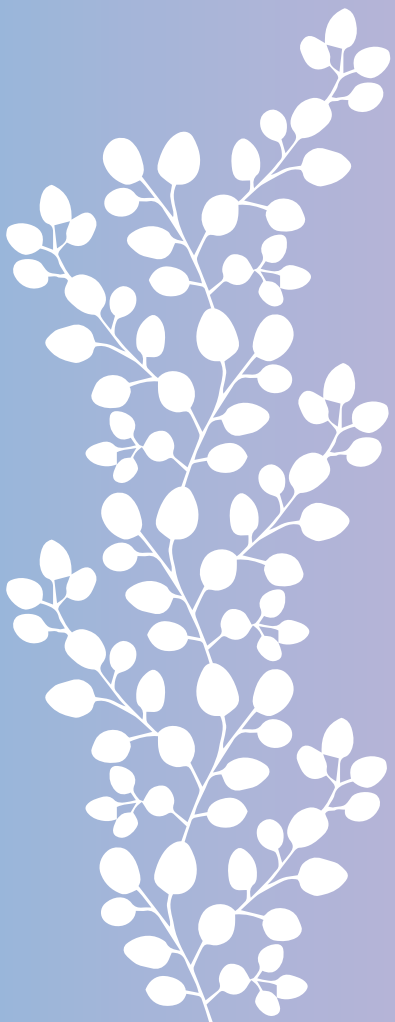
Understanding Abuse



Abuse is also called
gender-based violence,
family violence,
domestic violence,
or intimate partner violence.

What is abuse?

Abuse takes many forms. It can include someone hitting their partner, sexual abuse, controlling their partner's money or behaviour, controlling them emotionally, or coercive control.

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviours used to assert control over a person through repeated acts that disempower them in a number of possible ways including through fear for the safety of self or others, isolating them from support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, removing or threatening to remove the victim's rights and liberties, depriving them of independence, resistance, and escape, and regulating their everyday behaviour.

More than one type of abuse can happen at the same time. It may be a single act or a series of acts forming a pattern.

Children and young people may be harmed by being exposed to abuse in adult relationships, being the direct victims of violence, or both.

Abuse is also called gender-based violence, family violence, domestic violence, or intimate partner violence.

In this book, we use the word "abuse."

In an abusive relationship there may be:

Psychological or emotional abuse, including:

- controlling someone
- threats to harm children or family, a pet, or belongings
- damage to belongings
- hurting or killing pets
- keeping someone from having control over their own money or from making their own decisions
- following or stalking a person
- bullying or picking on someone
- online harassment
- taking someone's phone, or reading their emails and text messages
- lying about someone to their pastor or imam or rabbi
- gaslighting
- embarrassing someone on purpose

Verbal abuse, including:

- yelling and screaming
- name-calling
- making threats
- criticizing

Physical abuse, including:

- pushing
- hitting
- punching
- choking/strangling
- kicking
- biting
- forced confinement (not letting someone leave)
- keeping someone from having things they need, like food
- trying to physically abuse someone

Sexual abuse, including:

- unwanted sexual touching
- forcing someone to have sex
- unwanted violence during sex, such as choking a person without their consent
- trying to sexually abuse someone

LEGAL INFO

Some forms of abuse are criminal offences in Canada, including:

- hitting, punching, strangling, or other physical assault
- sexual assault
- threats to harm or to kill
- withholding food and medical treatment
- taking another person's money through fraud or threats
- creating fear by repeatedly following, communicating, or attempting to communicate with a person (stalking or criminal harassment)
- forcing someone to work (forced labour)
- forcing someone into sex work (human trafficking and sexual exploitation)

Healthy relationships

A healthy relationship involves respect and care from both partners.

In a healthy relationship, neither partner should be afraid of the other partner. A healthy relationship is non-violent and involves equality between partners.



We all deserve healthy relationships with our partners.

