

Abuse in Same-Sex Relationships



Abuse in relationships is any behavior or pattern of behavior used to coerce, dominate or isolate the other partner. It is the use of any form of power that is imposed by one partner over the other to maintain control within the relationship.

Abuse includes but is not limited to:

- **Physical Abuse** - hitting; choking; slapping; burning; shoving; using a weapon; physically restraining; intentional interference with basic needs (e.g. food, medicine, sleep)
- **Isolation:** Restricting Freedom - controlling contacts with friends and family, access to information and participation in groups or organizations; locking up in a room / restricting mobility; monitoring telephone calls
- **Psychological & Emotional Abuse** - constantly criticizing, ridiculing (self, family, and friends, past); trying to humiliate or degrade; lying; undermining self-esteem; misleading someone about the norms and values of the gay/lesbian communities in order to control or exploit them
- **Stalking / Harassing Behavior** – being followed; turning up at workplace or house; parking outside; repeated phone calls or mail to victim and/or family, friends, colleagues
- **Threats & Intimidation** - threatening to harm partner, self or others (children, family, friends, and pets); threatening to make reports to authorities that jeopardize child custody, immigration or legal status; threatening to disclose HIV status, threatening to reveal sexual orientation to family, friends, neighbors, and/or employers
- **Economic Abuse** - controlling or stealing money; fostering dependency; making financial decisions without asking or telling partner
- **Sexual Abuse/Harassment** - forcing sex or specific acts, pressuring into unwanted sexual behavior, criticizing performance
- **Property Destruction** - destroying mementos, breaking furniture or windows, throwing or smashing objects, trashing clothes or other possessions

The reality:

Domestic violence in the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) community is a serious issue. The rates of domestic violence in same-gender relationships are roughly the same as domestic violence against heterosexual women (25%). As in opposite-gendered couples, the problem is likely underreported. Facing a system which is often oppressive and hostile towards queers, those involved in same-gender battering frequently report being afraid of revealing their sexual orientation or the nature of their relationship.

Common Myths about Abuse in Lesbian Relationships:

MYTH	FACT
"Women are not abusive - only men are."	Anyone can choose to be abusive or not.
"Lesbians are always equal in relationships. It is not abuse, it is a relationship struggle."	Two women in a relationship do not automatically guarantee equality. Relationship struggles are never equal if abuse is involved.
"Abusive lesbians are more "butch," larger, apolitical or have social lives that revolve around the bar culture."	Abuse occurs regardless of race, class, religion, age, political affiliation, lifestyle, or physical attributes.
"Lesbian violence is caused by drugs, alcohol, stress, childhood abuse."	While these factors can be important, they do not excuse the abuse.
"Lesbian abusers have been abused/oppressed by men are therefore not as responsible for what they do."	This is an excuse; abuse will only stop when responsibility is taken for the abuse.
"It is easier for a lesbian to leave her abusive partner than it is for a heterosexual woman to leave her abusive partner."	It is never easy to leave an abusive relationship.

Common Myths about Abuse in Gay Male Relationships:

MYTH	FACT
"Gay men are rarely victims of abuse by their partners."	→ Men can be and are abused. This myth makes it particularly hard for men to come forward for help.
"When violence occurs between gay men in a relationship, it's a fight, it's normal, it's 'boys will be boys.'"	→ Using violence or 'taking it' is not normal; it is an unhealthy way to relate to others.
"Abuse in gay male relationships primarily involves apolitical gay men, or gay men who are part of the bar culture."	→ Abuse occurs regardless of race, class, religion, age, political affiliation or life style.
"Abuse in gay male relationships is sexual behavior: it's a version of sadomasochism and the victims actually like it."	→ In s/m there are mutually agreed upon verbal contracts between the involved parties. No such contract exists between an abuser and his victim.*
"It is easier for a gay man to leave his abusive partner than it is for a heterosexual woman to leave her abusive partner."	→ It is never easy to leave an abusive relationship.

Abuse in Same-Sex Relationships versus Abuse in Opposite-Sex Relationships:

What is the same?

- Abuse is always the responsibility of the abuser and is always a choice.
- Victims are often blamed for the abuse by partners, and sometimes family, friends and professionals excuse or minimize the abusive behavior.
- It is difficult for victims to leave any abusive relationships.

- Abuse is not an acceptable or healthy way to solve difficulties in relationships, regardless of sexual orientation.
- Victim often feel responsible for their partner's violence and their partner's emotional state, hoping to prevent further violence.
- Abuse usually worsens over time.
- The abuser is often apologetic after abusing, giving false hope that the abuse will stop.
- Some or all of the following effects of abuse may be present: shame, self-blame, physical injuries, short and long-term health problems, sleep disturbances, constantly on guard, social withdrawal, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, feelings of hopelessness, shock, and dissociative states.

What is Different?

