

## Self-help guide for heterosexual women using abusive behaviours in intimate relationships

This self-help guide is for any woman who has used abusive, violent, or controlling behaviours towards a male partner and wants help to change.

## Who is this self-help guide for?

This self-help guide is for women who have used abusive, violent, or controlling behaviours in their intimate relationships with men; this includes women identifying as bisexual, trans, or lesbian women who have occasional sex with men.

We know it can be tough facing up to difficult problems and if you're reading this, it probably means you have some concerns about your behaviour.

We want to support you to get help and make the changes you need, so that you are safer around your partner and children (if you have or care for them).

Throughout this guide, we use the term 'partner'. For those that have been abusive in the past, partner (in this guide) can also refer to ex-partners of either gender.

When you read this self-help guide, we encourage you to think hard and face up honestly to the things you have done. You might have done something only once or twice, but in many cases, you'll notice that there is a pattern and an intent to the abusive things you do. By recognising your patterns of abusive and controlling behaviours, it will hopefully become easier to make changes and stop.

It takes effort and commitment to stop being violent, controlling and/or abusive. This guide can go as far as making you aware of some aspects of the problem. For more help you can contact the Respect Phonenumber free of charge on 0808 8024040.

## Have you hurt, scared, or controlled your partner?

Domestic abuse, or domestic violence, is usually defined as any incident of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of their gender or sexuality. However, incidents are rarely isolated and most people who experience abuse find that there tends to be a

*pattern* of behaviours that scare, hurt and/or otherwise control them.

Coercive control refers to what goes on *between* episodes of violence and abuse, as well as to the 'incidents' themselves. Frightening and controlling your partner means that he is less able to be himself or to do as he wants. If you have children, or care for children, they are likely to be scared and upset by it, too.

Behaviours like stalking and checking on your partner isolate him from support and trap him in a world where you call the shots and are violent and abusive when he doesn't do what you want. The memories of what has happened in the past when he 'broke your rules' can be enough to keep him under your control and in your power, whether you use abuse or not.

Domestic violence and abuse can include, but is not limited, to the following:

#### **Physical abuse**

Hitting, punching, kicking, pushing, using a weapon against him, putting your hands around his throat, strangling, choking or causing him any other kind of physical harm, regulating food intake, damaging things, throwing and breaking things.

#### **Psychological or emotional abuse**

Calling him names, texting, or emailing him abusive messages, putting him down, shouting or swearing, controlling who he sees, accusing him of things or demanding that he changes his clothes or looks.

#### **Gaslighting**

Gaslighting is another form of psychological abuse where you discredit his memory, perception and sanity through lies, denial, contradiction, false information and manipulation.

#### **Sexual abuse**

Pressuring or forcing him to have sex, touching him against his will, sulking or punishing him for not wanting sex, forcing him

to watch porn or degrading him. Sexual abuse can happen in or outside of relationships.

### **Financial abuse and/or Economic abuse**

Keeping a strict account of how much he is spending, keeping him short of money, refusing to sign paperwork, using his credit cards without permissions, building up debts. Restricting his access to essentials such as food, clothing or transport, denying him the right to have his own money by preventing him from being in education or employment, preventing him from accessing benefits or a bank account, withholding financial contributions to your child/ren's care after you have separated.

### **Online and digital abuse**

Monitoring his social media profiles or emails, abusing him over social media such as Facebook or Twitter, sharing intimate photos or videos without his consent, using GPS locators or spyware on his phone.

### **Post-separation abuse**

Making unwelcome contact after you have separated, calling, and texting him repeatedly, checking up on his movements or pressuring him to take you back, following him, using contact arrangements to abuse him and punish him for leaving the relationship.

If you have used any of these behaviours towards your partner or ex-partner, you are being abusive.

How would **you** feel if someone treated you like that?

## **Remember**

- You do not have the right to control your partner's life or behaviour.
- No matter how angry you are, it is never ok to abuse him.
- No matter how he behaves, he has a right to live free from abuse – as have any children you have or care for together.
- You can change your behaviour if you choose to do so.

## Choose to change!

### What's causing your abusive behaviour?

Abuse doesn't just happen – it is always a choice. Even though it may feel like you are losing control when you are abusive, it is often quite the opposite. To make sure you are not abusive in the future, you need to recognise and understand your *intent* in using abusive behaviour, and what purpose it is serving.

Think about the times you have abused your partner and if you are honest with yourself, you will probably be able to work out what your intent was.

