

## **Why Does Abuse Happen?**

You may already have heard many possible justifications for the abuse in your relationship, either from your partner or others. Or, you may have considered possible reasons yourself. Perhaps your partner has told you that you caused the behavior because you made your partner angry, hurt, jealous, or scared. Maybe your partner was drunk or high when the abusive behavior happened. Does your partner get extremely angry and then tell you afterwards “I lost it! I didn’t know what I was doing.” Do others in your life reflect that your partner is under a lot of stress and pressure from a job, or financial or family concerns? What was your partner’s early life like? Are you concerned that your partner’s behavior stems from being exposed to abuse as a child?

Given that the person hurting you may be affected by some of these circumstances, it can be difficult to see your partner’s abuse as intentional, chosen behavior. But abuse is a choice. None of the things described above are more than excuses, because many people get drunk, high, angry, or stressed, or experienced abuse as children, and as adults to not act abusively toward their intimate partners and family members. Abuse also does not happen because of whatever you are saying or doing in your relationship. You may already have experienced this; it may not seem to matter how or what you say and do, things do not get better and stay better. Changing your behavior does not stop the abuse, because it does not cause the abuse.

Some may assume that people who commit domestic abuse and violence are abnormal or mentally ill. To a non-violent person, it can be hard to see how a “normal” person could say and do such hurtful things. However, domestic abuse is widespread to the point of being an epidemic, despite many abusive behaviors being against the law. People who abuse subscribe to a cultural belief system in which abuse is acceptable. If those people experience no negative consequences for committing abuse, they get the message that it is acceptable. Committing domestic abuse in itself is not considered a behavioral health issue, and it is important for you not to justify abusive behavior if your partner has a behavioral health diagnosis or some other mental imbalance or instability you may wonder about and sympathize with. Your partner should be held accountable for abusive behavior. Your partner may also need and deserve assistance with a behavioral health problem, and this is best left to someone in a professional role. It is not your responsibility to sacrifice your safety or happiness in an attempt to support or accommodate your partner’s behavioral health issues.

Domestic abuse is also not something that is only happening in your relationship, because of your partner’s individual thoughts, feelings, and actions. Abuse is a learned behavior and is a widespread cultural problem around the world. Historically, domestic abuse stems from a culture, supported by laws and social traditions, which place women’s rights and experiences below men’s. Because of this, you are not alone in your experiences, and there are many resources to help you be safer and feel better. However, also because of this, other people in society may accept abuse and violence in relationships as the status quo and may blame you for the abusive behavior, rather than holding your partner responsible. It is important for you to seek out support from people who see abuse clearly as a behavior by your partner for which you are not responsible.

You may encounter blaming attitudes, even from people close to you. Some people may already have given you the impression that the abuse is happening to you simply because you continue to stay in the

relationship, as if this somehow invites and condones abuse. Many people in abusive relationships know, however, that leaving may be a scary and dangerous step to take, and will not necessarily end the abuse. Remember that your partner is hurting you because of a belief that it is acceptable behavior to control loved ones, not because of anything you are saying or doing.

People working in the field of domestic abuse and violence are striving to change cultural attitudes and understanding about domestic abuse, especially regarding holding abusers accountable for their behaviors and lifting the blame from the people who are being abused.

### **More helpful reading**

- ✓ Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men by Lundy Bancroft (Berkley Books, 2003)
- ✓ The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help by Jackson Katz (Sourcebooks, 2006)