

Who is Doing What to Whom? Determining the Core Aggressor in Relationships Where Domestic Violence Exists.

Domestic violence, also known as Intimate Partner Violence, is an extremely complicated, multi-faceted issue. Studies widely identify women as victimized more often than men by their intimate partners,¹ but men can be victims of intimate partner violence, too, and women may use violence within relationships. What is often harder to determine, especially when both people in a relationship use violence, is who may be the core abuser and who may be the primary victim.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey:

- 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have been victims of [some form of] physical violence by an intimate partner within their lifetime.¹
- 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men have been victims of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.¹
- 1 in 7 women and 1 in 18 men have been stalked by an intimate partner during their lifetime to the point in which they felt very fearful or believed that they or someone close to them would be harmed or killed.¹

What is also often harder to determine is a woman as the core abuser, especially within heterosexual relationships. Women are not typically identified as the primary abuser and in the studies examined or within the context of LGBTQ relationships. According to a 2012 report from the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Intimate Partner Violence:

- For the second year, close to a majority (47.6%) of IPV homicide victims were LGBTQ men and a majority of homicide victims were identified as gay (47.6%) and lesbian (28.6%).
- Women accounted for about a third (32.6%) of IPV survivors who reported to NCAVP member programs in 2012, while men accounted for a little more than a third (36.1%).
- Gay men were more likely to require medical attention and suffer injuries as a result of IPV. Gay men were close to two times (1.7) more likely to require medical attention and 16 times more likely to suffer injury as compared to individuals who did not identify as gay men.

Throughout our research, we were unable to find data that quantified how often women were identified as the primary abuser in the relationship. Anecdotally, we know they exist, but we were unable to find statistics that clarified how prevalent they may be. It can be implied that men are more often victimized by men and women are the abuser to other women in intimate relationships, but we were not able to quantify that, nor in cases where men are the primary victim with a female abuser.

With that said, advocates and those assisting victims of domestic violence may struggle to identify who is the primary aggressor in the relationship. To that end, the information that follows speaks to the characteristics of abusers, the characteristics of victims, and how violence and abuse may be used in a relationship to maintain control over another.

Characteristics of Abusers

Abusers main objective in intimate relationships is to dominate and control their victim. They are manipulative and clever and will use a myriad of tactics to gain and maintain control over their partner, often in cycles that consist of periods of good times and peace and periods of abuse. The cycle often starts to repeat, commonly becoming more and

more intense as time goes on. Each relationship is different and not every relationship follows the exact pattern. Some abusers may cycle rapidly, others over longer stretches of time. Regardless, abusers purposefully use numerous tactics of abuse to instill fear in the victim and maintain control over them.

The overarching strategy used by abusers is referred to as coercive control. Coercive control includes a combination of abusive tactics such as isolation, degradation, micromanagement, manipulation, stalking, physical abuse, sexual coercion, threats and punishment.ⁱⁱ An abuser may use some of these tactics or vary when they use them, but combined and used over time, they are effective in establishing dominance over their victim.

A dominant and controlling partner may initially present at the onset of a relationship as wonderful, loving, and attentive. They may be charming, successful, well-liked and are often very romantic and interested in their partner's interests and desires. They may want to be with them all the time, attentive and charming with their partner's friends and family, supportive and kind. However, over time, these behaviors start to change. The attention that may have initially felt exciting and flattering starts to feel isolating and controlling. The victimized person may start to feel isolated from friends and family because their partner dominates so much of their time. The abuser may start to object to their partner's time spent with others or make it so difficult to do things independently of them that the victim stops doing so.

Prolonged exposure to this type of treatment combined with periods of loving and desired behaviors by the controlling partner can lead to the victimized person feeling trapped, silenced, and lacking self-esteem. If the victimized person tries to assert themselves, the abuser often ramps up the abuse and may become more and more controlling and abusive. Soon, the victimized person may come to fear the abuser for various valid reasons and may feel they are unable to escape or leave. It is important to note that a victimized person may not be able to get away from their abuser because the abuser *will not let them do so*.

Abusive tactics used to establish dominance and control over a partner by an abuser include, but are not limited to the following. An abuser may:

- Be extremely jealous and/or possessiveness
 - Try to convince others they are the true victim in the relationship
 - Blame the victim for causing them to abuse them
 - Be unpredictable
 - Be cruel to animals
 - Be physically, verbally, emotionally, or psychologically abusive
 - Be extremely controlling
 - Be rigid in their beliefs about roles of women and men in relationships
 - Be particularly interested in guns or weapons
 - Be forceful with sex or disrespectful their partner's wishes around sex
 - Be vigilant about their partner's every move
 - Blame their partner for anything bad that happens
 - Have a bad temper or are easily angered
 - Come from a violent household
 - Sabotage birth control methods or refuse to honor agreed upon protection methods
 - Sabotage or obstruct their partner's ability to work or attend school
 - Control all the finances in the relationship
 - Abuse of other family members, children, or pets
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Forms of Domestic Violence include:

- Battery – a pattern of abusive behavior that a person fearful of their physical and/or sexual safety; control; intimidation; coercion.
- Isolation – forcing a partner to account for their time and whereabouts and/or making a partner tell with whom they have visited; telling a partner that you exist for him only – you do not get to be a separate, autonomous person.
- Emotional Abuse – playing on a partner’s insecurities; giving mixed messages; constant insults and degradation; telling a partner who they are or should be.
- Financial Abuse – controlling all monetary resources; exploiting a partner’s social security number or credit; not allowing a partner access to money or financial documentation.
- Threat of Control of the Children - a partner must acquiesce to the abuser’s needs, wants or desires or something will happen to the children; threat of taking the kids away.

