence?

Statistics reflect that 95% of domestic violence victims are women, though people of all genders are also victims. Regardless of who is being victimized, domestic violence is a serious problem that needs to be addressed by religious communities.

## How prevalent is domestic violence?

Surveys from the U.S. and Canada indicate that domestic violence occurs in 28% of all intimate partner relationships. Researchers believe this estimate is low since most domestic violence incidents are unreported.

## Why do victims stay?

People stay in abusive relationships for many reasons. Maybe they are terrified that the abuse will become more violent if they try to leave, that the abuser will try to take the children, that they can’t make it on their own because of financial limitations.

## What are the four basic types of domestic violence?

### Physical Assault

Includes shoving, pushing, hitting, restraining, kicking. Physical assaults may occur frequently or infrequently, but in many cases they tend to escalate in severity and frequency.

### Sexual Assault

Any time one partner forces or coerces sexual acts which are unwanted or declined by the other partner.

### Psychological Assault

Includes isolation from family and friends, forced financial dependence, threats, verbal and emotional abuse, intimidation, and control over where the victim can go and what they can do.

### Attacks Against Property & Pets

Destruction of property which may include household objects or treasured objects belonging to the victim, hitting the walls, or abusing or killing pets.

## What should I do if I believe I am experiencing domestic violence?

- Trust your instincts. Seek help from a domestic violence program in your community.
- Contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1.800.799.SAFE (7233) for 24-hour help.
- Recognize that the abuse is not your fault.
- Know that you are not alone and that help is available.
- Talk in confidence with someone you trust for support.
- If you remain in the situation, set up a safety plan. For example, hide important documents and some money in a safe place, locate a safe place to go in case of emergency.

## How do I know if someone is a victim of domestic violence?

People who are being abused are as different from each other as non-abused people. They come from all walks of life, all races, all gender and sexual identities, educational backgrounds, and all religions. An abused person might be the Vice-President of your local bank, your child’s Sunday school teacher, your beautician, or your dentist. Anyone experiencing any of the patterns of abuse listed above is a victim of domestic violence.

## Who are abusers?

Just as with those who are abused, people who are abusive fall into no specific categories. They come from all class backgrounds, races, genders, sexual identities, religions, and walks of life. They may be unemployed or highly-paid professionals. The abuser may be a good provider, a sober and upstanding member of the community, and a respected member of the congregation.

## How do I know if I’m abusive?

- If you are extremely jealous
- If you control your partner’s activities
- If you use physical force to solve problems
- If you believe that you are the head of the household and should not be challenged

These actions hurt the people you love. You should get help from someone who will hold you accountable and help you change. **Acknowledge that the abuse is a serious problem and have the courage to seek help.**

## What can I do to be helpful if an abusive situation is revealed?

- Listen to the person and **believe them**. Tell the victim that the abuse is not their fault, and it is not God’s will for them.
- Tell them that they are not alone and that help is available.
- Let them know that without intervention, abuse often escalates in frequency and severity over time.
- Seek expert assistance. Refer them only to specialized domestic violence counseling programs, **not** to couples counseling. Help find a shelter, a safe home, or advocacy resources to offer protection.
- Respect confidentiality and their decisions.
- Hold the abuser accountable. Don’t minimize abusive behavior. Support them in seeking specialized counseling to help change abusive behavior.
- Continue to hold them accountable while also supporting and protecting the victim.
- If restoration of the relationship is to occur, it can be considered only after the above steps have taken place.

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## How does religious doctrine address domestic violence?

Religious teachings can serve as either a roadblock or a resource in addressing domestic violence. There is nothing in Jewish or Christian teaching which can rightly be used to justify abuse. However, there are teachings which can be misused and distorted to suggest that domestic violence may be acceptable or even God's will. When these teachings or interpretations of scripture are misused, they become roadblocks to ending the abuse.

For example, an interpretation of Shalom Bayit (the Jewish teaching about peace in the home) which places sole responsibility on the woman to "keep the peace" and obey her husband, would be a serious roadblock to addressing domestic violence. An understanding that Shalom Bayit is everyone's responsibility offers help for the victim and accountability for the abuser.

Likewise, the Christian teaching that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church is a call for husbands to treat their wives with respect and love, not with violence or control. This teaching can serve as a valuable resource to challenge and prevent domestic violence.

As religious communities, our mandate is to minimize any roadblocks facing abused members of our congregations and to maximize the resources that exist within our religious traditions.

**"Have pity on me, O God,  
for I am in distress  
with sorrow my eye is consumed;  
my soul also, and my body.  
I am like a dish that is broken...  
But my trust is in you, O God;  
I say, 'You are my God'"**  
(Ps 31:10-15)

## What can a spiritual community do to address domestic violence?

- Form a committee to address domestic violence issues.
- Encourage the clergy to speak out publicly against domestic violence.
- Invite staff from local domestic violence programs to make educational presentations.
- Designate a day or month for educating and activating the congregation.
- Offer pre-marriage counseling dealing with equality, healthy conflict, violence and control.
- Use available curricula for youth which encourage the values of gender equality and nonviolent conflict resolution.
- Offer meeting space in your church or synagogue to the local domestic violence program.
- Contribute financial support to local domestic violence programs.

### Where can I find more information?

#### *Services for victims in the U.S.:*

**National Domestic Violence Hotline**  
800-799-SAFE (24 Hours);  
800-787-3224 (TTY)  
[www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

#### *Resources in the U.S.:*

**National Resource Center on Domestic Violence:** [www.nrcdv.org](http://www.nrcdv.org)

#### *Services for victims in Canada:*

**Assaulted Women's Helpline**  
416-863-0511 (24 Hours)  
[www.awhl.org](http://www.awhl.org)

**National Clearinghouse on Family Violence**  
800-267-1291 (within Canada)

## Articles, books, and videos on religion and domestic violence are available from FaithTrust Institute

877-860-2255 (toll free)  
206-634-1903  
[www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)

#### **A Christian resource:**

*Keeping the Faith: Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse* by Rev. Marie M. Fortune (HarperSanFrancisco, 1987)

#### **A Jewish resource:**

*You Are Not Alone: Solace and Inspiration for Domestic Violence Survivors Based on Jewish Wisdom* By Toby Landesman (FaithTrust Institute, Seattle, WA, 2004)

#### **A Muslim resource:**

*Change From Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities* By Maha B. Alkhateeb and Salma Elkadi Abugideiri (Peaceful Families Project, 2007)

## About FaithTrust Institute

For more than 40 years, FaithTrust Institute has helped congregations of all spiritual traditions address the religious and cultural aspects of interpersonal and intimate violence. We have developed acclaimed prevention curriculums and trainings that are used across North America, in diverse religious and spiritual communities and seminaries.

Since 1983, we have been at the forefront of addressing the crisis of clergy misconduct and abuse. Through training, resources, and consultation, we help communities respond to leadership misconduct in its myriad forms.

Survivor-centered, and trauma-informed, we help spiritual communities live into the tenets of their faith by working for safety, accountability, and justice.

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