

Exploring Healthy Family Relationships

The Allies in Action Project educates newcomers to Canada about domestic abuse/family violence and how to maintain healthy family relationships.

What is Violence in Spousal Relationships?

- According to the World Health Organization, intimate partner violence refers to behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors.
- It is a public health issue and the most widespread of all human rights violations, a pervasive and systemic public health issue affecting all socio-economic and cultural groups throughout the world at a high cost to the individual and society.

Cultural and social norms perpetuating abuse and violence

- A man has the right to correct or discipline women's behavior
- Physical violence is an acceptable way of resolving conflicts
- Divorce is shameful
- A woman is responsible for making a marriage work
- Sexual violence is shameful for the victim, which prevents disclosure.

Specific risk factors associated with immigration

- It increases the imbalance of power within a relationship
- It can be used by the abuser as a way of controlling the victim
- Isolation from their primary support network
- Language barriers and cultural differences (acculturation stress)
- Linguistic and social isolation
- Financial insecurity
- Fear to lose their immigrant or refugee status (Abusive husbands may use as ways of control sponsorship applications threatening women with loss of status and/or children.
- Lack of information about their rights in Canada as immigrants or survivors of abuse and violence.
- Barriers to access to community resources such as legal or counseling (i.e. stigma associated with the issue, to take actions or seeking help, particularly mental health)

Immediate potential effects, behaviors, and emotions associated with physical or sexual assault

- Fear, confusion, anger, numbness, guilt, or shame
- Trying to minimize the abuse and/or hide the evidence (e.g. covering bruises, excusing the abuser, assuming the responsibility for the abuse)
- A woman experiencing an abusive relationship is three times more likely to feel depressed, suffer anxiety disorders, PTSD, feelings of low-self esteem, low self-worth, and hopelessness. Self-harm and increased suicidal tendencies are associated with these types of abuse.
- It increases the risk of another disease such as high blood pressure, sleep disorders, chronic pain or fibromyalgia, among others.

Effects on those witnessing violence: children (Short term and long term effects)

- Psychological distress, feelings of fear, guilt, shame, sadness, or low self-esteem
- Complex trauma, PTSD
- Isolation, difficulties trusting other people
- Aggressive behavior
- Sleep disturbances, stomach aches/headaches, short attention span, poor results at school...
- Children born in this environment are more likely to be of low birth weight, which is linked to infant and child illnesses and disabilities. They can suffer harm in the uterus. Developmental delays in speech, motor or cognitive skills.
- Witnessing intimate partner violence is a predictor for dating violence, with different responses based on gender, internalizing or replicating violence and accepting violence and controlling behavior as something acceptable and a way of resolving conflicts.

Preventing and Responding to Intimate Partner Violence: What could be the role of family and friends?

- Being aware of cultural and social norms that perpetuate this abuse against women and children
- Giving credibility to the victim
- Supporting the victim (e.g. approaching the person gently in a safe and confidential space, listening and expressing that you care about her safety and well-being, respect her pace and choices, to not pressure the victim, to not judge or criticize the abuser).
- Reflecting on how cultural factors can prevent the victim from seeking help
- Learn more about help, how to respond safely, and what resources are available.