Maybe you wanted:

- To stop him doing something or make him do something.
- To shut him up.
- To punish him for something you didn't like or hurting your feelings.
- To stop him having independence and freedom.
- To show him who is boss.
- To win the argument and get your own way.

This is what we mean when we say that domestic violence and abuse is about power and control. Whenever you use fear, force or coercion to make him do something he doesn't want to do or stop him doing something he does want to do, you're being abusive.

Remember:

- Violence and abuse is a choice, and you can choose differently
- If you want to move away from a relationship based on power, fear, and control to one based on intimacy, care and respect, you must stop blaming your partner for your behaviour and choose to change
- Just because you have been violent and abusive in the past doesn't mean you have to be in the future

## What's it like for him?

### How does your abuse affect your partner?

As difficult as it can be, many people find that facing up to how their behaviour has affected – and still affects – their partner can make it easier to change. People very often find it easier to change when they think about the impact of their behaviour on others: if you can understand what it's like for him being on the receiving end of violence, abuse and controlling behaviour, it might be easier for you to change.

Your abuse is likely to be having a serious effect on your partner's health and wellbeing. If you have used physical violence you may have caused injuries such as:

Stiffness, soreness, aching, throbbing, numbness, headaches; cuts and other wounds; black eyes and bruising; lost teeth and hair; burst ear drums; broken bones, weight loss.

In some cases, men have been killed or permanently disabled by their female partner.

Even if you have not used physical violence, abusive and controlling behaviour impacts men in a multitude of ways:

- Your partner may develop physical health difficulties from the abuse: feeling physically tense and on edge; having difficulty sleeping; feeling exhausted; having panic attacks; catching Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs); being physically sick; if medication is being withheld your partner may become very ill.
- Your partner may feel he is walking on eggshells: terrified of when the abuse might start again or whether the abuse might escalate. Your partner is constantly assessing every aspect of their life to pacify you and to keep things calm.
- Your partner might feel some, or all, of the following: depressed, stressed, vulnerable, ashamed, drained, terrified, angry, confused, anxious, unloved, worthless, destroyed, humiliated, lost, alone, isolated.
- Your partner may feel like he has lost who he is and cannot make any decisions freely. He may not feel able to

say anything due to his fear of the consequences. He may be afraid of friends, family, work colleagues and his community finding out he is the victim of domestic abuse.

- Your partner may feel that what they are experiencing is not domestic abuse due to societal misconceptions and may not know where to seek safe support.

The most important thing is that you must let go of wanting to control or change your partner's behaviour; you can only change your own behaviour. You might not like his behaviour, but that does not ever excuse your choice to use violence and abuse.

### **If you or your partner have, or care for children, how are they affected by the abuse to your partner?**

It's easy to tell yourself that children aren't aware of abuse in the household, especially if they aren't in the same room where the abuse takes place. However, even if your children haven't seen you be violent, abusive, or controlling, they will have overhead things.

Imagine how terrifying it is for children to hear abuse and violence, trying to piece together what is happening and worrying how it will end without being able to do anything.

I remember being in bed and hearing it all the time. I know I saw, but I can't remember seeing it, I can't explain it, it's really weird, I just blocked it out, put it to the back of my mind.

**Jackie, aged 19**

Some of the ways abuse affects children can include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Experiencing direct abuse, getting hurt intervening: trying to protect their parent/carer/sibling.
- Hearing or seeing the violence and abuse, being woken up or kept awake by shouting and arguments.
- Being used to divide loyalties, or to hold back or pass on information between the two of you, being used to ridicule or humiliate their parent or carer.
- Knowing that this is something that they mustn't talk about at any cost, especially outside.
- Having to leave their family home, their school, and friends; this might be temporary or permanently and will be for the safety of them and their parent or carer.
- Having to call the police, being made subject of child protection investigations or court proceedings and seeing you in a contact centre.

Children who live in a house where abuse takes place are suffering harm whether it is aimed at them or not. Children are completely dependent on the adults around them and if they do not feel safe in their own homes or families, this can have long lasting effects now and in the future.

**Physical effects:** Children can get physically hurt if abuse is taking place near them or they try to intervene to make it stop, they can find it difficult to sleep when they live with domestic abuse, and they can also find it hard to concentrate, feel scared, wet the bed, and have panic attacks.

**Emotional effects:** Children often experience fear; anger; distrust; anxiety; low self-esteem; growing up too fast; not being able to talk about what is going on.

**Behavioural effects:** models him/herself on your abusive behaviour; protective over their parent or carer- may use violence to protect them; expects/accepts abuse; is bullied at school; misses time from school; does poorly or over performs at school; use alcohol/drugs to cope; wary of other adults particularly professionals; developing eating disorders.



