

# 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

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