

Abuse

What is abuse?

Abuse is the use—or threat of using—physical, sexual, or verbal behavior to coerce another to do something. The abuser generally wants to degrade or humiliate, or to gain or maintain a sense of power or control. Abusive behaviors may include subtle or covert harm as well as life-threatening acts of violence. These behaviors create an imbalance of power and control within a relationship or family.

There are several kinds of abuse—physical, sexual, and emotional—and each kind can take many different forms. Our society is so tolerant of abusive behavior that we often do not even recognize it as such.

What is physical abuse?

Physical abuse is any forceful nonconsensual physical behavior. It includes but is not limited to situations where a person is

- pushed, shoved, or hit
- held down, tied, or otherwise physically restrained from leaving
- targeted with a thrown object
- locked out of the home
- abandoned in a dangerous place
- denied basic physical needs such as eating or sleeping
- choked or burned
- threatened or abused with a weapon

Note that many of the above may not result in physical injury. The degree of injury is not what determines that an action is abusive. It is the behavior itself and the atmosphere of intimidation that defines abuse.

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is any nonconsensual sexual act or behavior. It is not just rape. It demeans and humiliates, making one feel shameful and exposed, particularly

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with regard to one's sexuality. It includes but is not limited to situations where a person is

- demeaned by remarks about body or body parts
- berated about sexual history, possibly including being blamed for being sexually abused or raped as a child
- called degrading sexual names
- treated as a sex object
- forced to beg for sexual attention
- forced to watch or have sex with others or pose for sexual photographs or pornography
- forced to engage in sex (rape)
- forced to do sadistic sexual acts

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse is any verbal or nonverbal message given in order to threaten, intimidate, and degrade. It includes but is not limited to situations where a person

- is belittled by name-calling
- feels frightened by another's looks, actions, or gestures
- is treated like a servant
- feels controlled by the abuser, who monitors one's activities and plans, conversations, and reading choices
- has concerns that are not taken seriously
- feels threatened
- is made to feel mentally unbalanced

Recovery Action Step

Can you relate to these three types of abuse? Write down a time in your life when you experienced emotional abuse. Some people were emotionally abused as children when they were called names on the playground and weren't allowed to play with other children.

Discuss the answers with your therapist, sponsor, or recovery support group.

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What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

It doesn't matter what type of abuse you've experienced, every type has a cost. That cost depends on the severity of the abuse. Many people suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a debilitating condition that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event. PTSD affects both men and women. The event causing it may be something that threatened the person's life or that of someone close to him or her.

Traumatic events that can trigger PTSD include violent personal assault such as rape or mugging, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat. Whatever the source of the problem, some people with PTSD suffer from chronic memories of the trauma in the form of nightmares and disturbing flashbacks.

Other symptoms of PTSD include sleeping problems, feeling detached or numb, being easily startled, losing interest in things once enjoyed, and having trouble feeling affectionate. Irritability or aggressive behavior may result. Reminders of the trauma may be very distressing and can lead to avoiding certain places or situations that bring back those memories. Anniversaries of the traumatic event may also be very difficult.

Many people have PTSD, especially those who have spent time in war zones. PTSD is diagnosed only if the symptoms last more than a month. In those who develop it, symptoms usually begin within three months of the trauma. The length of the illness varies. Some people recover within six months; others show symptoms that last much longer. Occasionally PTSD does not show up until years after the traumatic event. If you suspect that you suffer from PTSD, it is best to see a mental health professional, psychologist, or licensed professional counselor for an accurate diagnosis.

What kinds of treatment are available?

Although PTSD is a mental health disorder, it can be treated with medical and behavioral interventions. Like others with mental health disorders, people with PTSD are highly likely to experience alcohol or drug use problems.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy, group therapy, and individual psychotherapy have been found to be effective treatments for PTSD. Studies have also shown that medications can help ease the symptoms of depression and anxiety. It is

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important to discuss medication options with a professional knowledgeable about substance use disorders because some medications can be addictive.

Where can you get help?

National Domestic Violence Hotline

The National Domestic Violence Hotline offers crisis intervention, information about domestic violence, and referrals to local service providers to victims of domestic violence and those calling on their behalf. Hotline advocates and volunteers have access to translators in 139 languages. They also offer resource materials on violence issues.

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The National Center for PTSD was created to advance the clinical care and social welfare of America's veterans through research, education, and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders. This website is an educational resource concerning PTSD and other enduring consequences of traumatic stress.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

SAMHSA offers a wealth of information on all mental health topics.

MaleSurvivor

This organization is for men who have been victims of childhood sexual abuse and rape. They offer a newsletter, a search tool to find licensed therapists by state, and professional articles on abuse.

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)

This organization helps survivors of rape, incest, and childhood sexual abuse find counseling. It operates a twenty-four-hour toll-free helpline that connects people with rape crisis counselors in their area.

Survivors of Incest Anonymous

This is a Twelve Step group for survivors of incest and other childhood sexual abuse.