

RECOGNIZING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN CLIENTS AND THEIR PETS

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“I ALWAYS WONDERED WHAT MANY PEOPLE LIKELY WONDER: WHY DOESN'T SHE JUST LEAVE?”

A woman enters a veterinary clinic with her injured dog. She won't say what happened, but it is obvious to all but the most casual observers. Both the woman and the dog are fearful—both are wary. She knows that the dog needs medical treatment but is hesitant to consent although she eventually does. She leaves the clinic while the procedure takes place. A short while later, the phone rings. The receptionist answers and on the other end she hears screaming and swearing. It is the husband. He says that he is the owner of the dog and that his wife cannot consent to any treatment. That he won't pay and neither will she, and if any procedure is performed he will leave a scathing review online. His threats escalate until the staff alert the police. Both husband and wife show up at the clinic. The husband is intoxicated. He leaves the clinic with his wife and dog, and is pulled over and arrested as soon as he leaves the parking lot. The dog has received no treatment—as much as the veterinarian wanted to help, they knew they could not treat the animal given the husband's adamant instructions that no treatments were authorized. Obviously, if the pet had shown signs of abuse, the veterinarian would have had a duty to report.*

Domestic violence.

When I first heard this term, my mind immediately gravitated toward the act of physical violence. The words themselves suggest that it is only a physical issue. Violence in and of itself is a behaviour that causes physical harm to something or someone, and yet I have learned that domestic violence spans every form of harm, emotional, psychological, sexual, financial—think of all the ways one person could hurt another, and that will fall under domestic violence.

I think back to the interactions I've seen in people close to me. Once my friend's partner screamed at her because she didn't hold the elevator door long enough for him. He called her a derogatory name, but quickly

calmed down when she apologized. Another friend mentioned to me that she had gained weight and that her partner refused to look at her until she lost it. She made excuses for him when I pressed the issue. In passing, these stories may appear to be couples bickering, but looking at them now, it is clear to me they were verbal abuse, one of the most subtle forms of domestic violence and something that could easily be missed. The same partner who yelled at my friend claimed to be a lover of animals. Until he noticed dog hair. Until he noticed dirt or slobber. He would carry a lint brush with him, and he refused to allow my dog in his home. I could see the anger building up inside him when my dog would jump up. Some time after he split with my friend, I saw his name in the news. He had been arrested for assaulting a new girlfriend.

I always wondered what many people likely wonder: why doesn't she just leave? As a result of the work I've done around domestic violence, of what I've witnessed and what I've been told, the answer has become very clear to me.

Because she can't.

Generally, when someone is in a relationship, they look to their partner for reassurance and as someone to love and trust. They assume the best and don't expect the worst. This is why emotional abuse can be subtle at first. It can creep in disguised as a compliment to slowly attack her self-esteem, and then escalate to full-blown verbal attacks. It can start with derogatory pet names that pretend to be cute but are really insulting. It can escalate to inappropriate jokes or sarcasm, making fun of her in public. Finally, it can turn into blatant insults, belittling and defiling her character. These types of criticism can wear away at her until she starts to believe it. “Maybe he's right. Maybe I am ugly or stupid, maybe nobody else will want me.” The purpose of this is to shatter her self-worth to the point where she feels like she cannot leave because she has nowhere to go.

Animal abuse falls under the category of emotional abuse. The pet that the survivor loves and cherishes is used to manipulate her emotions. Often the perpetrator will threaten to harm the animal if the woman leaves or disobeys him. In one case mentioned to me by a police officer, a woman had left her husband. She was fearful for her two dogs left behind, but she had to

leave for her own safety. Her former partner took both dogs to a veterinarian and had them euthanized just to hurt her.

Sadly, in a lot of domestic violence relationships, the male partner has control over all assets, finances, and usually over the survivor's income.

This means that if she were to leave, she would have no money and no means to support herself.

This is specifically why it is done: to control where the survivor goes and what she is able to do. It is close to impossible to start a new life with no money, especially if you have pets. It is also very challenging to get her pet to a veterinarian if her abusive partner controls all of her finances. Another reason why it would be very hard to leave.

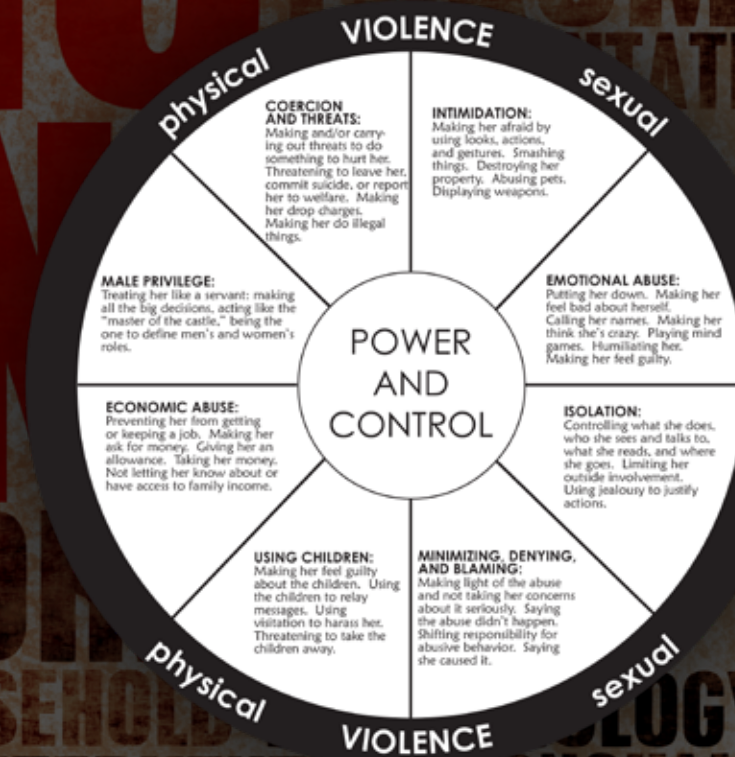
Though these are just a few examples of types of domestic violence, they paint a very specific picture of control tactics. The abuse may not be as easy to recognize as a black eye, but it is no less damaging and no less dangerous.

These types of abuse are also severely underreported because survivors fear that nobody will believe them, or they themselves do not feel it is serious enough to report, or they fear the repercussions from their partner.

Most veterinarians want to help. Although they got into veterinary medicine to help animals, many veterinarians I've met who are learning about the role of animals in domestic violence end up wanting to know how they can also help the person who wants to escape the situation.

As a veterinarian, you may wish to know what different types of domestic violence look like and how these signs may show up in an examining room alongside the animal. The physical manifestations of domestic violence are much easier to spot, but what happens when an animal owner is belittled in front of a veterinarian by their partner or when he is making all of the treatment decisions when it is clear that is not what she wants? He never lays a hand on her, but it is clear to the veterinarian that she is not a willing participant in the decisions made. The veterinarian may wonder, is that abuse? And if so, what can they do about it?

The Chapter is currently looking at introducing a project that will provide an avenue to allow veterinarians to help the animals of those fleeing domestic violence. Should the project become feasible and be approved, Chapter members will receive an email to show them how they may help. [WCV](#)



The power and control wheel illustrates the dynamics of one type of domestic violence: abuse by a man against a female partner. These are ways that an abuser can use coercion, violence, and other tactics to control and dominate an intimate partner.

* This example does not cover all the different types of domestic abuse, which are far-ranging. Domestic abuse can also occur in same-sex or other gender combination relationships, and the power and control wheel illustration may not adequately reference other gender combination relationships.