

Intimate Partner Violence and Trauma Informed Practice

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV), also known as domestic violence, family violence, and gender-based violence, consists of an incident, or pattern of incidents, of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading, and violent behaviour. Types of abuse include physical, emotional, psychological, verbal, financial, social, sexual, cultural, and spiritual.

IPV and abuse can occur in all settings, and among all socioeconomic, religious, and cultural groups. While we focus on male-female heterosexual relationships, we recognize that violence and abuse can occur in intimate LGBTQ2+ relationships and other family relationships. Nearly one third of women have experienced physical or sexual IPV.



IPV is a global public health crisis. In Canada, every two and a half days, a woman or girl is killed violently, usually by a male partner or family member, and each night, more than 6,000 women and children find refuge from violence in shelters.

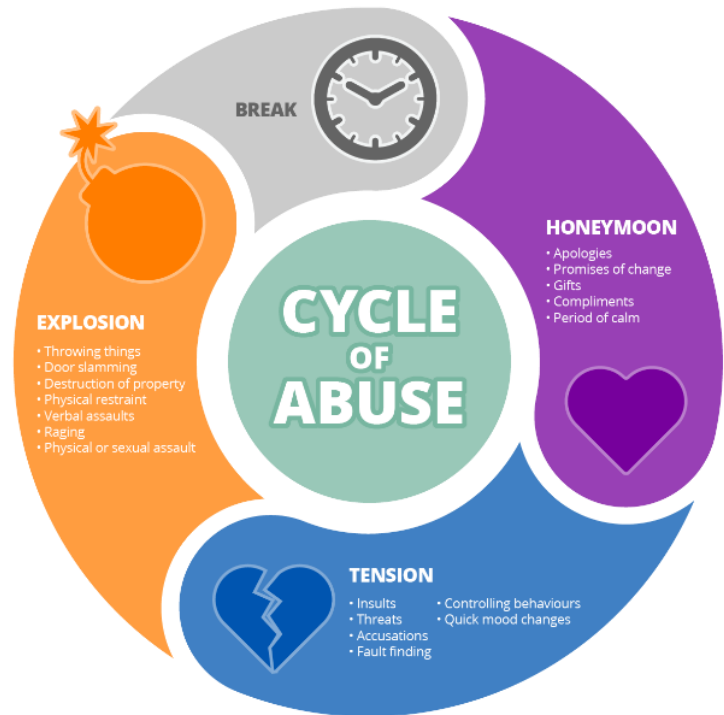
IPV is extremely underreported. This happens for a variety of reasons, including the shame and stigma associated with IPV, fear of the consequences of reporting, and/or a lack of recognition as to what constitutes abuse.

Because IPV tends to happen behind closed doors, there may not necessarily be signs visible to people outside the immediate household. Survivors are often highly successful and effective individuals who have learned how to put on a good face, and may not disclose the abuse to anyone.

That said, becoming familiar with the Cycle of Abuse, which outlines the pattern of how violence escalates and explodes, and the possible signs of abuse are good ways to become more aware.

Possible Signs of Physical Abuse (Suspected Abuse Tool)

- Bruises, welts, cuts, or wounds, cigarette or rope burn marks, or blood on person/clothes.
- Internal injuries, including broken or fractured bones, sprains, or muscle injuries.
- Painful body movements, such as limping, trouble sitting/standing (not illness related).
- Coded or vague/indirect references to sexual assault or unwanted sexual advances.
(Bass et al., 2001)



Possible Signs of Psychological Abuse

- Sense of resignation and hopelessness with vague references to mistreatment.
- Behavior that is passive, helpless, withdrawn
- Anxious, trembling, clinging, fearful, scared of someone/something.
- Self-blame for current situation or partner/caregiver behavior.
- Excuses constantly made for partner's moods or behaviours.
(Bass et al., 2001)

Possible Signs of Neglect by Others or Self

- Unclean physical appearance.
- Inadequate food or meal preparation supplies in household.
- Underweight, physically frail or weak, or dehydrated.
- Under or overuse of, or confusion about, prescription, or over-the-counter, medications.
- Inadequate utilities, including lack of heat, water, electricity, and toilet facilities.
- Unsafe or unclean environment, including insect infestation, or unmaintained animals.
- Neglected household finances, including unpaid bills or rent.
(Bass et al., 2001)

Possible Signs of Exploitation

- Overpayment for goods or services
 - Unexplained changes in power of attorney, wills, or other legal documents.
 - Missing personal belongings.
 - Lack of access to personal or family finances.
- (Bass et al., 2001)

Trauma Informed Practice

A common question that arises in any discussion of IPV is: “Why doesn’t she just leave?” While the more appropriate question is “Why does he hurt her?”, there are a range of complex and nuanced reasons a woman might maintain a relationship with a violent and abusive partner.

