



Abuse

What Is Abuse?

Amy's finger was so swollen that she couldn't get her ring off. She didn't think her finger was broken because she could still bend it. It had been a week since her dad shoved her into the wall, but her finger still hurt a lot.

Amy hated the way her dad called her names and accused her of all sorts of things she didn't do, especially after he had been drinking. It was the worst feeling and she just kept hoping he would stop.

Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, or a combination of any or all of those. Neglect — when parents or guardians don't take care of the basic needs of the children who depend on them — can also be a form of abuse.

Physical abuse is often the most easily spotted form of abuse. It may be any kind of hitting, shaking, burning, pinching, biting, choking, throwing, beating, and other actions that cause physical injury, leave marks, or produce significant physical pain.

Sexual abuse is any type of sexual contact between an adult and anyone younger than 18; between a significantly older child and a younger child; or if one person overpowers another, regardless of age. If a family member sexually abuses another family member, this is called incest.

Emotional abuse can be difficult to pin down because there may not be physical signs. Emotional abuse happens when yelling and anger go too far or when parents constantly criticize, threaten, or dismiss kids or teens until their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth are damaged. Emotional abuse can hurt and cause damage just as physical abuse does.

Neglect is probably the hardest type of abuse to define. Neglect occurs when a child or teen doesn't have adequate food, housing, clothes, medical care, or supervision. Emotional neglect happens when a parent doesn't provide enough emotional support or deliberately and consistently pays very little or no attention to a child. But it's not neglect if a parent doesn't give a kid something he or she wants, like a new computer or a cell phone.

Family violence can affect anyone. It can happen in any kind of family. Sometimes parents abuse each other, which can be hard for a child to witness. Some parents abuse their kids by using physical or verbal cruelty as a way of discipline.

Abuse doesn't just happen in families, of course. Bullying is a form of abusive behavior. Bullying someone through intimidation, threats, or humiliation can be just as abusive as beating someone up. People who bully others may have been abused themselves. This is also true of people who abuse someone they're dating. But being abused is no excuse for abusing someone else.

Abuse can also take the form of hate crimes directed at people just because of their race, religion, abilities, gender, or sexual orientation.

Recognizing Abuse

It may sound strange, but people sometimes have trouble recognizing that they are being abused. Recognizing abuse may be especially difficult for someone who has lived with it for many years. A person might think that it's just the way things are and that there's nothing that can be done. People who are abused might mistakenly think they bring it on themselves by not acting right or by not living up to someone's expectations.

Someone growing up in a family where there is violence or abuse may not know that there are other ways for family members to treat each other. A person who has only known an abusive relationship may mistakenly think that hitting, beating, pushing, shoving, or angry name-calling are perfectly normal ways to treat someone

when you're mad. Seeing parents treat each other in abusive ways might lead a child to think that's a normal relationship. But abuse is not a normal or healthy way to treat people.

If you're not sure you are being abused, or if you suspect a friend is, it's always OK to ask a trusted adult or friend.

Why Does It Happen?

If you're one of the thousands of people living in an abusive situation, it can help to understand why some people abuse — and to realize that the violence is *not your fault*. Sometimes abusers manipulate the people they are abusing by telling them they did something wrong or "asked for it" in some way. But that's not true.

There is no single reason why people abuse others. But some factors seem to make it more likely that a person may become abusive.

Growing up in an abusive family is one factor. Other people become abusive because they're not able to manage their feelings properly. For example, someone who is unable to control anger or can't cope with stressful personal situations (like the loss of a job or marriage problems) may lash out at others inappropriately. Alcohol or drug use also can make it difficult for some people to control their actions.

Certain types of personality disorders or mental illness might also interfere with a person's ability to relate to others in healthy ways or cause people to have problems with aggression or self-control. Of course, not everyone with a personality disorder or mental illness becomes abusive.

Fortunately, abuse can always be corrected. Everyone can learn how to stop.

What Are the Effects of Abuse?

When people are abused, it can affect every aspect of their lives, especially self-esteem. How much abuse harms a person depends on the situation and sometimes on how severe the abuse is. Sometimes a seemingly minor thing can trigger a big reaction. Being touched inappropriately by a family member, for example, can be very confusing and traumatic.

Every family has arguments. In fact, it's rare when a family doesn't have some rough times, disagreements, and anger. Punishments and discipline — like removing privileges, grounding, or being sent to your room — are normal. Yelling and anger are normal in parent-teen relationships too — although it can feel pretty bad to have an argument with a parent or friend. But if punishments, arguments, or yelling go too far or last too long it can lead to stress and other serious problems.

Teens who are abused (or have been in the past) often have trouble sleeping, eating, and concentrating. They may not do well at school because they are angry or frightened, or because they can't concentrate or don't care.

Many people who are abused distrust others. They may feel a lot of anger toward other people and themselves, and it can be hard to make friends. Abuse is a significant cause of depression in young people. Some teens may engage in self-destructive behavior, such as cutting or abusing drugs or alcohol. They may even attempt suicide.

It's normal for people who have been abused to feel upset, angry, and confused about what happened to them. They may feel guilty and embarrassed and blame themselves. But abuse is never the fault of the person who is being abused, no matter how much the abuser tries to blame others.

Abusers may manipulate a person into keeping quiet by saying stuff like: "This is a secret between you and me," or "If you ever tell anybody, I'll hurt you or your mom," or "You're going to get in trouble if you tell. No one will believe you and you'll go to jail for lying." This is the abuser's way of making a person feel like nothing can be done so he or she won't report the abuse.

People who are abused may have trouble getting help because it means they'd be reporting on someone they love — someone who may be wonderful much of the time and awful to them only some of the time. A person might be afraid of the consequences of reporting, either because they fear the abuser or the family is financially dependent on that person. For reasons like these, abuse often goes unreported.

What Should Someone Who's Being Abused Do?

People who are being abused need to get help. Keeping the abuse a secret doesn't protect anyone from being

abused — it only makes it more likely that the abuse will continue.

If you or anyone you know is being abused, talk to someone you or your friend can trust — a family member, a trusted teacher, a doctor, or a school or religious youth counselor. Many teachers and counselors have training in how to recognize and report abuse.

Telephone directories list local child abuse and family violence hotline numbers that you can call for help. There's also Childhelp USA at (800) 4-A-CHILD ([800] 422-4453).

Sometimes people who are being abused by someone in their own home need to find a safe place to live temporarily. It is never easy to have to leave home, but it's sometimes necessary to be protected from further abuse. People who need to leave home to stay safe can find local shelters listed in the phone book or they can contact an abuse helpline. Sometimes a person can stay with a relative or friend.

People who are being abused often feel afraid, numb, or lonely. Getting help and support is an important first step toward changing the situation.

Many teens who have experienced abuse find that painful emotions may linger even after the abuse stops. Working with a therapist is one way to sort through the complicated feelings and reactions that being abused creates, and the process can help to rebuild feelings of safety, confidence, and self-esteem.

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