

# Help for the Battered Woman

## What do we mean by a battered woman?

A battered woman is faced with repeated acts of violence by the man she lives with. This abuse may result in physical, sexual, and psychological damage and even death. Over one-third of women murder victims are killed by their male partners.

Battering occurs in all types of families. No social class is exempt; however, poverty and substance abuse increase the risk.

## What is abuse?

Abuse may be psychological, physical, or sexual. Psychological abuse includes:

- swearing or threatening to hit you
- forcing you to perform degrading or humiliating acts
- threatening to harm your children, a baby-sitter, or companion of your children
- attacking or destroying your valued possessions and pets
- throwing away your medicine
- demanding sex for grocery money or other needs such as children's shoes
- exerting too much control over your life.

Physical abuse includes:

- throwing objects at you
- pushing or shoving, especially if the abuser says he pushes or shoves you to "protect himself" from your attacks or to make you "shut up"
- hitting, slapping, kicking, choking, punching, or slamming you against things, or beating you up
- holding you underwater in the bathtub
- grabbing your hair and dragging you across the room
- attacking you with a knife, gun, rope, or electrical cord
- grabbing you so hard that it leaves red marks or bruises on your body.

Sexual abuse includes:

- forcing you to have vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse against your will
- biting you on the breasts or in the genital area
- shoving things into your vagina
- making you do sexual acts with other people or animals.

## How does battering occur?

Violent episodes usually follow a three-phase cycle.

**First phase:** In this phase the man acts increasingly edgy and tense. Verbal abuse, insults, and criticism increase. Shoving begins. Almost any subject, such as housekeeping or money, may trigger the buildup of tension.

## Help for the Battered Woman

**Second phase:** The tension mounts. You may argue or defend yourself. The man responds by hitting or kicking you, often saying he is teaching you a lesson. In this phase the man may drink heavily, which is not the cause but an excuse for the incident.

**Third phase:** The man apologizes and promises to change. He may shower you with gifts and promises. You may begin to hope that the relationship can be saved and that the violence will not recur. Since many batterers seem charming, you may actually believe that the problem has passed. If you have hit him to defend yourself, you may believe that you deserved the abuse.

The usual pattern is for the abuse to continue and to become more severe. The longer you stay in a battering relationship, the greater your chances are of being seriously injured by the man abusing you.

### Abuse during pregnancy and child abuse

Abuse often begins or increases during pregnancy, putting both you and your baby at risk.

More than half of wife batterers also abuse their children. Others threaten to batter their children. Children who see family violence or who are abused themselves can be deeply affected by it. They may have stomachaches, headaches, diarrhea, or problems with bed-wetting and sleeping. Often they have difficulty in school.

Children may come to think that physical violence is a way of dealing with problems. Abused children are more likely to get into an abusive relationship when they grow up. Abuse to an unborn child, child abuse, or fear of child abuse are major reasons why some women choose to leave an abusive man.

### How can I take care of myself?

**First, ask yourself if your relationship is safe.** Arguments are normal in a relationship. However, physical violence is never normal or acceptable. No one has the right to hurt someone else. Does your spouse or lover ever:

- Scare you with threats of violence by throwing things when he is angry?
- If he hits you, tell you it's your fault?
- Promise it won't occur again, but it does?

If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, you are involved in an unhealthy relationship and you could be risking your own health and that of your children.

**Admit you are abused.** If you are in an unhealthy relationship, the first thing to do is to admit that you are being abused. You have the right to feel safe from harm, especially in your own home. Let a doctor, nurse, counselor, close friend, or family member know about your situation so you can call the person if you need to leave a dangerous situation.

Many women who have been battered develop mood disorders, such as depression or posttraumatic stress disorder. Treatment of these conditions can help a battered woman to deal more effectively with her unhealthy relationship.

**Learn the warning signs.** Learn to recognize signs of a possible violent incident before it occurs. Warning signs often include:

- your partner's access to or threatening to use a weapon, especially a gun
- violent threats or acts to children, other family members, or household pets
- forced sexual encounters

## Help for the Battered Woman

- a decrease in your partner's sense of guilt after a violent outbreak.

**Plan an emergency exit.** Know what resources there are in your community for battered women. These resources may include the following:

- police department
- crisis hotlines
- rape crisis centers
- domestic violence programs
- legal aid services
- hospital emergency rooms
- shelters for battered women and children
- mental health centers.

If you feel you or your children are in danger from your partner, pack a suitcase to store with a friend or neighbor that includes:

- a change of clothing for you and your children
- toilet articles
- an extra set of keys to the house and car.

Keep the following items in an easy-to-find but safe place, so you can take them with you on short notice:

- prescription medicine needed by you or your children
- IDs such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, voter registration card, and driver's license
- extra cash, your checkbook, savings account book, and credit cards
- medical and financial records, such as mortgage or rent receipts and the title to the car
- a toy or book for each child.

Know exactly where you will go and how to get there at any time of day. Explain to the person you have confided in that you may have to show up suddenly in case of an emergency.

In an emergency, call the police or 911. If no police officer or other official responds immediately, keep calling. During an attack, leave the house and take your children with you. Report the attack to the police as soon as possible.

Call your doctor or go to the emergency room if you are hurt. Give your doctor or emergency room staff complete information about how you were injured. Ask for a copy of the medical record. Charges may be filed.

**Make changes.** Do not confuse guilt with love. Your children are better off if neither you nor they are being beaten. You will need to think about the long-term situation. No matter what choices you make, counseling can be very helpful. Counseling can help you to look at yourself more positively. It can also help you with practical matters that will arise as you begin to make changes in your life.

If you and your partner want to work toward a healthy relationship, there are many possibilities. Couples counseling is not advised. Individual or group counseling can help with issues of domestic violence. Your partner must participate in an ongoing treatment program for violent offenders before you try reconciliation. Your partner must "own" his loss of control

## Help for the Battered Woman

and develop new ways of coping with conflict. Then you can feel safe entering into the relationship again.

You may decide to leave your partner for good. If you are married to the abuser, it is important to get a lawyer who deals with abuse cases. If you are concerned that you can't afford a lawyer, call a legal aid service in your community.

These hard decisions will help you to become the person you want to be, in control of your own life, and not subject to abuse from another.

### **Where can I call or write for help?**

Many states have toll-free, 24-hour domestic violence hotlines. Look in your local telephone book to find one in your area. The number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) is 800-799-7233. You can also visit the NDVH Web site: <http://www.ndvh.org>.

For nonemergencies, the National Council on Safe Families provides counseling and referrals to domestic violence services anywhere in the U.S. Information is available 24 hours a day through My Sister's Place, Yonkers, NY, at 914-969-5800.

The National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence provides referral help and information on child, spouse, and elder abuse:

National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence  
1155 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-429-6695  
Web site: <http://www.nccafv.org>

The Alliance for Children and Families provides counseling referrals to agencies nationwide.

Alliance for Children and Families  
11700 West Lake Park Drive  
Milwaukee, WI 53224  
Phone: 800-221-2681  
Web site: <http://www.alliance1.org>

Other helpful organizations are:

Center for Women Policy Studies  
1211 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Suite 312  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-872-1770  
Web site: <http://www.centerwomenpolicy.org>

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
P.O. Box 18749  
Denver, CO 80218-0749  
Phone: 303-839-1852  
Web site: <http://www.ncadv.org>

National Family Violence Prevention Fund  
383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304

## Help for the Battered Woman

San Francisco, CA 94163-5133

Phone: 1-800-313-1310

Web site: <http://www.fvpf.org>

Developed by McKesson Clinical Reference Systems.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.