Healthy relationships include:

Negotiation and Fairness
Non-threatening Behaviour
Economic Partnership
Respect, Trust and Support
Shared Responsibility
Responsible Parenting
Honesty and Accountability

Healthy relationships include:

Negotiation and Fairness

This means that both partners:

- seek mutually satisfying resolutions to conflict
- accept change
- are willing to compromise

Non-threatening Behaviour

This means that both partners:

- talk and act in a way that allows both of them to feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves

Economic Partnership

This means that both partners:

- make money decisions together
- benefit from financial arrangements

Respect

This means that both partners:

- listen to each other openly and without judging
- are emotionally supportive and understanding
- value the other's opinions

Trust and Support

This means that both partners:

- support each other's goals
- respect each other's right to their own feelings, friends, activities, and opinions

Shared Responsibility

This means that both partners:

- mutually agree on a fair distribution of work
- make decisions together

Responsible Parenting

This means that both partners:

- share parental responsibilities
- provide a positive, non-violent role model for the children

Honesty and Accountability

This means that both partners:

- accept responsibility
- take responsibility for past use of violence
- admit being wrong
- communicate openly and truthfully

Is it abuse?

Most couples argue from time to time, but there is a difference between having a disagreement and being afraid of your partner. When fear becomes part of the relationship, it can be a sign of abuse.

It is not easy for most of us to recognize and accept that our partner is abusing us. Some people struggle to identify their situation as abusive.

You may feel that your partner loves you because partners who hurt their partners often express love toward the people they hurt. Remember that anyone can choose not to hurt others, and that there are other ways to behave toward the people we love.

Everyone has to take responsibility for their own behaviour.

You may feel sorry for your partner, or hope you can change your partner. Perhaps your partner is insecure, has problems, or was abused. There is no excuse for abuse.

We all have to learn to feel good about ourselves without putting others down. It doesn't mean you don't love your partner if you want your partner to change and stop abusing.

Regardless of why someone is abusive, their behaviour cannot be justified.

Abuse is always wrong.

It could be abuse if ...

Your partner ...

- gets jealous when others are around
- destroys, or threatens to destroy, your possessions
- uses put-downs, name-calling, or threats
- makes you choose between your friends/family and your partner
- blames you when things go wrong
- pushes you
- hits you
- threatens to take your children
- hits the walls
- yells at you
- harms, or threatens to harm, your pet
- threatens to harm your family members or friends
- threatens suicide or self-harm

If you feel you have to ...

- ask permission to spend money or go out
- take the blame when things go wrong
- "make things right" just for your partner
- do what your partner wants
- make excuses for your partner's behaviour

If you feel ...

- afraid to make decisions because you fear your partner's reaction or anger
- isolated from friends, family, and activities
- afraid to express your own opinions or say "no"
- afraid to leave your partner

If the lists above sound familiar to you, you may be experiencing abuse.

Why does abuse happen?

There are many reasons why a partner hurts someone they love. A partner may abuse because they:

- learned this behaviour in their own family
- feel it is acceptable to control others
- believe abuse is a way to have power
- have low self-esteem or are insecure
- are unemployed
- think that there are few, if any, consequences to their violent acts
- have a mental illness or suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- abuse alcohol or drugs

There is no easy answer to why abuse happens.

Many factors can influence why people choose to be violent. For example, traditional gender roles may lead family members to believe the man is the legal head of the household and should control the family.

Some people are brought up to believe that it is okay to use force to control their partners or solve family problems.

Some people say they feel like they are being treated like property, belonging first to a parent and later to a partner.

Traditional gender roles can also influence the dynamics of abuse in gender-diverse relationships and relationships in which one or more of the partners are queer or transgender. One partner may shame the other for being too feminine or too masculine, for not "passing" according to socially accepted gender norms, for being out, for not being out, or other reasons. See page 26 for more discussion about how abuse can impact gender-diverse partners.

Many of us grew up in families where there was a lot of conflict or where violence was common. Violence is on television, in movies, in video games, in advertisements, and online. It is often considered normal to be dominant and even to be violent, especially for men.

