

An illustration of a person with dark hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, sitting on a white surface. They are surrounded by vertical orange bars, suggesting they are in a cage or a state of confinement. The background is dark blue.

# Domestic Violence and *Suicide Risk*



## Many Forms of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence and suicide are both significant public health crises. Although often discussed in isolation, studies indicate the links between domestic violence and suicide risk are clear.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. Department of Justice defines **domestic violence** as a “pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person.”<sup>2</sup> Domestic violence can occur between a parent and child, siblings, roommates, and current or former intimate partners. Indeed, domestic violence can take many forms.

## Recognize the Connections between Domestic Violence and Suicide

Research indicates that domestic violence and suicide risk connect in several important ways:

- Survivors of domestic violence have an increased risk of suicide. Those who experience intimate partner violence, particularly sexual abuse, are at increased risk of suicide ideation and behaviors.<sup>3</sup>
- Perpetrators of domestic violence are at an increased risk of suicide. Suicide risk is high among men seen in domestic violence courts. For example, one cross-sectional study of 294 males in a court-ordered domestic violence perpetrator intervention program found 22% reported experiencing suicidal ideation within the past two weeks.<sup>4</sup>

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**NOTE:** In domestic violence relationships, threats of suicide may be a way to control others but should not be ignored or dismissed as ‘just a threat.’<sup>5</sup> The combination of controlling behaviors, threats of self-harm, and threats to kill or harm other adults, children, or pets indicates grave risk.<sup>6</sup> Take all suicide statements seriously and seek help for both the domestic violence survivor and the perpetrator.

## Pursue Evidence-Based Prevention Strategies

Communities can take the following actions to prevent domestic violence and suicide.<sup>7</sup>

| Strategy  | For Domestic Violence Prevention  | For Suicide Prevention   |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Screen</b>   | Individuals such as first responders or counselors can learn about the connections between suicide and domestic violence and screen appropriately for both. |  |
| <b>Educate</b>  | Teach safe and healthy relationship skills, such as social-emotional learning programs.   | Teach coping and problem-solving skills through parenting programs and social-emotional learning programs.                                       |
| <b>Foster connectedness</b>                             | Engage influential adults and peers to support healthy relationships. Include bystander empowerment programs and engaging men and boys as allies.           | Implement peer support programs and community engagement activities.   |
| <b>Improve access to evidence-based crisis services</b> | Include treatment for at-risk children, youth, and families using parenting skills and family relationship programs.  | Encourage safer suicide care (e.g., the Zero Suicide initiative) and increase access to mental health providers in underserved areas.            |
| <b>Strengthen economic supports</b>                     | Maintain work-family supports and strengthen household financial security.  | Support housing stabilization policies and strengthen household financial security.  |
| <b>Create protective environments</b>                   | Promote school safety and a healthy workplace environment. Improve organizational policies, such as reporting domestic violence incidents.                  | Encourage community-based policies that increase protective factors. Encourage collaboration among community agencies.                           |
| <b>Support survivors</b>                                | Provide survivor-centered services, housing programs, and treatment support.  | Provide resources to those affected by a suicide attempt or suicide death. Follow best practices for safe reporting and messaging about suicide. |

## Screening Tools

**The Ask Suicide-Screening Questions (ASQ)** is appropriate for both youth and adults to screen for suicide risk: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/research/research-conducted-at-nimh/asq-toolkit-materials/index.shtml>

**Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)** is used to screen for depressive symptoms. Question 9 screens for the presence and duration of suicide

ideation: <https://zerosuicide.edc.org/resources/resource-database/patient-health-questionnaire-9-phq-9-depression-scale>

**Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence Assessment Instruments for Use in Healthcare Settings** is a compilation of assessment and screening tools for both domestic violence and sexual violence: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv/ipvandsvscreening.pdf>

## Access Resources

- » **National Domestic Violence Hotline** offers free, confidential support and tools to survivors of domestic abuse: <https://www.thehotline.org/>; **1-800-799-SAFE (7233)**
- » **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** provides free, confidential support for people in distress as well as suicide prevention and crisis resources: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>; **1-800 273-TALK (8255)**
- » **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** offers the following resources:
  - Domestic violence prevention technical package: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-technicalpackages.pdf>
  - Suicide prevention technical package: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/suicidetechnicalpackage.pdf>



## Endnotes

- 1 World Health Organization. (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. Retrieved from [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=EF5A2CF83416E7D0C2BF2BFCABA089CA?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625_eng.pdf;jsessionid=EF5A2CF83416E7D0C2BF2BFCABA089CA?sequence=1)
- 2 U.S. Department of Justice. (2011). *Domestic violence fact sheet*. Retrieved from [https://www.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh241/files/archives/factsheets/ojpbs\\_domesticviolence.html](https://www.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh241/files/archives/factsheets/ojpbs_domesticviolence.html)
- 3 Cavanaugh, C. E., Messing, J. T., & Campbell, J. C. (2011). Prevalence and correlates of suicidal behavior among adult female victims of intimate partner violence. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, 41(4), 372–383.
- 4 Wolford-Clevenger, C., Febres, J., Elmquist, J., Zapor, H., Brasfield, H., & Stuart, G. (2015). Prevalence and correlates of suicidal ideation among court-referred male perpetrators of intimate partner violence. *Psychological Services*, 12(1), 9–15.
- 5 You, S., Swogger, M. T., Cerulli, C., & Conner, K.,R. (2011). Interpersonal violence victimization and suicidal ideation. An examination in criminal offenders. *Crisis*, 32(5), 240–245.
- 6 Victorian Government. (2020). Family violence multi-agency risk assessment and management framework. Retrieved from <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management>
- 7 CDC. (2017a). *Preventing intimate partner violence across the lifespan: A technical package of programs, policies, and practices*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-technicalpackages.pdf>; CDC (2017b). *Preventing suicide: A technical package of policy, programs, and practices*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/suicidetechnicalpackage.pdf>