

## What Is Abuse?

### Who this is for

This fact sheet is for you if:

- you are afraid for your safety and/or your children's safety because your partner is mistreating you, and
- you are wondering if your partner's actions are abuse.

In this fact sheet, **partner** means the person who you are or were married to, you live or lived with in a marriage-like relationship, or you have a child with.

### What abuse means

Abuse in relationships includes behaviour ranging from threats to physical or sexual assault. It may also include emotional, verbal, and financial actions that are harmful.

An abuser uses threats and violence to gain power and control over his or her partner. Often, the abuser blames the abuse on the victim. Remember that abuse is the abuser's fault. *Abuse against you is not your fault.*

Here are some examples of abuse in relationships.

**Physical abuse** is when your partner:

- stops you from leaving your home;
- breaks your things, damages property, or threatens to damage something that you value;
- shoves, slaps, chokes, punches, or kicks you, and/or
- threatens or hurts you with a weapon or any object.

**Emotional or verbal abuse** is when your partner:

- embarrasses you, yells at you, insults you, or calls you bad names;
- constantly criticizes and blames you for everything;
- does not let you contact friends and family;
- threatens to have you deported; and/or
- accuses you of having or wanting to have sex with someone else.

**Psychological abuse** is when your partner:

- decides what you can do or know about, where you can go, or who you can see;
- opens and reads your mail or other private papers;
- follows or watches you wherever you are, or monitors your phone calls;
- phones or emails you again and again; and/or
- threatens to hurt you, your children, friends, or pet.

**Sexual abuse** is when your partner:

- forces you to have sex when you do not want to;
- forces you to perform sexual acts that make you uncomfortable or hurt you; and/or
- injures sexual parts of your body without agreement.

**Financial abuse** is when your partner:

- makes all the household money decisions and does not let you have any money;
- does not let you use bank accounts and credit cards;

- refuses to let you get a job or makes you lose your job; and/or
- runs up debts in your name.

Abuse can also be emotional, physical, or sexual harm to your children. For example, abuse happens if your partner threatens to kidnap your children, or threatens to use the courts to take your children away from you.

Abuse can continue after you leave your partner. For example, your abuser may threaten to take you to court to pressure you to do what he or she wants. Or he or she may keep taking or keep trying to take you to court, and/or not pay child support as the court ordered.

### Abuse that is against the law

Certain types of abuse are more harmful than others and are against the law — these are crimes. Assault and criminal harassment are crimes.

- **Physical assault** is when your partner hits or hurts you. It also is when your partner threatens to hit or hurt you, and you believe that can and will happen.
- **Sexual assault** is when anything sexual happens to you without your agreement. This includes unwanted kissing, sexual touching, and forced intercourse (rape).
- **Criminal harassment** (sometimes called **stalking**) is when your partner forces unwanted and constant attention on you. It is a pattern of threats and actions that makes you afraid for yourself and your children. The law says that your partner cannot phone or email you again and again, follow you, threaten you, or threaten to destroy your property.

### Why you might stay

There are many reasons why someone stays with an abusive partner. You may be staying for one or more of these reasons:

- You may be a victim of a "cycle of violence" — a repeating pattern of violence in an abusive relationship. It sometimes begins with tension that slowly builds until a violent event happens. After the violent event, your partner may be sorry, may promise that it will not happen again, and may be loving and attentive. This may convince you and your partner that the abuse will end. But this pattern of abuse often occurs again.
- You feel you are financially dependent on the abuser, especially if you have a disability.
- You are afraid for your children's safety.
- You are afraid of losing your home.
- You think no one will believe the abuse happened.
- You have no social supports because you stay away from your friends and family.
- You do not know about your legal rights or support services that can help you.
- You are afraid of losing your immigration status.
- You do not speak English well and think that you will not be understood.
- You feel alone and pressured by family or community problems, or because you are a newcomer to Canada.

