

FAMILY VIOLENCE & SUBSTANCE ABUSE

A Framework for Family Violence

Family violence is abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency. It can include many forms of abusive behavior:

- emotional abuse
- psychological abuse
- neglect
- financial exploitation
- destruction of property
- injury to pets
- physical assault
- sexual assault
- homicide

The primary victims are women, children and seniors, including people with disabilities.

Females are more frequently victimized than males and in most cases the perpetrators are male.

These abuses of power are reinforced by traditional societal attitudes and maintained by existing barriers to social equality based on sex, race, age, class and disability.

A Framework for Substance Abuse

Substance abuse refers to the inappropriate use of any drug or mood-altering substance. It can result in personal, family, health, social, legal and financial problems. Substance abuse is use that occurs:

- too frequently
- in excessive amounts
- over a long period of time or
- in the wrong combination with other drugs

Substance abuse can result in physical and psychological dependence or addiction. Both legal and illegal drugs can be involved, including alcohol, prescription medications, illicit drugs and solvents.

Substance abuse or dependence can affect a person's overall health and functioning – emotional, psychological and physical. Therefore, these problems must be addressed as specific issues, rather than as mere symptoms of other problems.

Making the Connections

Family violence and substance abuse are problems that are complex, multi-faceted and further complicated when they appear together. Two major concerns are the link between the victim's experience of family violence and substance abuse, and the link between the victimizer's substance abuse and abusive behavior.

As victims

- Women abused in the past, or currently living with an abusive partner, may use alcohol or other drugs to deal with the pain, anxiety, and fear of their situation.
- Adults who were abused as children may use substances to deaden the pain of past memories.
- Adolescents who have been abused or who have witnessed abuse may resort to alcohol or other drug use as a coping mechanism.

As Victimizers:

- Parents who abuse and neglect their children often have problems with substance abuse.
- Men who assault their partners often use alcohol or other drugs prior to the assault.
- Men who sexually exploit children have often engaged in substance abuse before or during the sexual offence and may use alcohol and other drugs as a way of luring and manipulating their victims.
- Victimizers may abuse substances to diminish their feelings of guilt or shame or to assist in denial of their acts.
- Those who care for seniors or persons with disabilities may give them excessive medication or withhold medication in order to control their behavior.

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What is the relationship between family violence and substance abuse?

(Side 2)

Substance abuse does not cause family violence nor does family violence cause substance abuse. However, there are similarities between the two problems and the problems add to each other. There are a multitude of factors that influence how a person will be affected by family violence and whether or not that person will be susceptible to substance abuse and dependence. The connection between the two problems is sufficiently strong to cause concern.

- Members of families in which one or both parents abuse substances are considered to be at high risk for physically abusing and particularly for neglecting their children.
- Persons who have experienced family violence are at greater risk for alcohol and other drug problems than those who have not.
- Evidence suggests that adolescents who run away from violent homes are at risk of further victimization and substance abuse as well as other problems.

Why does the relationship occur so frequently?

There are many ways of looking at the connection between family violence and substance abuse. There are some examples:

- Self-medication – Alcohol and other drugs may be used to cope with the physical, emotional, or psychological pain of family violence. It has not, however, been determined that victims who abuse substances do so solely as a result of their victimization.
- Disinhibition – Alcohol or other drugs are seen as reducing behavioral inhibitions so that socially unacceptable behavior such as aggression is more likely to occur. However, this does not adequately explain the choice of family members and vulnerable populations as targets of this aggression.
- Learned association – We learn in our families and social groups that certain events or behaviors are connected and expected. For example, a person may learn to connect family violence and substance abuse by growing up in a family where they both occur. In addition, beliefs about the potential effects of a drug will strongly influence a person's actual experience of the drug. A belief that a drug will cause abusive behavior will increase the likelihood of abusive behavior.
- Disavowal – Often abusive individuals excuse their violent behavior and are even excused by their partners and other family members because they were drunk and "not in control". It allows us to see the person as normal, but their behavior is deviant.

Some Thoughts for Family Violence Victims

If you have been a victim of family violence, there are several issues about substance abuse that may be important for you to consider.

- Family violence does not necessarily stop when the abuser stops abusing alcohol and/or other drugs.
- Using alcohol or other drugs to cope with the effects of family violence can lead to further problems, including drug dependency and possibly increased vulnerability to violence.
- Both family violence and substance abuse problems often require assistance beyond the family for protection, support or treatment.
- Attempting to deal with one problem without addressing the other can cause a false sense of security.

In a crisis, contact your local police, child welfare agency or women's shelter for protection. For more information or treatment referral services, contact NCADA at (314) 962-3456.

Some Thoughts for Those Who Behave Abusively Toward Family Members

If you have abused a family member, there are several issues about substance abuse that are important to you.

- If you have a history of abusive behavior, intoxication will increase and likelihood of severity of your violence.
- Getting treatment for both substance abuse and abusive behavior is important, as treating only the substance abuse is no guarantee that your abusive behavior will stop.
- Children growing up in families where substance abuse or family violence is present, often repeat these problems as adults.

Most people who threaten or harm others, especially family members, feel upset about what they did. There are programs that can help you stop behaving abusively and that can help you feel better about yourself. Contact a counseling program for men who batter, a family service agency or an addiction treatment program. Remember to tell them about both family violence and the alcohol or other drug abuse.

Source: *Family Violence and Substance Abuse*; The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (Canada)

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Resource from NCADA's RADAR library. For more information visit our website at www.ncada-stl.org.
For questions on substance use, abuse and related problems, call NCADA's Help Line at (314) 962-3456.