Social expectations can play a role in abuse. People may feel pressured to act out traditional male and female gender roles. Social expectations can lead people to believe that it is acceptable for men to be "tough" and abusive, and for women to be caregivers and make sure everyone in the home is happy. These gender roles can make people feel pressured to show their strength through controlling their partners.

Gender roles can also make it seem that a power imbalance in relationships is normal and acceptable. The pressures of traditional gender roles often lead to women being blamed if their home is not happy, even if their partner chooses to abuse them. These pressures can also lead to women blaming themselves.

People who abuse often believe that ending the abuse is not their responsibility. They often blame the victim. They might say "my partner made me" or "my partner drove me to it."

Abusive partners sometimes confuse abusive behaviour with expressing anger. Anger is an emotion that everyone experiences, and it can be expressed in healthy ways.

Abuse is never acceptable.

Sometimes people react in self-defence in response to being abused. If you respond to abuse by yelling, putting your partner down, slapping, or using aggressive behaviour, it does not in any way excuse your partner's abusive behaviour.

No one has the right to abuse others.

Is there a pattern to abuse?

In an abusive relationship, your partner might only be abusive on a rare occasion, or they might be abusive to you only once. Other abusive partners are abusive many times during a relationship. Abuse and violence starts early in some relationships. In other relationships, the abuse may start later—sometimes during pregnancy, or when a partner is about to leave. Violence and abuse may be used to maintain power and control over you. You may notice that there is a pattern to this behaviour.

It could look like this:

- Tension and anger start to build up. Sometimes you and your partner may argue.
- Your partner physically abuses you or makes threats about becoming violent.
- Then there is a cool-down, make-up, or calm stage. Your partner may apologize and promise that it will never happen again. Your partner may reinforce these statements with "quick fixes" such as buying you gifts or a special dinner. Often these actions are focused on making the abuser feel better rather than trying to make you feel better.

Some abusive partners begin to take responsibility and work on long-term solutions such as seeking help from family, friends, or counsellors.

If a partner uses "quick fixes," the changes are often temporary. In some cases, the tension builds up again, and the abuse starts over.

Over time the abuse may increase in intensity. Even if your abusive partner takes responsibility, change may take time. Sometimes, the abuse happens again in spite of the progress your partner has made. You have to decide for yourself if you want to continue to work on, or leave, your relationship.

There is a pattern to abuse...

Tension and anger

Abuse

Quick fix

...but you can step out of the cycle.

The effects of abuse

People who are abused often live with constant fear, worry, guilt, and self-blame. If you have experienced abuse from your partner, you may:

- begin to feel worthless, helpless, or ashamed
- feel like a failure
- feel isolated and degraded

The effects of emotional or psychological abuse cannot be seen, but can be just as harmful as physical abuse. If you have experienced abuse of any kind, you may feel that no one could ever love you. You may feel stupid, ugly, and alone. You may begin to lose your self-respect. You may begin to use alcohol or drugs to escape.

You may feel like the hardest thing is feeling the loss of:

- self-respect
- respect for your partner
- someone to be with
- a sense of hope
- happiness
- love
- the feeling of safety that a relationship can provide
- companionship
- independence
- your future goals and dreams
- laughter and joy
- your own identity
- freedom
- the ability to make decisions

RESOURCES

Even if you are not ready to make changes, sometimes it helps to talk. Transition houses are there to offer this support. You can also call or text the **Transition House Association of Nova Scotia** any time of day for free at 1-855-225-0220. Call even to just talk.

For information about children and abuse, see page 105 of this book.



Remember

There is no excuse for abuse.
Abuse of any kind is never okay.

The abuse is not your fault.
No one deserves to be abused.

It takes a lot of courage
to face these issues.

Diversity and abuse

Abuse can happen to anyone, but some people are more likely to be abused by their partners. They may also find getting help more difficult. They may be:

- people with disabilities
- Indigenous people
- Black and African Nova Scotians
- other people of colour
- immigrants
- people with less education
- people with lower income
- 2SLGBTQQIA+ people

Some people feel that their families and friends expect them to act in ways that make it difficult to stop or leave the abuse. They may feel they can't talk to anyone outside their family or culture, or they may feel they cannot leave their relationship. They may feel they cannot tell people about their partner because they haven't told family and friends about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

People who have experienced abuse all have different experiences, but many things are the same. Many victims feel isolated and alone. They may feel responsible for their partner's abuse and emotional state. Sometimes they blame themselves for the abuse.



