Health Effects of Domestic Violence

Effect of abuse on physical health

♦ A recent article in a medical journal found that “the stress of being in an abusive relationship may cause the women to be more susceptible to disease (Leibschultz, 2000).”

♦ Battered female victims identified depression, feelings of low self-esteem, helplessness, and generally severe stress reactions coupled with somatic complaints (Walker, 1979).

♦ “The stress of being in an abusive relationship often has a physiological impact, as well as the obvious physical and psychological impact: it often increases one’s vulnerability to illness (Hagion-Rzepka, 2000).”

Effect of abuse on mental health

♦ “Chronic abuse causes serious psychological harm. The tendency to blame the victim, however, has interfered with the psychological understanding and diagnosis of a post-traumatic syndrome. Instead of conceptualizing the psychopathology of the victim as a response to an abusive situation, mental health professionals have frequently attributed the abusive situation to the victim’s presumed underlying psychopathology” (Herman, 1992, p. 116).

♦ Panic disorders, phobias, anxieties and depression of abuse survivors is markedly different than ordinary phobias, anxieties and panic disorders which are not based in fact or traumatic experience, as they are in abuse survivors (Herman, 1992).

Evidence of long-term effects

♦ A study comparing children of battered women and refugees of war found significant similarities including sadness, anger, confusion, and PTSD. The study concluded, “these studies provide convincing evidence that the effects of violence exposure are not transient or temporary but may endure over many years” (Berman, 1999, p. 60).

♦ These same effects have been observed in adult abuse victims as well as children (Raphael, 1998; Walker, 1979).

♦ Normal recoveries may take months for victims of crime (Bard & Sangrey, 1986).

♦ Some survivors may develop extreme symptoms years later in response to major life stressors (van der Kolk, 1987).

♦ One study found that rape victims experienced consistently higher levels of fear and anxiety …for as long as 16 years after the rape occurred. (Ellis, Atkeson & Calhoun, 1981).
Specific long-term effects of domestic violence

♦ Long-term effects observed in adult victims of domestic violence include: intense startle reactions, tension, nightmares, chronic fatigue, disturbed sleeping and eating patterns and medical symptoms (van der Kolk, 1987; Davidson & Foa, 1991; Herman, 1992; Goodman, Koss, & Russo, 1993a; Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita & Russo, 1994).

♦ Some survivors remain passive, withdrawn, and continue to display apathy and symptoms of depression (Chapman, 1962; Peterson & Seligman, 1983).

♦ A survivor’s ability to trust and to form emotional attachments is severely impacted by domestic violence (Dehart, 1996).

♦ A recent study of women who had been victims of long-term emotional abuse identified PTSD symptoms, along with depression and dissociative forms of coping (Raphael, 1998).

♦ Domestic violence is strongly associated with depression, anxiety, somatization, attempted suicide, and chemical abuse (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Kemp, Rawlings, & Green, 1991). These mental health problems are directly attributable to the abuse (Roberts, Williams, Lawrence, & Raphael, 1998).

Effect on employability

♦ Abuse frequently leads to self-doubt, depression, and confusion, and may take several years to uncover and heal (Sackett & Saunders, 1999).

♦ “Survivors of family violence often experience difficulty in future relationships, which affects not only the stability of home and family, but also professional relationships in the course of employment” (Hagion-Rzepka, 2000).

♦ The percentage of abused women reporting interference from their abusers with their efforts to obtain employment, education or training ranges from 15% to 50% (LaViolette & Barnett, 2000).

Other economic consequences of abuse

♦ Domestic violence is a major cause of homelessness: a recent study in Santa Clara County found that 50% of homeless women and children were fleeing their abusive homes (Burstein & Woodsmall, 1987).

♦ The majority of welfare recipients have experienced domestic violence in their adult lives, and a high percentage are currently abused (Taylor Institute, 1997).

Full and complete references of all sources cited can be obtained by calling The Ripple Effect at 408-225-2381.
Health Effects of Domestic Violence fact sheet

References:


