

Women



EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO FEEL SAFE IN THEIR OWN HOME

Asking for help can save you from mental and physical suffering – it may even save your life. Telling someone that your partner is being abusive toward you is the first step to believing you are worthy of a better life; you don't have to manage this alone. Research tells us that, for women who are being abused in their intimate relationships, getting support from a domestic violence service as soon as possible gets the best outcomes for them. Talking to a professional domestic violence service provider will help you consider your options and work out ways to be safe, whether you want to stay in your relationship or leave. Do not be afraid to ask for help, you are not alone.

Domestic and family violence is when one partner acts abusively to dominate and control their partner. Usually, domestic violence involves a man abusing his female partner, but women are also sometimes abused in same sex relationships. "Abuse" can be physical, non-physical or sexual. Physical violence includes things like hitting, kicking, strangling or biting. Non-physical violence includes jealous behaviour, telling you you're crazy, checking up on you, limiting your contact with friends and family, intimidating you, humiliating you or controlling the family money. Sexual violence includes forced vaginal, anal or oral sex and being forced, threatened or intimidated to submit to other painful, humiliating or unwanted sexual acts.

Physical, non-physical and sexual violence are equally harmful. Any type of abuse can make you feel scared and anxious, make you feel worthless, restrict your independence and put your children's physical or emotional safety at risk.

Domestic violence can take a physical and emotional toll on you. Women who have experienced domestic violence say things like:

- I feel depressed and anxious all the time; I'm like a walking zombie.
- I have constant headaches and can't seem to think straight.
- I often get physically hurt, but I'm too embarrassed to go to the doctor.
- Sometimes I take too many pills or drink too much alcohol – to numb the pain.
- I can't remember the last time I slept a full night. I can't relax.
- I feel that if I say anything or do anything I am being dramatic or selfish.
- I feel like no-one cares what happens to me.
- I feel worthless.
- It's all my fault.
- It's like I'm walking on eggshells all the time.

These are normal responses.

It is not "weak" to feel these things.



COMMON QUESTIONS WOMEN ASK

How do I know when my relationship problems are bad enough to seek help?

Ask yourself: Does my partner control what I do and say by making me feel scared of their behaviour? Am I constantly trying to keep the peace? Are my opinions valued and respected? Does my partner belittle me? Does my partner keep track of my movements when we're not together? Does my partner try to stop me connecting with family or friends?

Where can I get help?

Domestic violence services are available across Queensland. To find your closest service call DVConnect on 1800 811 811 or access a list of services at: <http://qlddomesticviolencelink.org.au/>

My partner wants to know where I am all the time. They keep texting me and they sulk or get angry when I don't respond. I feel like I haven't got any privacy.

Controlling behaviour, like tracking your movements, is one of the early warning signs of domestic violence. By sulking or getting angry your partner is punishing you because you haven't done what they wanted you to do. Your local domestic violence service can help you develop strategies to deal with this kind of behaviour.

My partner has pushed and shoved me a few times, but has never hit me with a fist.

Domestic violence often starts with small, occasional incidents. These can escalate to life threatening assaults. What does your partner want you to feel when they push and shove you? Your local domestic violence service will listen, and believe your story. They can help you work out whether what you're experiencing is domestic violence.

My partner says they're sorry and it will never happen again.

Most people who abuse their partners know their behaviour is wrong. It is common for them to feel sorry after an abusive episode and promise never to do it again. The reality is that most domestic violence involves a cycle of ongoing abuse – where the person says they're sorry, treats you really well for a while, then the situation gradually builds up to another explosion of violence ... then comes the next apology, etc. This cycle can be repeated often (e.g. every few days) or over a long time (e.g. months or years).

I think that I want to leave. What's the best way to do this?

It's not unusual for violence to increase if your partner finds out that you are planning to leave. It is important not to tell them, and to plan for your safe departure. Your local domestic violence service can help you develop a safety plan, designed to meet your needs. Effective safety plans usually include letting someone you trust (e.g. a friend, family member or a domestic violence counsellor) know that you are being abused and that you plan to leave. It's best to:

1. Know where you are going to – to a friend? family member? women's shelter?
2. Have a bag packed for you and your children. Include medication, spare keys, money, copies of identification papers (Medicare card, driver's licence, tax file numbers, passports, birth certificates, bank details, etc).
3. Practise your escape route.

I'm worried about what will happen to my children if I leave.

When you take your children away from an abusive relationship you are doing it for them, as well as for yourself. You and your children have the right to be safe in your own home. Even if your children are not being directly hurt by your partner, seeing you being abused usually does emotional damage to them. Your local domestic violence service can provide ongoing counselling for both you and your children. (They can also suggest places your partner can go for counselling.) Domestic violence services can contact other support services that you need so that your children can live in a safe and caring environment where they won't be abused or neglected.

“He blamed me for everything - a bad day at work, the car playing up - even the weather!”

What are the legal implications for shared parenting of my children if I leave?

