SOAR SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF ABUSE AND BRAIN INJURY THROUGH RESEARCH

# Intimate Partner Violence and Trauma Informed Practice

## Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV), also referred to as domestic violence, family violence, and gender-based violence, consists of single incidents or ongoing patterns of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading, and violent behaviour. IPV can take many forms, including physical violence (such as hitting, pushing, strangulation, or assaults to the head, face, and neck); emotional or psychological abuse and coercive control (including insults, humiliation, isolation, threats, and controlling behaviours); sexual violence (including forced sexual acts or reproductive control); financial abuse (such as preventing someone from working or controlling access to money); and cultural or spiritual abuse, which involves the misuse of beliefs or traditions to control or harm.

IPV and abuse can occur in all settings and among all socioeconomic, religious, and cultural groups. While this document focuses primarily on male-female heterosexual relationships, it is important to recognize that people who are 2SLGBTQQIA+ experience some of the highest rates of gender-based violence compared to any other population. Nearly half of LGB+ women and LGB+ men (47%) report experiencing physical assault since age 15, compared to 26% of heterosexual women and 33% of heterosexual men.



Violence and abuse also occur within LGBTQ2+ relationships and across other family and caregiving relationships.

One-third of women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual IPV. IPV is a global public health crisis. In Canada, every two days, a woman or girl is killed violently, most often by a male intimate partner or family member, and each night more than 6,000 women and children seek refuge from violence in shelters. IPV is extremely underreported and underrecognized for a range of reasons, including shame and stigma, fear of retaliation or consequences, dependence on the abuser, and a lack of recognition of what constitutes abuse.

Because IPV often occurs behind closed doors, there may be few visible signs to those outside the immediate household. Survivors are often highly capable, effective, and resilient individuals who have learned how to manage, adapt, and put on a good face. Many do not disclose the abuse to anyone.

That said, becoming familiar with the cycle of abuse, which describes how violence escalates and repeats over time, as well as the possible signs of abuse, can help increase awareness and responsiveness.

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# Possible Signs a Person May Be Experiencing Intimate Violence

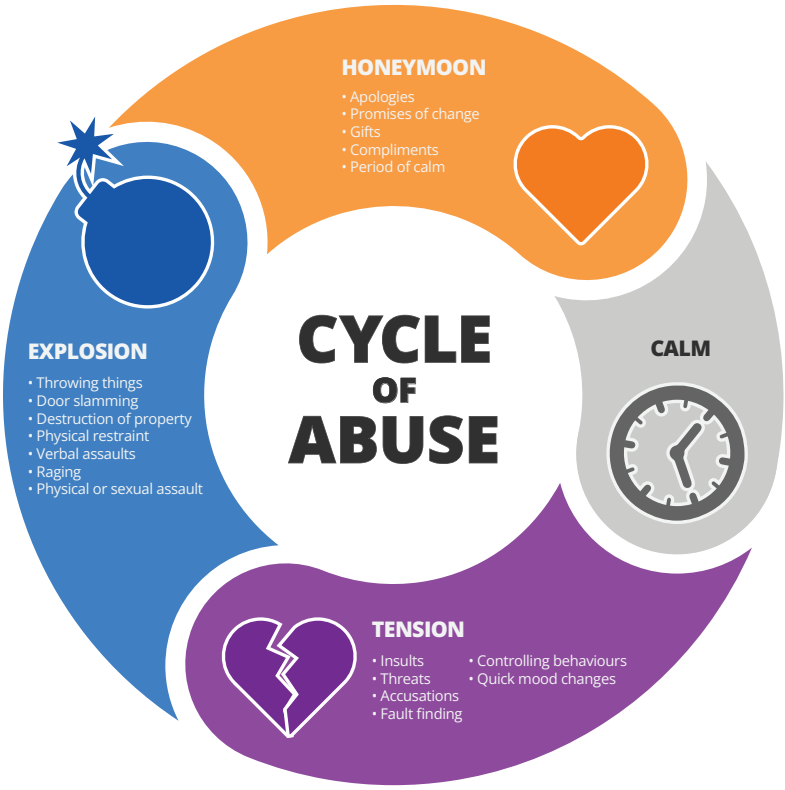
Abuse rarely presents in a single, isolated way. Physical, psychological, and emotional impacts often overlap, and individuals experiencing physical violence may also show signs commonly associated with psychological abuse.

