

Ask ERS?

Dear ERS Advisor:

I am a 19 year-old college freshman away at school and living in a dorm. My boyfriend works in our hometown about an hour's drive from campus. I care about him a great deal, but do feel kind of smothered by him. He calls me every day asking where I have been and who I was with. He continuously calls my cell phone until I call him back. He frequently accuses me of seeing other people. He also insists on coming to visit me every weekend. This has put a strain on my relationship with my roommate and made it hard for me to study. I am enjoying being away at school and making new friends, but the way my boyfriend is treating me is really starting to drag me down. How can I get him to trust me and stop checking up on me all the time? I am worried about what things will be like when I come home for the summer.

Smothered in School

Dear Smothered:

Based on your description, it sounds like your boyfriend is threatened by your absence and your new-found freedom. It also sounds like his insecurity increases his attempts to monitor and control your behavior. It is challenging to maintain trust in a long-distance relationship, especially when one of you feels insecure or suspicious! Unfortunately many long-distance relationships don't work for those exact reasons. A trusting relationship is both consistent and honest and requires a lot of good communication. Acknowledge his concerns but make sure to let your boyfriend know that his smothering behaviors are, in fact, driving you away. Each of you needs to decide how you want and expect to be treated in a caring relationship. Then sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk about the expectations and deep-seated fears that you both have. While confronting these issues may seem scary, letting this issue escalate may be even worse. It's important that you both achieve a safe and satisfying resolution. Remember also that the EAP is available for either individual or couple's counseling.

Best wishes in your efforts!

ERS Advisor

**Interested in submitting a question or comment?
Send an e-mail to aharkleroad@ers-usa.org.**

Domestic Violence: Are You a Victim?

Carmella Merkel, LCPC

“I'm so devastated” she said; “How could someone you love so much hurt you like this?” This was the third incident this month but this time it had become physical. During arguments it was mostly him blaming, shaming and putting her down. She believed it was her fault because that's what he told her. She knew that he was under a lot of pressure and stress at work, plus dealing with finances and the kids at home could be overwhelming for him. She felt so frustrated because it seemed that no matter what she did, it was never enough. She wished she could do something to make things right. She had initially been attracted to his assertiveness, his ability to take control of a situation and be successful. She never imagined that those traits could turn into aggression and controlling behavior.

Women aren't the only victims of intimate partner violence. In fact, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control reports that in the U.S. every year, more than 800,000 men are raped or physically assaulted by an intimate partner; however, since 85% of domestic violence targets are women, this article will primarily reference victims as being female.

Domestic violence statistics

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence states:

- An estimated 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime.
- In 2001, 20% of violent crime against women was committed by an intimate partner compared to 3% of violent crime against men.
- Young women, ages 16-24, experience the highest rate of domestic violence – 16 per 1000 persons.
- Domestic violence affects all races and socio-economic groups.
- Marital rape accounts for 25% of all rapes, affecting over 75,000 women each year.
- 3 in 4 women over the age of 18, who reported being

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raped, were physically assaulted by a current or former husband, co-habiting partner or date.

- Domestic violence has been estimated to cost employers in the United States \$3-13 billion each year.
- In 2000, 1,247 women and 440 men were killed by an intimate partner.
- In 1999, 74% of the persons murdered by an intimate partner were female.

What is domestic violence?

So how do you know if your partner is abusive, or if you may be at risk for domestic violence? Take the quiz below and see if you identify with any of the following:

Does your partner...?

- Embarrass you with bad names and put-downs?
- Look at you or act in ways that scare you?
- Control what you do, who you see or talk to, or where you go?
- Stop you from seeing or talking to friends or family?
- Take your money or Social Security, make you ask for money, or refuse to give you money?
- Make all the decisions?
- Tell you that you're a bad parent or threaten to take away or hurt your children?
- Act like the abuse is no big deal, it's your fault, or even deny doing it?
- Destroy your property or threaten to kill your pets?
- Intimidate you with guns, knives or other weapons?
- Shove you, slap you or hit you?
- Force you to drop charges?
- Threaten to commit suicide?
- Threaten to kill you?

Risk factors for victims and abusers

Those targeted for abuse tend to have more passive personalities. Most likely they will accept the guilt, their abusive partner's blame and believe that partner's reality. A victim may also have a strong desire to be needed. She

may even use sex to establish intimacy and underestimate the danger of the situation. People in abusive relationships usually have low self-esteem, feel helpless and are intensely afraid of doing the "wrong things." Victims of physical abuse typically feel that they have no basic human right *not* to be hit and that there is absolutely nothing they can do about the situation. In some cases, they also take on a "rescuer" role where they feel that they must help the batterer, even accept the responsibility for his actions.

An abuser's focus is usually centered on power and control. Batterers most likely have an explosive temper and can be extremely jealous. Alcohol and drug abuse may be an issue at times, but even without these substances, he can still maintain a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" personality. The abuser frequently tries to control his partner by isolating her from any support network or educational intervention. There is always denial and refusal to accept responsibility for the violence. An abuser may also have low self-esteem and may have grown up in an abusive household. He may frequently blame others for his problems and have unrealistic expectations of his partner. To gain control, an abuser is often verbally abusive using put-downs, humiliation, guilt, threats to harm her kids, or take the children away from her, as well as using any force during an argument. Other methods of control include destroying property, limiting her outside involvement with others, controlling what she reads and where she goes. Abusers often treat their victims like servants and are the ones to define men's and women's roles within the relationship. Typically, the abusive partner makes all the financial decisions while the other partner is often prevented from working, without independent access to any income.