- Fear – A woman is most at risk for physical harm and death at the time of leaving an abusive partner or in the period after she leaves. On some level, then, she may in fact be safer by remaining in the relationship.
- Guilt – Having committed to her partner, and their life together, a woman will often feel a strong sense of guilt at the idea of leaving. She may also believe things he’s said about the abuse being her fault, and feel she has a responsibility to stay, and try to make things better.
- Stigma – It’s a difficult thing to admit the person you love is hurting you. Many women fear the stigma and victim-blaming that often accompany acknowledgement of abuse.
- Finances – A woman may have chosen to stay home and raise her children fulltime, and would now find it difficult to secure meaningful employment to support herself and her family if she leaves. She may also be a victim of financial abuse, and have no access to any of the family’s financial resources in order to plan, and make, her escape.
- Children – A woman may stay in a violent relationship for the sake of her children, believing they are better off with both parents than in a so-called “broken” home.
- Lack of support – Being in an abusive relationship can be very isolating, and a woman may not feel she has the necessary support from family or friends to take steps to leave.
- Love – While the relationship may be abusive, he’s not always violent, and this is the man she loves.

Understanding the reasons a woman may stay with, or return to, her abuser is critical in being able to offer support. Those who work with survivors of IPV focus on having empathy and being trauma informed. A trauma-informed practice:

- Recognizes trauma has varied, and devastating, short and long-term effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex PTSD,

hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, and memory loss, and incorporates that framework into all interactions.

- Emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for the survivor above all else.
- Creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild their sense of control, personal agency, and empowerment, all of which suffer in the midst of an abusive relationship.
- Meets women where they are at, suspending personal judgment and supporting the survivor rather than telling her what she “should” or “needs” to do. Whether this is the first, or fifth time, she’s left her abusive partner (research shows it takes on average seven times leaving to leave for good), the support offered must be constant.

Here are some ideas on how to take a trauma-informed approach when interacting with a survivor:

- Acknowledge and name the violence.
- Be clear the abuser is at fault.
- Honour the survivor’s resistance.
- Challenge victim-blaming messages.
- Let her judge her choices.
- Listen and support.

Language matters, particularly when interacting with survivors of violence and abuse. Here are some ideas on what to say to a survivor:

- “You didn’t deserve this. It’s not your fault.”
- “I’m sorry this happened to you.”
- “I’m concerned about you.”
- “How can I help?”
- “It sounds like you’re doing the best you can.”
- “I’m here to listen.”

Here are some ideas on what not to say to a survivor:

- “You should leave him.”
- “Why haven’t you left him?”
- “You have to call the police.”
- “You should go to marriage counselling.”
- “Why didn’t you go to the hospital?”
- “Maybe you’re over-reacting.”
- “I always thought he was such a great guy.”

Educating yourself on the dynamics of abuse and coercive control, and becoming familiar with the resources in your community, will also help you be a more effective ally and support to survivors who may otherwise not know where to turn.

Local support resources include:



SUPPORTING SURVIVORS
OF ABUSE AND BRAIN INJURY
THROUGH RESEARCH



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



[Kelowna Women's Shelter](#) – Free emergency and transitional housing and counselling support for women who've experienced intimate partner violence and abuse. A counsellor is on duty 24-hours a day to answer questions and provide support at 250.763.1040.

[Central Okanagan Elizabeth Fry Society](#) - Free specialized victim assistance, sexual assault counselling, and other community programs. Contact them at (250) 763-4613

[UBC Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office \(SVPRO\)](#) - Free, confidential support for members of the UBC community who've experienced sexual violence. All gender identities, expressions and sexualities are welcome. Call 250.807.9640 to connect.