

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Women from all walks of life experience violence and abuse from people they know and love. They don't ask for it, nor do they deserve it. Everyone has the right to be treated with respect and to live free from fear.

Nobody has the right to abuse others to relieve their own frustrations or to control them. The responsibility for this behaviour rests entirely with the perpetrator – it is not your fault.

While it can be difficult and frightening to take action against domestic violence, you will feel safer, stronger and more in control if you do. Know that the law, your friends and family, and many services are here to help you reduce and avoid violence.

Seeing your situation clearly, seeking support and realising that you are stronger than you think, are the first steps towards a better, healthier life.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence occurs when a person uses violent and/or abusive behaviour to control someone with whom they have a relationship. This includes children, step children and adopted children, de-facto couples, gay and lesbian couples who live together and the relatives of those couples. Property damage, physical or sexual assault, threat of assault, or stalking by your partner or ex-partner are all crimes, punishable by law.

Other things your partner does to coerce, control and dominate you may not be illegal, but they are still wrong and unacceptable, like:

- Telling you what to wear and where you can go
- Constantly putting you down, criticising you, insulting you in public
- Making it difficult or uncomfortable for you to see your family or friends
- Withholding money or not letting you earn or access your own money
- Forcing you into sexual behaviour that is unwelcome, painful or humiliating

This can leave you feeling stressed, anxious, depressed, and like you can't do anything right. It can also affect your health.

What about the kids?

Children who witness domestic violence live in a permanent state of fear, which can have serious long-term effects. This also places them at risk in their later relationships – males are more likely to be abusive; females are more likely to be abused.

Children often feel responsible and try to make things easier for their mothers by not saying how they feel. Others become depressed or aggressive and may have difficulty relating to their peers.

Talk to your children and reassure them that feeling frightened, angry and confused is quite normal in this situation. Explain that the violence is not their fault.

Being a good parent to the kids includes treating you, their mother, with respect.

What can I do to protect myself?

You are probably more resourceful than you think and are already doing things to protect yourself and others. Think about what works and what doesn't.

Let trusted friends, family and others know what's happening. Even though it may be difficult and embarrassing, it is important for your safety that they know, and you might be surprised to find that they are more than willing to offer you support.

Get legal advice so you are clear about the full range of options available to you even if you choose not to take legal action.

Make a safety plan

- Think about what you already do to protect yourself.
- Can you avoid your partner when you are more at risk, for example when they've been drinking?
- Prepare an excuse to leave quickly if your partner becomes threatening
- Where can you go that will be safe in an emergency and who can you call: friends, family, neighbours, the police (000), Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) (62800 900). Keep a mobile phone or a list of emergency phone numbers handy.
- Make sure your children know what to do in an emergency as well.
- Have some money easily accessible.
- Talk to a lawyer or legal service about whether an intervention order is right for you, and how to go about getting one.
- Keep a diary of the violence using a secret code, take photos and give them to a trusted friend or doctor to keep.
- Talk to people and gather information about your options and the support available.
- Cover your tracks – delete your search history if you use the Internet at home, be aware that if you have a redial button on your phone your partner can push it to find out who you just called.

Should I stay or should I go?

Many women love their partner and want to stay with them – they just want the violence to stop. Unfortunately, studies show that once abuse starts, it is likely to get worse. It will only stop if your partner recognises and takes responsibility for their behaviour, and seeks help. Men who want to stop using violence can call the Canberra Men's Centre and DVCS for support.

Choosing whether to stay or leave your partner and home is a difficult decision that only you, as the expert in your own life, can make.

If you stay

For a whole range of reasons, women may decide that staying with an abusive partner is the best choice open to them. This doesn't have to mean remaining silent and alone. It is important to seek support and to nurture your self-esteem so that you can increase your safety and improve your quality of life.

If you leave

Separating can be extremely dangerous time and it is important to plan accordingly. DVCS's Safety Planning booklet, which can be found at, www.dvcs.org.au/domesticviolence.html#Safety%20when%20preparing%20to%20leave) has comprehensive advice on how to keep as safe as possible at this time.

Try and take all personal documents with you, including three forms of identification, children's documents, bank statements or other relevant documentation.

Have them ready in a safe place, along with a spare set the keys, any medication you need, the children's special toys and a change of clothes. Women often return a number of times to their partners because they promise to change and tell them they love them. We all want to believe the best of people. Unfortunately, this 'honeymoon' is usually followed by a return to the old abusive behaviours.

Who can help me?

Finding someone to talk to about your feelings and experiences is helpful. Getting professional support can help in a number of ways. These include providing an opportunity to talk without being judged, allowing someone to let you know that it's not your fault, helping you make a safety plan, helping you get a restraining order or domestic violence order and providing you with information and referral to relevant services for further support.

Anonymous support

A phone service like DVCS or WiRC is a good place to start as they offer a safe place to talk things through, explore options and put you in touch with further support.

Domestic Violence Crisis Service

This service provides crisis counselling, information, options and support assistance with issues such as: safety planning; legal accommodation options; referrals to refuges and counselling services; advocacy with agencies including police, Housing ACT, Centrelink, Immigration, child protection agencies; transport to court and appointments and follow up contacts after initial crisis intervention.

Support group

Support groups offer the chance to meet with others who have lived with domestic violence to share knowledge and experiences. Contact WiRC for information about its support group by phoning 6205 1076.

Counselling

Counselling can offer a supportive space to explore what's happening at home.

Emergency

Call the police on triple-0 when your partner's violence gets out of control or you feel unsafe.

Where to go for help?

• Domestic Violence Crisis Service	6280 0900 24hrs 7days
• Police	000
• Canberra Rape Crisis Centre	6247 2525 24hrs 7days
• Child Protection Services-After Hrs Crisis Service	1300 556 729
• Domestic Violence Orders and Protection Orders Unit	6217 4299
• <i>Women's Information & Referral Centre</i>	6205 1075 or 6205 1076
• Women's Legal Centre	6257 4499
• Aboriginal Legal Service	6249 8488
• Legal Aid Service	1300 654 314
• Centrelink Crisis Payment	131 021
• Care Financial Counselling Service and Consumer Law Centre ACT	6257 1788
• Refuges	
• Beryl Women's Refuge Inc	6247 5687
• Communities @ Work Women's Housing Program	6288 4744
• Doris Women's Refuge	6241 7028
• Inanna Service	6295 3323
• Northside Women Supported Accommodation Program	6249 1113
• St Vincent de Paul Society- Supported Accommodation	6208 7330
• Toora House-Single women	6247 8523

Contact WIRC

For an up-to-date contact list of the services available:

6205 1075 or 6205 1076

Drop in to the Women's Information and Referral Centre
Ground Level London Court, 13 London Circuit, Canberra City

Email: wirc@act.gov.au

Website: www.women.act.gov.au

References

Information Sheet *Domestic Violence*, Women's Information Referral Exchange Inc, Victoria

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