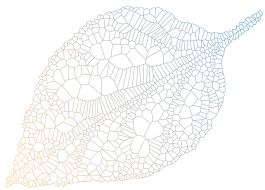
People who have experienced abuse may keep it a secret because they fear that if they tell anyone they will:

- break up their family
- lose their children
- lose their support and social networks, friends, family, and community
- bring dishonour and shame to the family
- have to live in poverty
- have to talk about their sexual orientation or preferences
- have to talk about their gender identity
- make their partner angry or retaliate

People from diverse groups often face additional challenges in leaving abuse. Perhaps a person's faith or tradition says they must stay at home with their family even if they are being abused.

Some people have had bad experiences with the police or the courts, with doctors or nurses, or with government agencies. They may face language barriers, racism, or discrimination based on gender identity or sexual preference. They may also fear being deported, feel isolated in their communities, and face disbelief from their neighbours and friends. There can be barriers that keep them from reporting the abuse and dealing with it.

People from different backgrounds and identity groups are affected by abuse in different ways. Race, class, sexual orientation, and ability can make it harder to leave abuse and to find support.



Women living in poverty

Women living in poverty face additional challenges in leaving abuse. For example, they may not leave an abusive partner because they feel they can't afford to live on their own. If they have children, they may also worry about being able to support them without their partner's income.

Sometimes women living in poverty have more than one job to make ends meet. This can make accessing support services difficult. For example, they may not be able to get time off to see a lawyer or support person. They may not have money to get to support agency offices.

Poverty can make relationships harder. Though there is never an excuse for abuse, poverty can create emotional and psychological stress that can make abuse worse.

Women in rural communities

Women in rural communities may face barriers in finding support to leave the abuse. Rural women often do not tell anyone about abuse because it can be hard to keep things private in a small community.

In a small community, there may also be fewer support services. Women may need to look for support outside their community, which can be difficult if there are no reliable and affordable transportation services in the area.

If a women leaves her community, she may be isolated from the support of friends, neighbours, and family. She may have to take her children out of school and away from grandparents and other family members, and their friends.

RESOURCES

No matter where you live, you can call or text the Transition House Association of Nova Scotia at 1-855-225-0220. It is free from anywhere in Nova Scotia. You can talk about your options any day, any time of day or night.

Call 211 to learn about services near you.

Women with disabilities

Women who have physical and intellectual disabilities can be more vulnerable to abuse. They may also face more barriers if they leave abuse or try to access support services.

An abusive partner may use a woman's disability to abuse her. The abuser may threaten to destroy assistive devices, or make other threats to stop the woman from leaving. An abuser may make a woman feel worthless for having a disability, or that the disability is the reason for the abuse. A woman with a disability may feel that she will lose an essential support person by leaving an abusive partner.

Women with disabilities may have difficulty explaining the abuse to police and service providers. They may also face physical obstacles when trying to access offices for support services (for example, if a service is not wheelchair accessible).

African Nova Scotian Women

African Nova Scotian women may also face additional challenges in leaving abusive partners and finding the help they need. For example, historical and present discrimination and experiences of racism have resulted in many African Nova Scotians not trusting the police and the justice system.

Some African Nova Scotian women may worry that reporting abuse will expose their partners to racism from police and the justice system. They may also worry that reporting abuse will keep in place stereotypes that African Canadian men are violent.

For many African Nova Scotian people, extended family and kinship are important. Some African Nova Scotian women may fear having to leave their community and family support network if they report abuse and seek help.

RESOURCES

Call 211 or see the Resources section at the end of this book for resources for African Nova Scotian women.

