

GENDER-BASED AND PARTNER VIOLENCE

and How Mental Health
Counselors Recognize
the Signs



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Introduction

We've heard it so many times that we're almost numb to the words and the reality they describe: *We live in a violent society*. It permeates every hour of the news, the films that market themselves as entertainment, the video games that beguile children and adults, and the music genre whose lyrics glorify the infliction of pain. We hear of wars and rumors of wars, mass shootings, and major outbursts over minor fender-benders or being cut off in the supermarket parking lot.

For some people, there's also the violence they come home to — a violence that's based on who they are or where they stand in a relationship. This paper will explore both gender-based and partner violence — the telltale clues that it's happening, though it may be hidden, and the steps that counselors can and must take when they come face to face with it.

First, a couple of definitions. Gender-based violence refers to any systematic form of violence that is maintained, in part, due to gender norms. It can refer to the gender of the attacker or the gender of the victim. The crime of sex trafficking also falls under the umbrella of gender-based violence. Partner violence is perpetrated by someone who is in an intimate relationship with the victim, whether that person is a current partner or a former one. It transcends all identities and groups.



Who, exactly, are the victims?

- **Women victimized by men.** Women represent, by far, the largest group of gender-based violence victims. Thirty-five percent of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.¹ Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner.² But whether the attacker is an intimate partner or a stranger, the underlying dynamic is the same — a gender norm of male dominance and power that exists in certain segments of society.

Dr. Lilliane Macias, an assistant professor in the University of New Haven's Department of Psychology, who specializes in trauma-informed, community-based prevention and practice, acknowledges that while men also can be victims of violence from partners, the scope of gender-based violence toward women is of such magnitude that it warrants separate recognition. "With women, there's a much greater risk of lethality than there is with male victims of partner violence," she says.

Considering the fact that one in three women can expect to experience partner violence in their lifetime, Macias warns future mental health counselors that they should expect many encounters with violently abused women in their practices.

- **LGBTQ/Gender Non-Conforming Individuals.** LGBTQ persons are victims of gender-based violence through intimate partners as well as individuals who commit hate crimes.

In LGBTQ partner violence, the same dynamic of dominance over the other is at work. "All forms of abuse have, at their center, the issue of power and control," Macias explains. "They are used as tools to control the other — who is perceived as weaker and more vulnerable."

LGBTQ communities cope with more than partner violence, however; they are also at risk of suffering verbal, emotional, and physical bullying and violence on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Says Macias, "When someone dies or is injured and the person attacking them is motivated by hate and uses derogatory terms, we can say with some confidence that that person wouldn't have been attacked if not for this bias against gender identity or sexual orientation."

Just as with female victims of gender-based violence, the problem of violence perpetrated on gender minorities has reached such a scale that organizations, both local and global, are giving it separate recognition.

- **Men victimized by women.** This story has not gotten extensive coverage, and there are various reasons why it's flying under the radar. Shame, embarrassment and, therefore, an unwillingness to report by male victims is one reason. Such men, who typically don't fight back when assaulted, are operating under a different, more positive gender norm than the male-as-aggressor described earlier. Instilled in well-raised boys, it's the rule that boys and men must never hit a girl or woman — even if she hits you.

In addition, some men who have reported assaults from female partners have encountered disbelief on the part of authorities, who will look at a woman and her stronger male partner with a good deal of skepticism that he took any serious hits. However, an enraged woman strengthened by a major dose of adrenaline or a woman under the influence can inflict substantial physical damage.

Unfortunately, a cultural norm has developed that makes light of female-on-male violence or threats by allowing women the kinds of excuses that would never be tolerated in a man. For example, an angry woman tells a man "I'll break your neck" ... but says she wouldn't say these things if he "didn't piss her off"³.

The actual statistics on female-initiated violence against men? Experts are having a difficult time pinning down hard numbers. However, included among the statistics compiled by the Centers of Disease Control in a 2013 report on domestic violence against gays was this stunner: In a sample of 16,000 U.S. adults, 29 percent of heterosexual men had been a victim of intimate partner violence.⁴



Recognizing the signs that someone is being abused

Violence can take various forms, but no matter who the victim or abuser is or what group they identify with, all the forms of violence are common to every group. The driving need for power and control knows no identity boundaries.

The following are the different forms of violence and the subtle or not-so-subtle signs that it's happening:

- **Physical violence**

Much physical abuse is obvious — a black eye, a swollen lip, a broken arm. Any bruising around the neck is a very dangerous sign and is strongly linked to lethality for women. A woman who has a history of being choked is at much higher risk of death.

But there are also subtle signs that counselors must watch for and pursue, such as a person complaining about other bodily symptoms. Abuse victims may talk about health problems and say they're not feeling well when, for example, they've really been hit in the stomach. Violent partners may deliberately hurt the person in a place where it doesn't show.

Physical violence is almost never the only form of abuse inflicted on a victim, though, so a counselor should always expect it to be accompanied by other forms of abuse.

• Verbal abuse

Like physical abuse, verbal abuse is considered a form of violence. Although verbal abuse is not admissible in a court of law, a counselor with a client who's enduring habitual derogatory verbal attacks – such as routinely being called stupid— should worry about other forms of violence in the relationship.