When making a parenting decision the Family Law Courts must presume that parental responsibility is to be equally shared between parents, unless it is not in the children's best interest; for example, if there has been family violence or abuse. Parental responsibilities include all issues surrounding the care, welfare and development of children. There is no presumption of equal time; that is, the children spending equal blocks of time with each parent, although the courts can make orders for equal time if they believe it is in the best interests of the children. It is important to get advice from a lawyer as soon as possible, even before you leave the relationship. It is very important to tell your lawyer about any family violence, how it has affected you and the children and any concerns you have about you and your children's safety. To find your closest free legal service access the following link: www.qails.org.au or call Queensland Association of Independent Legal Services (QAILS) on (07) 33920092.

I can't go to my family, and I don't like the idea of going to a shelter.

There are different types of women's refuges, or shelters. Some have self-contained units, some have separate units with shared space, and some are like a share-house. Ask your local domestic violence service about the shelters available, so you know what to expect. Even if the arrangements are not perfect for you, there are real advantages in going to a women's shelter. It gives you time out from the violence – a chance to think about your situation and what you want to do with your life. At a shelter you will meet other women who are dealing with similar problems. It can be very helpful to talk with them ... to see that you are not alone and that the violence is not your fault. Also, the workers at women's shelters are experienced in helping women and children escaping domestic violence. They will be able to provide you with information and referrals and help you look at your options so you are able to make your own choices and future plans.

My partner told me they'll kill themselves, me and the kids, if we leave.

This is a very serious threat. Your risk is especially high if your partner is threatening to kill someone. PLEASE talk to your local domestic violence service as soon as possible. Threatening suicide and/or murder is emotional abuse, because your partner is making you feel scared and trying to blackmail you into staying. If you're worried about your partner hurting themselves, your local domestic violence service can tell you about where they can get help.

My partner told me that if I leave they'll report me to Child Safety and I'll lose the kids.

The Department of Child Safety is responsible for making sure that children are safe. They know that domestic and family violence harms children. By leaving an abusive relationship you are demonstrating that you have your children's best interests at heart. If your partner tells the Department that you are mistreating your children a Department worker will make an appointment to talk to you to find out what your situation is and to make sure that your children are safe. You should not lose your children simply because you left your partner.

My partner threatens that if I leave they'll tell Immigration and I'll be deported. I don't want to lose my kids.

Women who are on temporary visas and who choose to separate from their partner may still be able to apply for permanent residence even after the relationship has ended. It is important that you seek migration advice to learn of your options to remain lawfully in Australia. The Immigrant Women's Support Service (www.iwss.org.au or (07) 38463490) and/or your local domestic violence service can help you to access free migration advice from a registered migration agent. A migration agent will assist you with any paperwork required to help you with your permanent visa. The domestic violence service can also refer you to a legal service for advice regarding any children that you may have as well as arrange accommodation at a women's shelter to keep you and your children safe.



My family give me a hard time because I keep going back to my partner.

Often families get frustrated when they see you leave and return several times to your partner, because they are worried about you and your children and don't want to see you in an abusive relationship. Your local domestic violence service know that it sometimes takes many years, and several attempts, before you are finally ready to leave an abusive relationship ... and that you may never leave. They can help you develop strategies to be safer within your relationship. They will respect your right to make your own decisions about when, or whether, to leave. They can also help your family better understand some of the issues you face when leaving an abusive relationship.

I'm scared about what my partner will do if I call the police and I don't want them to get a criminal record.

Your partner won't want the police involved and will probably be angry when you ring them. But the most important thing is that you and your children are safe. Ringing 000 is one way to receive immediate assistance if you are in serious danger. Your partner will not automatically get a criminal record:

1. When police arrive at the scene their first priority is to make sure that you and your children are safe.
2. They should talk to you and your partner separately.
3. The police have the power to keep your partner for up to 4 hours if they believe your safety is threatened.
4. During this time, the police must lodge an application for a Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO). This means that your partner must not commit domestic violence for a specific length of time, which will be written on the order.
5. Your partner will only get into trouble if they continue to abuse you after the DVPO is in place – then they are at risk of getting a criminal record.

People tell me it's not my fault, so why do I feel so guilty?

You may feel guilty for many different reasons. Perhaps you feel responsible for the fact that your children are exposed to violence? Or, you feel that it's your fault that the relationship didn't work out? Or, you feel bad about taking your children away from their other parent? Or, you believe your abusive partner when they tell you that everything that's gone wrong is your fault? By making you feel ashamed and guilty your partner is encouraging silence and secrecy, which prevents you from seeking help. Your local domestic violence service knows how scary it is for you to ask for help, and they are used to women blaming themselves for their situation. The reality is that women who seek help have enormous courage. By seeking support you are giving yourself and your children a chance for a happier and safer life.



Scan this code using a QR reader app on your smartphone to access the full range of fact sheets.



The Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research receives defined term funding from the Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services to undertake research and develop educational resources pertaining to domestic and family violence in Queensland.