## Help from the police

You and your children have the right to be safe. If you are being assaulted or criminally harassed:

- Call **911** or the number for the emergency police or RCMP listed inside the front cover of your phone book.
- If you do not speak English, ask 911 for an interpreter.

Police can help when abuse is happening or after it has happened. To help the police with your case, make notes about every time you are assaulted, threatened, or feel unsafe. Put in your notes:

- What happened
- Date and time of the abuse
- Where the abuse happened
- How you or your children were hurt
- Who else saw what happened

## Community help

Because you are in an abusive relationship, you might feel ashamed, afraid, and alone. Abuse in relationships is *not* a private family matter. Whether you want to stay in the relationship or leave, you can get help for yourself and your children. Support services and trained people can help you wherever you live in BC.

- **Emergency shelters**, or safe houses, are where you and your children can go right away to be safe. **Transition houses**, also called second-stage housing, are where you and your children can stay when you leave an abusive relationship. To find the nearest safe house or transition house, call VictimLink BC at **1-800-563-0808** (no charge, 24 hours every day).
- **Advocates, settlement workers, and victim service workers** give free legal information and emotional support. To find one, see [www.povnet.org](http://www.povnet.org) (click "Find an Advocate"), [www.welcomebc.ca/WBC-Map.aspx](http://www.welcomebc.ca/WBC-Map.aspx), and [www.victimlinkbc.ca](http://www.victimlinkbc.ca) or call VictimLink BC (above phone number).
- **Income assistance** (welfare) is emergency money you can get if you have no money. Call the Ministry of Social Development at **1-866-866-0800** (no charge).
- **Community services** give support, counselling, and information. Some have services specifically for newcomers; people with disabilities; or lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered partners. Check your local phone book for their numbers, or the Directory of Victim Services in BC at [www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/directory/index.htm](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/directory/index.htm).

## Legal help

### Legal Services Society (legal aid)

**604-408-2172** (Greater Vancouver)

**1-866-577-2525** (call no charge, elsewhere in BC)

- For free services like the Family LawLINE, advice from **family duty counsel** (lawyers) at courts, a lawyer if you cannot afford one, and legal aid information, see [www.legalaid.bc.ca](http://www.legalaid.bc.ca).
- See free legal information at [www.familylaw.lss.bc.ca](http://www.familylaw.lss.bc.ca).

### Lawyer Referral Service

**604-687-3221** (Greater Vancouver)

**1-800-663-1919** (call no charge, elsewhere in BC)

- Gives you the name of a lawyer to discuss the legal problem with you for \$25 plus taxes (first half-hour). You can then hire this lawyer or ask for another name.

### If you are Aboriginal

- You may be able to get legal help from your friendship centre, your band's social development office, and/or an Aboriginal delegated agency.
- Call VictimLink BC (below phone number) for the name of a Native courtworker near you who can help.

## More information

- *Surviving Relationship Violence and Abuse* (booklet) [www.legalaid.bc.ca/publications](http://www.legalaid.bc.ca/publications) (click "Abuse & family violence")
- VictimLink BC (family violence phone service for confidential help and information) **1-800-563-0808** (no charge, 24 hours every day)
- BC government website about support services [www.domesticviolencebc.ca](http://www.domesticviolencebc.ca)
- Links to brochures about abuse in same-sex relationships [www.legalaid.bc.ca/publications](http://www.legalaid.bc.ca/publications) (click "Gays, lesbians, trans, & bisexuals")

This fact sheet explains the law in general. It is not intended to give you legal advice on your particular problem. This fact sheet is one of a series produced by the Legal Services Society. Other fact sheets in this series (some are in several languages):

- **Women Abused by Their Partners**
- **Men Abused by Their Partners**
- **If Your Sponsor Abuses You**
- **Safety Planning**
- **Getting Help from the Police or RCMP**
- **Protection Orders**
- **Parenting**
- **What to Do About Money**
- **The Criminal Court Process**
- **Staying in the Family Home on Reserve**



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