If a client doesn't admit to this type of abuse, he or she may be internalizing the putdowns, which subsequently emerge in counseling sessions. That is, victims will call themselves stupid. Internalization may also take the form of self-blame.

• Psychological/emotional abuse

Although this type of violence uses words to hurt, it goes far beyond simple verbal abuse in that it's extremely manipulative. Ultimately, it destroys a person's entire perception of reality. "I thought things were this way, but he's telling me they're actually the other way," is a common refrain that counselors hear. Victims are told over and over again that they are overreacting and lose all sense of what is true or valid about their feelings and beliefs.

The term "gaslighting," which derives from the classic play "Gaslight" and its two film adaptations, perfectly describes this form of psychological abuse. In extreme cases, it becomes virtual mind control.

Psychology Today outlines the seven stages of gaslighting in a relationship⁵:

1. **Lying and exaggerating** by the gaslighter about a victim, based on presumptions and accusations rather than objective facts
2. **Repetition.** Endlessly repeating the lies
3. **Escalation of the attacks** and more false claims when the victim challenges the lies
4. **Wearing out the victim.** The abuser stays on the attack until the victim becomes resigned and filled with doubt.
5. **Forming a co-dependent relationship** by creating such insecurity and anxiety that the victim looks to the attacker to grant approval and security
6. **Giving false hope.** Breathtakingly cruel, this tactic involves the gaslighter demonstrating kindness occasionally so that the victim lets his or her guard down. The next gaslighting attack after that will be devastating.
7. **Domination and control.** By this time, the victim is so under the gaslighter's control, that the attacker can exploit the person at will for the attacker's personal advantage.

Psychological and emotional abuse can also include other forms of controlling behaviors, such as limiting who the victim has contact with, what clothes the victim wears, or how the victim spends his or her time.

- **Economic and financial abuse**

This form of abuse is quite common. It involves using money as a threat to control a partner's behavior and maintain power.

The abuser may take the partner's paycheck, refusing to let the partner have autonomy in how to use it. It traps the partner in the relationship, and not just emotionally, because it literally prevents the person from leaving due to lack of funds. Property damage can also severely impact the partner's ability to be self-sufficient.

Concealing financial information from the other is another tactic. It leaves the partner completely in the dark about where he or she stands in a supposedly shared household.

Finally, financial abuse is often a sure sign of a physically abusive relationship⁶



Addressing the problem

There are two ways that counselors approach the issue of gender-based and partner violence: prevention and intervention.

- **Prevention**

A counselor has the opportunity to assess how healthy a client's relationships are when that person is already seeking help for another issue. And with young people, especially, talking to them as they start to form their first dating experiences is crucial. Say that David is struggling with his studies in high school or Monica is having trouble adjusting to college after the relatively secure environment of high school. They come to the school psychologist for help. Because the counselor works with the whole person, it's the ideal time to explore whether David and Monica's relationships are healthy or not and to educate them on what is healthy, what is a warning sign, and what has become flat-out dangerous.

The website loveisrespect.org highlights a mind-boggling statistic: One in three adolescents is a victim of emotional or physical/sexual abuse from a dating partner. That translates to 1.5 million teens annually.⁷ These abusers and victims will soon be adults, painfully dragging their abusive history into the future. What will be the effect on society of the decisions, workplace interactions, marriages, and child rearing that are informed by these violent relationships – and in such stratospheric numbers?

Loveisrespect.org provides a wealth of information for youth as well as resources for counselors, clinicians, and educators on preventing or arresting the tragic consequences of gender-based and partner violence for those who have their whole lives ahead of them.

• Intervention

If a counselor suspects the safety of his or her client is at risk, further drawn-out discussion takes a back seat to action. "We never want to handle these situations alone," cautions Macias. "We also want to give people as much agency as we can for making choices about what to do moving forward." Agency help includes shelters, community organizations, hot lines, and national and local resource centers for gender-based violence and domestic violence.

The last thing a counselor should do, according to Macias, is to tell the client what he or she is going to have to do next. Since the violence against the client is centered around power, a counselor giving an order would be feeding into that same dynamic. "Whenever possible, we want to include the client in decision-making," she says.

Finally, if the situation has deteriorated to the point where it becomes life threatening, or the counselor suspects that it is, the counselor has a responsibility to report it the police.



What's Important to Remember

Relationships exist within a spectrum. The spectrum runs from "healthy" at one end, moves into a yellow warning zone of "unhealthy" towards the middle, and culminates in "abusive" at the other end. If a person gets into an argument and yells at his or her partner, it doesn't necessarily mean the relationship has leapt to the far end of the spectrum or has even moved to the middle "unhealthy" realm. Occasional outbursts are a normal part of being human. However, habitual abuse of the types described above is another matter, and the sooner a counselor intervenes, the better.

Loveisrespect.org has created a detailed chart on the types of behaviors that are emblematic of each area of the relationship spectrum.⁸ It's a helpful tool for anyone involved in relationship counseling. And, for their clients, learning about what's on that chart could end up being a lifesaver.

Sources

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⁴ "Health Care Delivery System Reform" (<https://www.commonwealthfund.org/programs/health-care-delivery-system-reform>)



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