

# Supporting domestic violence survivors



## A tip sheet for faith-based leaders

Domestic violence is a serious moral and spiritual concern which violates human dignity and the basic ethical principles of many faiths. Faith-based leaders have the opportunity to heal communities, stand up for the common good in society, and help to end all forms of violence - physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal - in a loving, compassionate, and judgement-free manner.

Your congregational members or those experiencing abuse may often seek counsel, support, and safety from faith-based leaders. Faith communities play a critical role in providing support for individuals of all genders who have suffered or are currently experiencing domestic violence and hold those who choose to cause harm accountable.

**In this tip sheet, faith-based leaders will learn how to identify, speak out, and raise awareness of domestic violence within their congregations and communities.** Most importantly, you will have tools and resources to best support those impacted by domestic violence in a survivor-centered and trauma informed way.



## Domestic violence is more common than you think

Domestic violence is not discriminatory. Anyone can be a survivor or an abusive partner regardless of their religion, race, age, gender, sexuality, or education level. An act of domestic violence involves harming, intimidating, manipulating, controlling, or forcing a partner to do something they don't want to do.

In fact, in the United States, nearly 3 in 10 women and 1 in 10 men have experienced rape, physical violence, and stalking by an intimate partner.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. (2011). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## Types of domestic violence

Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, relationship abuse, or dating abuse, is a major public health crisis and a violation of human rights. Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviors used to exert power and control over an intimate partner, often through isolation and intimidation. Knowing the types of abuse is crucial for faith leaders and their congregation members, but it can also lead to more questions. Below are some common forms of domestic violence:

- **Physical Abuse:** **Physical abuse** is any intentional, unwanted contact with you or something close to your body, or any behavior that causes or has the intention of causing you injury, disability, or death.
- **Emotional and Verbal Abuse:** **Emotional abuse** includes non-physical behaviors such as threats, insults, constant monitoring or “checking in,” excessive texting, humiliation, intimidation, isolation, or stalking.
- **Sexual Abuse:** **Sexual abuse** refers to any behavior that pressures or coerces someone to do something sexually that they don’t want to do.
- **Reproductive Coercion:** **Reproductive coercion** is a form of abuse in which one partner causes harm, exerting power over the other through pressure to engage in sexual activity, refusing to use contraception or sabotaging contraception, restricting a partner from seeing a health care provider, and/or or keeping them from making critical health care decisions.
- **Financial Abuse:** **Financial abuse** often operates in more subtle ways than other forms of abuse, but it can be just as harmful to those who experience it. Financial abuse is when one partner controls the others’ finances or ability to provide for themselves.
- **Digital Abuse:** **Digital abuse** or technology-facilitated abuse is the use of technology to manipulate, control, harass, stalk, or intimidate a partner. Examples include excessive texting, harassment on social media, or using technology like GPS tracking to monitor movement.
- **Stalking:** Stalking occurs when someone watches, follows, or harasses you repeatedly, making you feel afraid or unsafe.

## Spiritual Abuse

One type of abuse that you may not know is spiritual abuse. **Spiritual abuse** is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It may involve an elder or faith leader inflicting abuse on members of the congregation, fostering a toxic culture through shame or control. However, it’s important to recognize that spiritual abuse can extend beyond organized religious settings and occur within intimate relationships. Individuals of any belief system, irrespective of their religion, can experience spiritual abuse. Examples include:

- Religion or spiritual beliefs of another person are **ridiculed or insulted**
- **Denies the other partner the right to practice** their religion or spiritual beliefs
- **Manipulates or shames** their partner’s religious or spiritual beliefs
- Raising children in a faith that the **other partner does not agree with**
- Religion is used to **justify or minimize abusive behaviors** (such as physical, financial, emotional, or sexual abuse).

Since spiritual life is deeply personal, spiritual abuse is no less harmful or difficult to endure than other forms of abuse. The abuse can be difficult to detect, since many survivors may not realize they are being abused. Additionally, the abusive partner may claim that challenging their abuse is an assault on their religious freedom.

## Identifying the warning signs of domestic violence

The use of religious traditions to justify abusive behaviors is often misinterpreted by abusive partners. In most cases, citing specific passages from scripture or referring to antiquated religious examples that support violence or control, bible verses, or faith-based community teachings.

If your faith member is experiencing abuse, it can be difficult to spot unhealthy behaviors and abuse. It is important to know the signs of abuse and what you observe, as it can have a profound effect on your congregation and members. Here are some common domestic violence warning signs to watch out for:

- **Controlling household finances** such as taking money or refusing to provide money for necessary expenses.
- **Pressure to perform sexual acts** or have sex without consent.
- Intimidation through **threatening looks** or actions.
- Preventing or **discouraging time with friends**, family, or peers.
- Insulting or **demeaning** in public.
- **Intimidation with weapons** such as guns, knives, bats, or mace.
- **Telling partner** that they never do anything right.
- Showing **extreme jealousy** of friends or time spent away from them.

## Having crucial conversations about healthy relationships

A survivor of domestic violence may be reluctant to speak to their faith leaders. They may have heard contradictory messages and fear they will not be supported, or be shunned, or not believed. There may be a reluctance among faith leaders to help survivors due to a lack of training and a lack of knowledge about how to support them without unintentionally harming them.

Here are some ways to have crucial conversations about healthy relationships with your members:

- **Listen and don't judge:** It can be very difficult for survivors to talk about abuse. Members are more likely to be open with faith-based leaders when they don't feel pressured and instead feel safe. Remember to listen and be supportive, even when you don't understand or agree with their decisions. Acknowledge their situation is difficult, scary, and they are already demonstrating bravery by talking about the abuse. Do not speak poorly about the abusive partner. Avoid any thing that could feel like victim blaming. Remind them that no person ever deserves to be abused.
- **Offer support and prioritize safety:** Leaving an unhealthy or abusive relationship is difficult and may be dangerous. In fact, leaving an abusive relationship is one the most dangerous times— it can take a survivor up to seven attempts to successfully leave. Realize your faith member may not be ready to contact anyone. Helping them create a [safety plan](#) and find resources for their situation could be beneficial. Offer to go with them to any [service provider](#) or legal setting for moral support.
- **Help them identify a [support network](#)** to assist with physical needs like housing, food, healthcare, and mobility as applicable.
- **Remember that you cannot “rescue them,”** and that decisions about their lives are up to them to make.

## If you need assistance or help

Regardless of someone's religious or spiritual beliefs, abuse is never acceptable or justified. If you know of a member or suspect someone in your congregation is experiencing domestic violence, advocates at [the National Domestic Violence Hotline](https://www.thehotline.org) are available 24/7 to provide validation, safety planning and connection to local resources and support. The Hotline's services are free and confidential.

- 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
- Chat at [thehotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org)
- Text "START" to 88788

For faith leaders working with young people and teens (e.g., youth pastor, youth group leaders), love is respect is the national resource to disrupt and prevent unhealthy relationships and intimate partner violence by empowering young people through inclusive and equitable education, support, and resources.

- Call 1-866-331-9474
- Text "LOVEIS" to 22522
- Chat at [loveisrespect.org](https://www.loveisrespect.org)