I failed all my exams, I put it down to what had happened at home. The atmosphere at school was exactly the same, and whenever I heard the teacher shouting at a child, I just used to cover my ears because I don't want to hear no one shouting. It's like, every time I heard someone shouting, it was like bells ringing in my head. I just don't want no more shouting, I used to just want to run out of the room and burst out crying because I don't want to hear no more shouting.

Karina, aged 16

For children:

- Fear doesn't end when you stop abusing.
- Your abuse harms your children even if they don't see it.
- Children are victims of abuse even if they are not directly harmed.

## Facing up to what you've done

It can be hard to face up to what you've done and how it's affected your partner. You may feel bad about how you have behaved. Your relationship is unlikely to be a happy one and many people who contact the helpline say that they feel a range of different feelings about themselves and their behaviour: regret, disgust, concern, anger, sadness and shame are all common.

In the short term, and often because of shame and guilt, it is easier not to take responsibility for your abusive behaviour. If you are telling yourself you are not responsible then you don't have to feel bad about it. You don't have to look at your behaviour and attitudes or change anything.

## Minimising/denying your behaviour

I'm not a violent woman

It doesn't happen often



I didn't *actually* hit him, it was just a little push

Playing down your actions serves to make it easier for you to live with your abusive behaviour and avoid judgements by others.

It is not until you accept sole responsibility for making changes that your abuse and violence can stop. If you continue to tell yourself, and others, that the abuse is not that bad, or that the abuse isn't having as much impact on you, your partner and your family, then it will become harder and harder to accept how serious the abuse is and motivate yourself to change.

## Blaming your partner

He pushes my buttons

He has a mental health problem

He doesn't listen to me

We speak to many women who feel their partner provoked them into being abusive. You are blaming your partner when:

- You talk about his behaviour when you are asked, or try to discuss, your own
- You think 'if only he would do/not do X, Y or Z, then I wouldn't be abusive'
- You believe that he needs to change for you to stop your abusive behaviour

The first step to stop your abusive behaviour is to take full responsibility for your behaviour. This means recognising that it's up to you to change how you behave. It is never your partner's fault if you choose to be abusive and blaming him won't help.

Next time you notice yourself blaming your partner, try to:

- Focus on your behaviour
- Think about your partner's needs and feelings
- Remind yourself why you don't want to abuse him
- Remind yourself that you are in control of what you do
- Remind yourself that you can choose not to be abusive

Even when your partner has behaved in ways that are not ok, you are still responsible for how you choose to behave. Your partner may have broken some rules that you have agreed or may have done something that you find unacceptable. Either way, your choice to use violent or abusive behaviours is a problem that you must take responsibility for. There is always a choice: if your partner is not the perfect partner you wanted, or if he behaves in ways that you don't approve of, you have the choice of reconsidering whether you want to be in this relationship or not. Choosing violence or abuse is always the wrong choice.

## Alcohol/drugs

Alcohol and drugs don't *cause* violence, but they can make it worse. Many people use alcohol and drugs and aren't violent or abusive; you are still responsible for your behaviour if you are drunk or high. If you find that your abuse is worse when you

drink or use drugs and you still do it, then you are choosing to be abusive.

I was ashamed to admit what was going on. I used to kid myself that I was out of control or that it was the drugs making me violent and that it wasn't really my fault. I've begun to realise that it was my problem – and although I didn't like facing up to that at first, it made me realise that if it was my problem then I could change things.

Fay, 28

Remember:

- You may be more likely to hurt or scare your partner or family members when you have been drinking alcohol or using drugs.
- Being out of it is not an excuse. You are still responsible for your behaviour – drunk, high, or sober.
- Help is available (see below).

Most people can choose how much and where to use drugs or alcohol. If you are one of these people you could try cutting back on your use of alcohol/drugs or keep it away from your family. This may mean staying at a friend's house after the pub or making sure you are sober when you go home.

If you are someone who cannot choose how much and where to use drugs/alcohol, you could consider getting some professional advice around your alcohol or drug use. [Click here to find local services](#)

### Other things to blame

There are many other excuses women use for abusive behaviour such as:

- Work problems

- Money worries
- Children
- Things that happened when you were a child

None of these things cause you to be abusive.

They may be issues that you and your partner argue about a lot, so may feel linked to your abusive behaviour. However, a lot of people experience these things and never use violence or abuse. You will be able to think of a time that you might have been stressed about any of the above and you didn't choose to be abusive.