## Possible physical, cognitive, and behavioural signs may include:

- Frequent injuries explained away as "accidents."
- Bruises, welts, cuts, burns, or wounds; blood on clothing or personal belongings.
- Painful or restricted movement (e.g., limping, difficulty sitting or standing).
- Headaches, dizziness, fatigue, confusion, difficulty concentrating, or memory problems.
- Nausea, vomiting, or sleep disturbances.
- Raspy or hoarse voice; trouble swallowing or breathing.
- Scratches or bruising on the neck, chest, or shoulders; red spots in the eyes or on the skin.
- Loss of consciousness or gaps in memory.
- Internal injuries, including fractures, sprains, or muscle injuries.

## Possible emotional and psychological signs may include:

- Anxiety, hypervigilance, fearfulness, or being easily startled.
- A sense of resignation, hopelessness, or emotional withdrawal.
- Self-blame for the abuse or partner's behaviour.
- Making excuses for a partner's moods or actions.
- Sudden isolation from friends, family, or activities.
- Depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, or significant changes in mood or behaviour.




## Possible signs of neglect or exploitation, financial abuse, coercion, and control may include:

- Unclean or unsafe living conditions.
- Lack of adequate food, utilities, or access to medications.
- Confusion about finances, missing belongings, or lack of access to money.
- Someone else monitoring visits, calls, finances, or daily activities.
- A partner or former partner showing up unannounced at work or other locations. (Bass et al., 2001)

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# Trauma Informed Practice

A common question that arises in discussions of IPV is, "Why doesn't she just leave?" A more appropriate question is, "Why does he hurt her?" There are many complex and overlapping reasons a woman may stay in, return to, or have difficulty leaving an abusive relationship.

These reasons may include fear (as the risk of serious injury or death often increases when leaving), guilt, stigma, financial dependence, concern for children, lack of support, and love. The abusive partner is not always violent, and survivors often hold onto hope that things will change.

- **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.

Survivors of IPV frequently experience overlapping physical, emotional, and cognitive challenges. Trauma and brain injury can both affect mental health, behaviour, memory, and emotional regulation. Survivors are too often misdiagnosed, blamed for their symptoms, or denied appropriate care. Responding in a way that is trauma and violence informed helps shift interactions from judgment to compassion.

A trauma-informed practice:

- Recognizes the wide-ranging and long-term effects of trauma, including PTSD, complex PTSD, anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, and memory difficulties.
- Prioritizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety.
- Supports survivors in rebuilding a sense of control, agency, and empowerment.
- Meets women where they are at, without judgment, and offers consistent support regardless of how many times they leave or return to an abusive partner.

Taking a Trauma-Informed Approach in Practice

- Believe them: "I believe you." "You are not alone."
- Acknowledge the harm: "This was not your fault." "You didn't deserve this." "I'm sorry this happened to you."
- Ensure safety: "How safe do you feel right now?" "What would help you feel safer?"
- Respect autonomy: Offer choices and options. Avoid telling someone what they should do.
- Create safer spaces: Offer privacy when possible and avoid judgment or unsolicited problem-solving.
- Rely on policy: Follow organizational policies related to safety, access, and responding to violence.

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."

Language matters. More examples:

- Instead of: "They are non-compliant."
- Try: "They are doing their best to cope right now."
- Instead of: "They refused services."
- Try: "They weren't ready or able to engage today."

Educating yourself about the dynamics of abuse and coercive control, and becoming familiar with local resources, strengthens your ability to respond in ways that are supportive, respectful, and effective.

## Resources in Canada

**Women's Shelters Canada** – A national organization supporting women and children fleeing violence by providing resources, advocacy, and a directory of shelters and transition houses across Canada. Their website also offers information on safety planning and supports for survivors of gender-based violence. Visit https://endvaw.ca/ to learn more and find services in your area.

**Canada Women's Foundation** – A national public foundation advancing gender justice and equality in Canada by funding and supporting programs that help women, girls, and gender-diverse people move out of violence and poverty and into confidence, leadership, and economic security. They partner with grassroots organizations, engage in research and advocacy, and provide resources to address the root causes of gender inequality and support systemic change. Visit https://canadianwomen.org/ to learn more and get involved.