Characteristics of Victims and Why Victims May Use Force of Violence within an Intimate Relationship

Anyone can be a victim of domestic violence. There is NO “typical victim.” Victims of domestic violence come from all walks of life, varying age groups, all backgrounds, all communities, all education levels, all economic levels, all cultures, all ethnicities, all religions, all abilities and all lifestyles.

Over time, the victim becomes more and more oppressed by the abuser and may do whatever they can to not agitate or displease their partner. In other instances, Victims of violence often retaliate and resist domination and battering by using force themselves. Victims may use violence or force in effort to:

1. Escape and/or stop violence that is being perpetrated against them, and
2. Establish a semblance of equivalence in the relationship as a method of protecting themselves and their children against escalating abuse.

In relationships where domestic violence exists, violence is not equal, even if the victim fights back or instigates violence in effort diffuse a situation. Violence on victims’ part is in larger part resistance to ongoing battering.

Characteristics of Resistive/Reactive Violence:

- The target of resistive violence is specific: the violator or abuser;
 - Reactive violence is used to stop and/or escape ongoing battering. It may be considered by the victim as a form of self-protection.
 - Reactive violence is often used by victims to reclaim and restore dignity and integrity that is destroyed by the batterer by their systematic abuse.
 - The motivation behind the use of such force is to retaliate and/or resist battering. Such violence may also be used with the intention of stopping future violence.
 - Targets of resistive violence generally hold the key to their own protection. That is, by stopping their own violence against their victims, they would also end their partners’ use of violence towards them;
 - Violence is rarely the first or only tactic used by victims of ongoing battering. They often use a variety of other methods to stop or reduce abuse, such as:
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- Negotiation;
- Appeasement;
- Threats to withdraw from the relationship or actually leave the perpetrator;
- Solicit help from others such as family, friends, clergy, and police;
- Threats to expose the offender to others and shame him to end abuse; and ☐
- Threats to hurt the offender emotionally, economically, or damage his property.

In brief, a victim's reactions to abuse fall into three classes:

- Coping (e.g., placating the abuser, enduring, etc.),
- Managing (e.g., anticipate abusers' moods, modify own behavior so as not to arouse anger in abuser, attempt to control situations that lead to violence, divert attention from the abuse through religion or other activities, etc.), and
- Resisting (e.g., create consequences for abuser such as arrest, seek outside help, hit back or strike preemptively, take other overt and covert actions to end or escape the abuse, etc.).

Domestic violence affects all aspects of a victim's life. When abuse victims are able to safely escape and remain free from their abuser, they often survive with long-lasting and sometimes permanent effects to their mental and physical health; relationships with friends, family, and children, their career and their economic well-being.

Victims of domestic violence experience an array of emotions and feelings from the abuse inflicted upon them by their abuser, both within and following the relationship. They may also resort to extremes in effort to cope with the abuse. Victims of domestic violence may:

- Want the abuse to end, but not the relationship
 - Feel isolated
 - Feel depressed
 - Feel helpless
 - Be unaware of what services are available to help them
 - Be embarrassed of their situation
 - Fear judgment or stigmatization if they reveal the abuse
 - Deny or minimize the abuse or make excuses for the abuser
 - Still love their abuser
 - Withdraw emotionally
 - Distance themselves from family or friends
 - Be impulsive or aggressive
 - Feel financially dependent on their abuser
 - Feel guilt related to the relationship
 - Feel shame
 - Have anxiety
 - Have suicidal thoughts
 - Abuse alcohol or drugs
 - Be hopeful that their abuser will change and/or stop the abuse
 - Have religious, cultural, or other beliefs that reinforce staying in the relationship
 - Have no support from friends or family
 - Fear cultural, community, or societal backlash that may hinder escape or support
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- Feel like they have nowhere to go or no ability to get away
- Fear they will not be able to support themselves after they escape the abuser
- Have children in common with their abuser and fear for their and their children's safety if they leave
- Have pets or other animals they don't want to leave
- Be distrustful of local law enforcement, courts, or other systems if the abuse is revealed
- Have had unsupportive experiences with friends, family, employers, law enforcement, courts, child protective services, etc. and either believe they won't get help if they leave or fear retribution if they do (e.g., they fear they will lose custody of their children to the abuser)

One of the most important mitigating factors in determining who is the primary abuser when violence is used by both partners in a relationship is when each partner ends their use of violence; the victim's use of violence ends when the relationship ends or the abuser stops using abuse. The abuser will continue to abuse their victim indefinitely and often more intensely as they feel a loss of control over their victim, either within the relationship, or when it ends. For far too many, this is when the victim is in the most danger; the more control the abuser feels they are losing, the more abusive they may become.

While data proves women are most often the victims of abuse in intimate relationships, again, anyone can be abused and anyone can be abusive. Understanding the dynamics of both abusers and victims is key to determining who is doing what to whom in a relationship.

ⁱ Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M. (2011). *The national intimate partner and sexual violence survey: 2010 summary report*. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from: http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf

ⁱⁱ Aronson Fontes, Lisa. *Invisible Chains: Overcoming Coercive Control in Your Intimate Relationship*. Guilford, 2015. Print.