## Other excuses

### Momentary insanity

When you're struggling to understand your violent and abusive behaviour you may be tempted to explain that you lost control and had what we might refer to as momentary insanity. You might say:

'I lost control'  
'I just flipped'  
'I saw red'

### The 'human pressure cooker'

You may feel that the build-up of pressure inside you was too much and by that point it was too late to make any other choice than to be violent/abusive. You might say:

'I just exploded'  
'I just blew'

Most of the time, your abusive behaviour isn't random. You don't explode randomly at passers-by, neither do you 'see red' and hit just anyone who happens to be near you.

If you believe that you felt so overwhelmed that you were abusive you won't be able to stop. It's one of the ways to avoid

understanding what abusive behaviour is about and what it is for. You can always make different choices.

If you're honest with yourself, you can identify lots of things you choose to control:

- What type of abuse you use and when
- What rules you have for your partner and when you change those rules
- Where to hit him, how hard and how long for
- Who the abuse is in front of
- When to stop the abuse

**So, what can you do?**

## Get support

### Take a time-out

Learn how to stop yourself from being violent. The guided time-out resource on the Respect Phonenumber website can help you identify when you are about to become violent, so you can choose to remove yourself and keep your partner safe.

### Build a support network

Building a positive support network is an effective way to ensure you have back up when you are worried about becoming violent and abusive. When thinking about who should be in your support network, the following guidance will help you:

- Identify people who want you to succeed in being non-abusive. Choose people in your life you trust: friends, family, a professional you trust, community or religious leaders. You need people who will help you in choosing non-abusive behaviour, will have the safety of your partner and children at the forefront of their mind and will hold you accountable for your abusive behaviour.
- Explain to the people you have chosen that you have identified them as a support and ask if they are willing to be on-call/available if you are concerned about becoming violent and abusive. Discuss how they are best able to

offer support to you e.g. over the phone or meeting face to face?

- Identify times in the past when it would have helped you to contact your support network and keep these in mind for future situations when you are concerned about your escalating behaviour.
- When seeking support keep your conversation focused on yourself and what you can control. Do not use your support network to blame, criticise, shame, or frighten your partner and family.
- Any contact with your support network should not be in the presence of your partner or children. Having privacy will enable you to talk freely about your behaviour and protects them hearing anything that might frighten or upset them further.

If you cannot reach anyone in your support network, you could consider some of the options below.

### **If you are finding it hard to change**

If you don't feel able to stop your violence and abuse, you should think about moving out of the house and not seeing him for a while. It may be the only way to keep him and your children safe.

### **Look after your wellbeing**

You might want to pray or meditate. Even a simple breathing exercise can help you to interrupt negative thoughts and manage your emotions when you are feeling stressed or like your behaviour is going to escalate. You could try the following:

#### **4-7-8 Breathing**

Step 1. Exhale completely through your mouth.

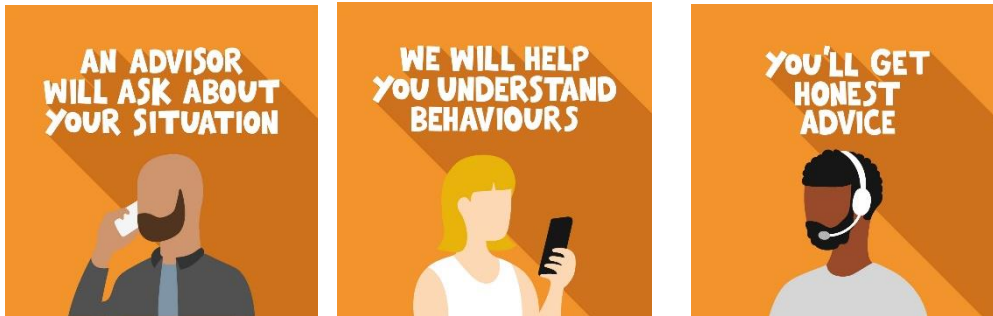
Step 2. Close your mouth and inhale through your nose to a mental count of four.

Step 3. Hold your breath for a count of seven.

Step 4. Exhale completely through your mouth, to a count of eight. (This is one breath).

Now repeat steps 2–4 three more times, until you've taken 4 breaths. Don't take more than four breaths in a row, or you might start to feel dizzy.

**Call the Respect Phonenumber freephone 0808 8024040**



We will listen to you in a non-judgemental way, discuss your situation and help you think about how to change. Our helpline is confidential.