Indigenous Women

Indigenous women may fear that support services staff will not understand their cultural needs. They may also worry about dealing with police or the courts because of experiences of oppression and racism.

Indigenous women may worry about leaving abuse because it can mean they have to leave their community. This would take them away from family, supports, and their cultural roots.

They may also worry about how people outside their community see them. They might be afraid of adding to negative stereotypes about Indigenous people and family violence.

Many Indigenous people live off-reserve and in urban areas. They may face similar challenges and barriers to reaching out for support services.

Most Indigenous families have felt harm and loss because of the effects of the Indian Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the hundreds of Indigenous women in Canada who are missing or murdered.

RESOURCES

Mi'kmaw Family Healing Centres (MFHC), located in We'koqma'q and Millbrook First Nations, deliver treatment and prevention services to all 13 First Nations of Nova Scotia. Healing centres offer culturally relevant holistic programming to all First Nation men, women, and children who have experienced family violence. Healing centres are always open, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

All counsellors and support staff are committed to helping Mi'kmaw adults and children to develop and maintain a healthy and violence-free lifestyle. Families receive treatment in their own communities with counsellors who know their language, values, and culture.

If the healing program refers people to off-reserve programs, the counsellor will ensure that the person gets the services they need.

Services:

- protection, safety, shelter, and basic life necessities to women and children
- 24-hour crisis support telephone line
- support and information to women, men, and children to enable them to develop and maintain a healthy and violence-free lifestyle
- individual and group support for women, men, and children
- outreach services to women, men, and children
- referral and follow-up to other social services programs
- community education in family violence intervention, healing, and prevention

We'koqma'q Family Healing Centre. 902-756-3440

Millbrook Family Healing Centre. 902-893-8483

The Native Council of Nova Scotia serves Mi'kmaq/ Aboriginal people who live off-reserve throughout traditional Mi'kmaq territory. It operates the Welkaqnik Next Step Shelter, a second-stage housing program. A full-time Community Support Counsellor can help you see your situation clearly and find good options.

Welkaqnik Management Committee
Toll-free: 1-800-565-4372
ncns.ca

The Native Social Counselling Agency helps off-reserve Aboriginal clients facing social problems with confidential support referral services.

N.C.N.S. Community Support Counsellor
P.O. Box 1320, Truro, N.S. B2N 5N2
Phone: 1-902-895-1738
ncns.ca/programs-services/native-social-counselling-agency

For more resources, see the Resources section at the end of this book.

Immigrant Women

People who are new to Canada can feel isolated from family and friends. They may not speak or read English or French well. Cultural differences can also make life even harder if their partner is abusive.

People who are new to Canada may not understand Canadian laws and their rights in Canada. They may worry about being on their own.

Newcomers may also worry about how leaving an abusive partner could affect their immigration status.

In Canada, abuse is not okay. If you are a sponsored spouse or partner and your sponsor is hurting or neglecting you, you do not have to stay in that situation. Your partner or sponsor must still support you financially if you stop living with them. You may also qualify for income assistance from the Government of Nova Scotia.

You can call **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada** at 1-888-242-2100 to talk about your immigration status. Whatever you say during this phone call will be kept confidential.

RESOURCES

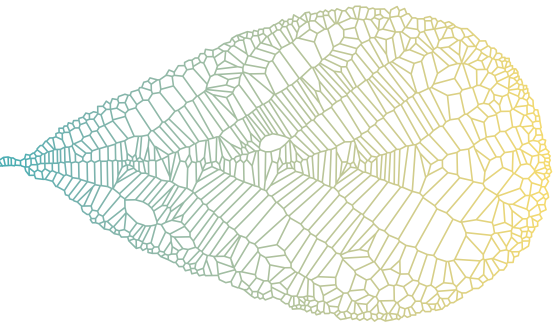
The Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) welcomes immigrants to Nova Scotia. ISANS offers services and creates opportunities for immigrants.

For more information, visit: isans.ca.

211 Nova Scotia has a lot of information and can connect you with services in many languages on their website: ns.211.ca
Or you can text or call 211.