The Cycle of Violence

The cycle of violence happens throughout the relationship. It is very rare for an abuser to suddenly become abusive overnight. There are usually three phases in the cycle. The first phase is called the **Tension-Building Phase** – usually this is where the victim may feel that she is "walking on egg shells" with even the children noticing a change in their parent's behavior. "Why is Daddy so crabby?" A loss of control is more noticeable, especially when the abuser experiences frustration, anger, pessimism, disillusionment, jealousy, and criticism.

The second phase is the **Explosive Incident** in which there is violence combined with the message, "I'm going to teach you a lesson." At this point, the batterer is unpredictable and out of control. Sometimes, there is police

intervention and legal action taken. It is imperative at this stage that the victim receive domestic violence education and intervention. This may help her to prepare for the next stage in which she is more vulnerable and prone to believe the batterer's promises to change.

The final phase is the **Honeymoon Period** during which there are usually gifts, promises, and apologies from the batterer. There is denial of any problem and the victim believes the abuser will get help and often drops the charges. In some cases, the victim worries that the batterer may harm himself and she will assume the rescuer role, hoping that if she changes and "does better next time," that the abuse will cease.

At the completion of Phase 3, Phase 1 begins again and the cycle continues over and over. This cycle can end. Through intervention with one or both parties, the violence can be stopped.

Ending the Violence

The first step to ending the cycle of violence is to maintain and establish safety. There are many state-wide resources available for women, men and children. To find a program in your area, go online to www.ncadv.org, the website for the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. There you will find a state-wide list of programs and resources for your area. If you don't have internet access, call your Employee Assistance Program for resources and support provided in-person or over the phone.

Finding a counselor who has experience or certification in domestic violence is also essential. Each partner should attend counseling separately until stability is established. Even though they are in a relationship and may still be living together, the individual issues outweigh the issues they may have as a couple.

Sometimes victims cannot always avoid a violent incident and so it is critical to have a safety plan in place.

Strategies can include:

- Practice getting out safely. "What doors, windows or stairwells can I use?"
- Keep money and car keys ready in order to leave quickly.
- Tell a supportive neighbor or friend about the violence and request they contact the police if they hear suspicious noises coming from the home.
- Teach the children how to contact the police by dialing "911."

- Have a plan of action once you've left the home. "Will I go to a shelter, a friend or family member's house, or police station to be safe?"
- When arguing with your partner, move to a "low-risk" space, near an exit. Avoid rooms without access to an outside door or rooms near weapons, such as the kitchen.
- Use your judgment and intuition, recognize the cycle – are you in the midst of the tension building phase?
- Make a habit of backing the car into the driveway or garage and keeping it fueled. Try not to park where the car can be blocked.

A victim may choose to obtain an Order of Protection. Domestic violence agencies can either help you arrange for an Order of Protection or link you to legal advocacy services or a lawyer, if needed.

Be sure that when an Order of Protection is established, to carry it with you. Give a copy of the Order or notify your children's schools or child-care provider. Inform your employer and/or security in your building of the Order and provide them with a picture of the abuser. If your partner violates the Order, call the police and report a violation, contact your attorney or call your advocate and advise the court of the violation. There can also be a complaint filed with the State's Attorney's office in the jurisdiction where the violation occurred.

The experience of being a battered and verbally/emotionally-abused partner is exhausting and emotionally draining. The process of building a new life for one's self takes courage and incredible energy, but it can be accomplished. A relationship of equality and non-violence is what everyone deserves and should include negotiation and fairness, economic partnership, shared responsibility, trust and support, responsible parenting, as well as honesty and accountability.

Help is out there for both the victim and the batterer. There are a number of online resources as well as the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE (7233). Remember that you can also contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for confidential counseling, information and resources.

Carmella Merkel, LCPC was originally an affiliate until she recently joined ERS' staff as an EAP counselor. She has worked extensively with Employee Assistance Programs both in private practice and through hospital-based programs and provided mental health screening services for DCFS. She has conducted domestic violence counseling and case management for families and individuals and facilitated group therapy sessions.

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Sites to See



➔ **<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/ipvprevention.htm>**

There are a number of organizations which have domestic violence prevention programs. Some work with the batterers, others work with kids in school, as well as parents and communities in an effort to change perceptions and lower risk factors for the future. This section of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control's website has a comprehensive listing of links to a wide variety of organizations and programs.

➔ **<http://www.ncadv.org/>**

In addition to all of the other great programs they offer, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence has a "donate a phone" program. "NCADV has partnered with The Wireless Foundation for over 7 years on the CALL TO PROTECT program. Through the collection of deactivated cell and wireless phones, an important tool has been provided for victims of domestic violence who may encounter emergency situations. The lifeline provided by donated phones has literally saved lives over the course of our partnership." Visit the site to print out the mailing label.

The Employee/Member Assistance Program is a free benefit focused upon supporting you or your family members whenever you feel stressed, angry or overwhelmed with life's demands. Call 1-800-292-2780 to find out more about our confidential services.

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