- Very limited services exist specifically for abused and abusive lesbians and gay men.
- Lesbians and gay men often experience a lack of understanding of the seriousness of the abuse when reporting incidences of violence to a therapist, police officer or medical personnel.
- Homophobia in society denies the reality of lesbian and gay men's lives, including the existence of lesbian and gay male relationships, let alone abusive ones. When abuse exists, attitudes often range from 'who cares' to '*these* relationships are generally unstable or unhealthy.'
- Shelters for abused women may not be sensitive to same-sex abuse (theoretically, shelters are open to all women and therefore, a same-sex victim may not feel safe as her abuser may also have access to the shelter). Abused gay men have even fewer places to turn for help in that there are no agency-sponsored safe places to stay.
- In lesbian and gay male relationships, there may be additional fears of losing the relationship which confirms one's sexual orientation; fears of not being believed about the abuse and fears of losing friends and support within the lesbian/gay communities.

What to do if you're being abused:

Recognize that you are not responsible for the abuse.

Recognize that violence/abuse is not likely to stop on its own - episodes of violence usually become more frequent and more severe.

It is important to break the silence. Try to tell someone you trust and who will believe you.

Seek professional help from a qualified counselor who is knowledgeable about partner abuse and is lesbian/gay positive. A lesbian or gay male counselor with the above qualities may help you address the pertinent issues of abuse with more comfort and focus.

Only you can decide what to do about your relationship - whether to stay or leave is your decision. However, it is important to develop a safety plan in case your safety and/or your children's safety is in jeopardy such as:

- a safe place to stay;
- emergency phone numbers;
- some money;

- your own bank account;
- post office box; and
- bag of essentials.

(see safety plan resource)

What to do if you're being Abusive:

The first thing is to: Stop being abusive. Stop using abuse of any form (physical, sexual, verbal or emotional), including threats and intimidation.

Accept responsibility for your behavior. Remember that the use of violence in any form is always a choice that you make.

Do not make excuses for your violence or blame your partner for your abusive behavior.

Recognize that abusive behavior is unacceptable and is a criminal act.

Seek professional help from a qualified counselor who is knowledgeable about partner abuse and is lesbian/gay positive. A lesbian or gay male counselor may help you address the pertinent issues of abuse with more comfort and focus.

Alcohol, drug use or mental health problems are not excuses for abusive behavior. Seek appropriate help for these problems.

How Can Friends/Relatives Help?

If someone discloses or you suspect that he/she is being abused, don't be afraid to privately express your concern and offer to help. Ways to help include locating resources, encouraging safety planning, respecting confidentiality and being there to listen. Believe their experience - don't minimize it. Don't give up or criticize them. If a friend doesn't leave an abusive partner, understand it is not easy. Let your friend know that you will be there regardless.

If someone you know is being abusive, tell them that violence and abuse are unacceptable. Encourage and support them in getting help to stop the violent behavior. Hold them accountable for their actions and the need to change.

How Professionals Can Help:

All professionals need to examine their own attitudes and feelings and how these have been influenced by homophobia and heterosexism.

Become aware of the silence and prevailing myths about partner abuse in lesbian and gay male relationships.

Do not assume with either males or females that their partner is of the opposite sex.

Respect your client's anxieties about disclosure of sexual orientation, which may be based on real fears of discrimination and its effects on child custody, family support, job security, and/or

deportation. Choices about disclosure of orientation and same-sex relationships are those of your clients and theirs alone.

It is important to impart acceptance of your client's sexual orientation.

Clients who have been abused by a same-sex partner may initially have issues of trust with a professional of the same sex.

Learn about and encourage the use of supportive social networks within and outside the lesbian and gay male communities.

Community Resources:



1. *Assaulted Women's Helpline* - Free 24 hour hotline provides confidential crisis counseling, emotional support, information and referrals to assaulted or abused women.(416) 863-0511
2. *The David Kelley Lesbian and Gay Community Counseling Program - Family Service Association of Metropolitan Toronto* (416) 595-9618
3. *TAGL (Toronto Area Gays and Lesbians)* (416) 964-600
4. *Lesbian/Gay/Bi Youth Line* (416) 962-9688

Web Resources/Further Reading:

[Citizens against Homophobia](#)

[Diane's Gay/Lesbian domestic Violence Page](#)

[Disdain of Gay Men and Lesbians](#)

[Lambda GLBT Community Services \(USA\)](#)

[National Gay and Lesbian Task Force On Line](#)

[Rainbow Male Survivors Network-gay/bisexual survivors of sexual abuse](#)

[Same Sex Domestic Violence-CUAV-Community United Against Violence](#)

[Triangle Foundation \(USA\)](#)

[W.O.M.A.N Lesbian Domestic Violence Program \(US\)\(Woman Organized to Make Abuse Non-Existent\)](#)

[GALE - Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC](#)