

Domestic violence: patterns of abuse



Domestic violence describes behaviors within an intimate relationship that cause harm — whether physical, sexual, psychological or financial. It's also referred to as intimate partner violence or abuse.¹

Domestic violence can take many forms. It often involves behaviors used by one partner to establish and maintain power and control over another. This may include intimidation, physical harm, manipulation or other actions.¹

In some relationships, patterns may emerge over time. For example, there may be a period of relative calm followed by rising tension and abusive behavior. Afterward, the person who caused harm may apologize, make excuses or promise the abuse will not happen again.²

However, every situation is different, and abuse does not always follow a predictable pattern.³

The Power and Control Wheel — a model developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Projects in Duluth, Minnesota — illustrates the many ways an abusive partner may exert control.^{4,5} The inner circle of the diagram highlights ongoing behaviors, such as:^{4,5}

- Making a partner feel afraid
- Inflicting emotional abuse
- Using economic abuse
- Isolating a partner
- Minimizing, denying or blaming
- Using children to create guilt or maintain control
- Coercing or threatening

The outer ring of the model represents physical and sexual violence, which reinforce these patterns. Abuse can escalate over time.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, help and support are available. The National Domestic Violence Hotline offers 24/7 support from trained advocates who can listen, provide resources and help with safety planning:

- Call **1-800-799-SAFE (7233)** or TTY **1-800-787-3224**
- Text “START” to **88788**
- Use the chat option on the website: **[TheHotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org)**

We're here to provide confidential support and resources. You're not alone. Help is available.

¹[Understand relationship abuse](https://www.thehotline.org). Available at: TheHotline.org. Accessed May 2026.

²[Dynamics of domestic violence](https://www.dvcc.deleware.gov). Available at: Dvcc.Deleware.gov. Accessed May 2026.

³[Is abuse really a “cycle”?](https://www.thehotline.org) Available at: TheHotline.org. Accessed May 2026.

⁴[Power and control](https://www.thehotline.org). Available at: TheHotline.org. Accessed May 2026.

⁵[What is the Duluth Model?](https://www.duluthmodel.org) Available at: TheDuluthModel.org. Accessed May 2026.

For legal disclaimers, visit **[RFL.com/Disclaimers](https://www.rfl.com/disclaimers)**