

SOS Détresse

Violence and abuse within the couple

For a couple to experience problems and periodic crises is quite natural. These moments of difficulty wake us up to the reality of our relationship's potential and limitations; they challenge us to work out new ways of restoring harmony.

Unfortunately, a couple in crisis will not only engage in quarrels and conflict, but – and this happens more often than we might imagine – also in physical abuse. As a rule, violence insinuates itself gradually into the couple's life. At first, one party is exposed to verbal humiliation or demeaning behaviour. Inability to put an end to these humiliations, indeed accepting, or at least tolerating them, leads to an increase in the abuse. Very often both perpetrators and victims have already endured violence or humiliation of some sort as children, and have come to consider that as a normal state of affairs. In later life, such people logically find it difficult to recognise the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and to know how to defend themselves.

Abuse is always the **expression of the perpetrators' own vulnerability and powerlessness**. They are unable to cope in any other way because they lack the ability to handle conflict and their own feelings appropriately. Those who resort to violence against their intimate partner are unable to manage their feelings; strong emotions cause them to lose self-control. This tendency is exacerbated by alcohol or drug abuse. However, **these factors do not in the least release perpetrators from their personal responsibility**.

There are **very different forms of intimate partner violence**: blows and ill-treatment (physical abuse), insults, threats, blackmail and contempt (verbal and psychological abuse), rape or sexual practices forced on the partner (sexual abuse), withholding of money or excessive control (economic abuse). Equally, child abuse, destruction of household items and ill-treatment of pets are all manifestations of intimate partner violence. The terms "violence" and "abuse" cover all types of behaviour intended to keep the partner in a closely controlled state of submission.

Is mine an abusive couple?

Many abuse victims no longer trust their own perceptions. They have lost the capacity to distinguish between levels of disagreement that are acceptable within a relationship and those which overstep the boundary beyond which lies violence. For various understandable reasons they justify, to themselves and to others, their partner's abusive behaviour; they trivialise, or even conceal the extent of aggression

involved. They frequently cling to the hope that their partner's behaviour will change for the better. So here we want to make quite clear what sorts of behaviour are typical of a non-violent relationship, and what sorts of behaviour identify a violent one:

Hallmarks of a non-violent relationship:

- Communication and tolerance
- Equal status for both partners
- Mutual respect
- Task-sharing
- Frankness and responsibility
- Trust and support
- Commitment to bringing up the children
- Non-threatening attitudes

Hallmarks of an abusive relationship:

- Threats and restrictions
- Insults and intimidation
- Psychological stress
- Isolation
- Denial and accusation
- Manipulation of the children
- Predominance of male privilege

If this second set of traits predominates, the relationship is already enmeshed in the dynamics of violence, from which it is hard for either partner to break free. We are not talking here about isolated incidents of one partner losing their self-control but then returning to responsible behaviour, by apologising and undertaking to cope with any future difficulties in a non-violent manner. What we are talking about is a repetitive behavioural pattern of words and deeds within a couple that are damaging to the partner, that subjugate them and inflict on them physical or psychological suffering. At that stage, the physical and psychological effects on the victim can be devastating.

What characteristics are typically developed by people living with intimate partner violence?

- Victims of violence often lose touch with their own emotions and feelings, such as fear, powerlessness, anger, rage, desire for revenge, guilt or shame. They repress these emotions and feel exhausted and paralysed.
- Victims of violence no longer have a sense of their own worth. They have lost their self-confidence and self-respect.
- Victims of violence often cut themselves off from other people.
- Victims of violence are unable to take a clear stand or make decisions.
- Victims of violence swing alternately between despising and accusing the violent partner and feeling affection for him or her. Though the abuse is real, they often will trivialise it, find excuses for it, repress or forget it. Such mood swings often prevent them from actively seeking help; they simply do not dare to.

- Victims of violence may often blame themselves for their partner's abuse, or may believe they deserve to be ill-treated. This is patently untrue: violence is never the victim's fault. The fault lies fairly and squarely on the perpetrator, and nothing should change that.

If you are in an abusive relationship, the first question must be how best to protect yourself

Intimate partner violence always impacts very negatively on the person at the receiving end of it, be it on their bodily and mental health, their affectivity, their outlook and emotional health. In a family context, it must also be borne in mind that violence directed at a parent inflicts psychological abuse on the children. The children suffer a loss of the security and trust they need, and live in constant fear. Witnessing violence in the family home is just as traumatic as being a victim of it. Child development in these circumstances is severely impaired. **Therefore, protecting yourself means protection for the children too.**

If you are a victim of physical abuse, you must defend yourself, not physically, but verbally. You have to tell your partner in no uncertain terms that violence is out of the question, and that you will not put up with it under any circumstance. If that fails to produce any effect, and if you feel seriously threatened by your partner, you must seek professional help. Go to the nearest women's counselling centre for advice. There are a range of solutions available which can offer a safe environment for you and your children.

You may also contact us at SOS Détresse (tel. 45 45 45), our counsellors can advise you.