



Abusive relationships: Recognize the warning signs and get help



Partners who abuse tend to have certain traits. Often, there are signs before abuse begins. Seeing abuse patterns before they happen can help victims get out of the relationship early.

Recognize the warning signs

Early on, an abusive partner often:

- Tries to keep the victim from friends and family
- Gets easily offended
- Is quick to blame others
- Acts controlling
- Wants to be with the victim all the time
- Has unrealistic expectations
- Sweeps the victim off his or her feet with a quick, whirlwind romance

And abusive actions are often disguised as ways to “love” or “protect” the victim. How do you know your relationship is abusive? The biggest red flag is if you feel afraid of your partner in any way. Do you feel like you have to walk on egg shells? Are you always trying to keep your partner calm and happy?

And here are some other signs:¹

Your experience:	Your partner's actions:
Do you feel afraid of your partner?	Does your partner humiliate or yell at you?
Do you avoid certain topics because you don't want to upset your partner?	Does your partner criticize you or put you down?
Do you feel like you can't do anything right in your relationship?	Would you be embarrassed for your friends or family to see the way your partner treats you?
Do you believe you deserve to be hurt or treated poorly?	Does your partner blame you for any abusive behavior or outbursts?
Do you feel like you have to shut down your feelings to cope?	Does your partner treat you like an object or like property?
Do you feel like maybe you're the one who causes conflict?	Does your partner ignore or belittle your opinions or the things you accomplish?

¹Domestic Violence and Abuse. Accessed February 2024.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is about more than hitting or punching. It includes behavior that puts a person in danger. Even if it seems minor or happens one or two times, these actions are part of physical abuse:

- Hitting
- Damaging property
- Kicking
- Withholding resources
- Pinching

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse can be just as, if not more, hurtful and damaging as physical abuse.¹ It chips away at a person's sense of self. And while you may not see visible cuts, the scars it leaves are very real. Here are some examples:

- Constant criticism
- Stalking
- Name-calling
- Blackmail
- Silent treatment
- Keeping weapons around
- Making and breaking promises
- Isolating a person
- Using children to control a person
- Threats to harm themselves or others

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is a kind of physical and emotional abuse. Partners who abuse physically and sexually tend to be more violent.¹ Sexual abuse can include:

- Forced sex acts
- Manipulating a person into sex acts
- Accusations of cheating
- Threats to “out” a gay or transgender partner

Economic abuse

One way for a person to control another is through money. This can make it very hard for a victim to leave. Here are some examples:

- Controlling household money
- Forbidding or sabotaging school or employment
- Running up bills the victim has to pay
- Threats of deportation

Why do abusers abuse?

There's no clear answer for why abuse happens. Many abusers have emotional issues. These may come from their own abusive pasts or other factors. But that's not an excuse. Many people go through abuse and don't go on to hurt others. Abuse is a choice someone makes. The person doesn't “lose control.” They abuse in order to control another person.

This attempt to control others may be due to a number of factors. These include:

- Having a poor self-image
- Seeing abuse as a child
- Being the victim of abuse as a child
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Having trouble with feelings

Getting out of an abusive relationship

As soon as you see your partner is abusive, end the relationship. Abusers often promise the abuse will stop or improve. Know that these promises are part of the abuse cycle and it will most likely continue or worsen.

Even if you love your partner very much, they will not get better alone. The person needs professional help and this work is best done while you are not together. Couples counseling is not recommended.

Be prepared

The most important thing you can do is to keep yourself safe. If you are in immediate danger, call the police. If your abuser prevents you from calling the police at the time of the abuse, call as soon as you can.

If you are living with abuse:

- Have an exit plan and tell it to your children.
- Teach your children how to call **911**.
- Devise a code word with neighbors and friends that will alert them to call the police for you.
- Keep a bag packed with clothing, important papers, prescriptions, some cash and extra keys. Keep the bag outside your home somewhere only you have access to it.
- Keep the number to the local domestic violence shelter with you at all times in case you need to call for support.
- Buy a new cell phone. Your partner may use your current phone to track you.

¹Domestic Violence and Abuse. Accessed February 2024.



Talk to others about your plans to leave

If you are planning to leave the abuser, talk with someone who can help you assess the safety of your plan. Consider who can help you leave. The time of leaving can be the most dangerous time of your relationship.

Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline **1-800-799-SAFE (7233)** for help. Tell people around you — family, friends, employers, neighbors — when you are going to leave. Ask them to be alert for the presence of the abuser. Ask if they would be willing to call for help if you need it.

Feeling worried about a loved one?

Maybe you've noticed your friend's relationship doesn't seem healthy. Is it abuse? What can you do? People in abusive relationships might:

- Be afraid or anxious to please their partners
- Check in often with their partner about where they are and what they're doing
- Make very few decisions for themselves
- Withdraw from others
- Show major personality changes

If you're worried, you may not know what to do. You might feel like you're being nosy. But by speaking up, you let the person know you care. Here are some tips:¹

- Ask if something is wrong
- Offer help
- Listen without judgment
- Show concern
- Support the person's decisions
- Avoid blaming or giving advice

If you want to learn more, you can visit [thehotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org).



There is hope for survivors of abusive relationships. By seeing the warning signs, recognizing abuse and getting support, help can be found.

¹[Domestic Violence and Abuse](#). Accessed February 2024.

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