You can call 811 for health information and advice. They can help people in 125 languages.

The Resource section at the end of this book also has information for immigrants and migrants.



2SLGBTQQIA+ people

Non-binary, transgender, bisexual, queer people, lesbians, and gay men experience abuse as often, and in some cases more often, than women in heterosexual relationships.

cisgender – A word to describe someone whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth.

non-binary – A word to describe people who do not fit the traditional gender binary of men and women. They may identify as having no gender, more than one gender, or moving between genders.

queer – Though this word has historically been used as a slur, many gender-diverse people have reclaimed this word to describe themselves. Queer can mean many things to different people, but is generally used by those who fall outside of the norms of gender and sexuality.

trans – A word to describe people who identify with a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth.

Some 2SLGBTQQIA+ people in abusive relationships do not tell anyone about the abuse because they fear they won't be believed, or because their partner may use their sexual orientation or gender identity to hurt them. For example, they may fear that their abusive partner will tell their families, friends, employers, or community about their sexuality or gender identity.

Women in abusive relationships with other women may worry that others will not believe the abuse because they assume that only men abuse. Women in same-gender relationships may be told that violence in their relationship means both partners are equally responsible. Men in relationships with other men also hear this myth.

Transgender and non-binary people may be afraid to leave or report abuse because they do not know if support services such as transition houses have transgender-inclusive policies and staff who are trained to be sensitive to their needs and concerns.

In the Halifax area, Adsum House, Alice House, and Avalon Sexual Assault Centre have formal transgender-inclusive policies.

RESOURCES

See the Resources section at the end of this book for contact information and services for 2SLGBTQQIA+ people.

Other organizations in Halifax and other parts of the province may also be welcoming and supportive. If you are a transgender or non-binary person leaving abuse, it can be helpful to talk to members of your community who might know from their own experiences which services are well-equipped to provide a safe, supportive space for you.

Abuse is wrong regardless of your sexual orientation or gender identity.

No matter who you are or who you love, you do not deserve to be abused.

Cut or tear along this line. Fold up and keep in a safe place.

Safety Alert

If you have experienced domestic abuse, know that you are not alone, and that there are a variety of supports available to you.

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

If you are seeking help or are looking for information about abuse, you can call the **Transition House Association of Nova Scotia 24-hour toll-free line**: 1-855-225-0220

Women's, Men's, and All Genders Helplines: 211

Help Lines

Crime Stoppers 1-800-222-8477

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

Mental Health Crisis Line
Serves all of Nova Scotia (24/7)1-888-429-8167

Avalon Sexual Assault Centre
Crisis Line 902-422-4240

Your local number:

_____

Quick connect

Community and social services 211
ns.211.ca

HealthLink 811
Hearing impaired 711
811.novascotia.ca

Women's, Men's, and All Genders Helplines:211

Mi'kmaw Family Healing Centres

Millbrook 902-756-3440
Toll-free: 1-800-565-4741

We'koqma'q 902-756-3440
Toll-free: 1-800-565-3440

Transition Houses and Shelters Crisis Lines

Amherst, Autumn House 902-667-1200

Antigonish, Naomi Society. 902-863-3807

Bridgewater, Harbour House 902-543-3999

Digby, Juniper House 902-742-8689
Toll-free: 1-800-266-4087

Halifax, Bryony House 902-422-7650

Kentville, Chrysalis House 902-679-1922
Toll-free: 1-800-264-8682

New Glasgow, Tearmann House . 902-752-0132
Toll-free: 1-800-831-0330

Port Hawkesbury, Leeside Transition House
. 902-625-2444
Toll-free: 1-800-565-3390

Shelburne, Juniper House 902-742-8689
Toll-free: 1-800-266-4087

Sydney, Cape Breton Transition House
. 902-539-2945
Toll-free: 1-800-563-2945

Truro, Third Place 902-893-3232
Toll-free: 1-800-565-4878

Yarmouth, Juniper House 902-742-8689
Toll-free: 1-800-266-4087

Cut or tear along this line. Fold up and keep in a safe place.