

Glossary of family violence terms

This glossary is a language guide for people who work with survivors of violence and abuse. Elements of this glossary were modeled after similar guides by the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, the SAFE & Together Institute, the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, and many other violence-prevention organizations. SAFE staff provided extensive input in the creation of the below language. This is not a rulebook and the words we use are imperfect and constantly changing.

Abuse: A pattern of behavior used to gain or maintain power and control. Forms of abuse include physical, emotional, financial, psychological, and spiritual.

Abuser: A person who uses tactics and behaviors to exert power and control over others. Advocates are encouraged to mirror the language survivors use (e.g., avoid the term “abuser” if a survivor does not consider the person who harmed them in their relationship to be an abuser.) Generally, the terms “abuser,” “batterer,” “perpetrator,” and “offender” should be avoided except in legal contexts. See also Person who uses violence/abuse.

Advocate: A trained professional or volunteer who supports survivors/victims and their families/loved ones.

Caregiver abuse: Refers to abuse perpetrated by one or more people assisting another person with tasks that the individual would typically do for themselves if they were otherwise able to.

Case management: The coordination of services on behalf of an individual by an advocate.

Child abuse: Doing or failing to do something that results in harm or risk of harm to a child. This may include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. See also Neglect.

Coercion: When a person who uses violence/abuse forces or attempts to force a survivor/victim to perform actions or behave in a particular way against the survivor/victim’s will. Can include threats of violence, forcing a victim to drop charges, forced isolation, and more.

Complainant: In legal contexts, refers to a person who claims to be the victim of a crime who has reported the crime to law enforcement. Advocates are encouraged to avoid the term “complainant” except in legal contexts. See also Survivor and Victim.

Dating violence: Violence or abuse that occurs between people who are in a dating relationship. This is the preferred term when describing teenage relationships that are abusive. See also Intimate partner violence.

Derealization: When someone experiencing trauma disconnects from their surroundings. Oftentimes people experiencing derealization perceive objects and spaces around them as unreal.

Dissociation: When someone experiencing trauma disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories, behaviors, physical sensations, or sense of identity. Some survivors/victims describe this as an “out of body experience.”

Domestic violence: Refers to a pattern of coercive behaviors that a person who uses violence/abuse implements to gain or maintain power and control over another person. The survivor/victim is typically in an intimate, dating, or family relationship. These behaviors may include physical and sexual abuse, direct or implied threats, emotional and psychological abuse, intimidation, verbal abuse, isolation, stalking, financial control, spiritual abuse, threatened or actual use of weapons, destruction of property, and harm to the survivor/victim's family, pets, or others. See also Family violence and Intimate partner violence.

Domestic violence informed: Similar to being "trauma informed" or "culturally competent." Refers to the utilization of best practices when working with survivors of domestic violence. Involves creating systems change and promoting safety, empowerment, and healing. See also Trauma informed.

Economic/financial abuse: A tactic that includes the use of finances to establish and maintain power and control over a survivor/victim. May include: monitoring or controlling a partner's finances, taking the survivor/victim's money without permission, giving the survivor/victim an allowance, prohibiting or limiting a survivor/victim's access to bank accounts or credit card, denying the survivor/victim the right to work, and sabotaging a survivor/victim's credit.

Emergency/temporary shelter: Immediate, confidential, and safe housing for survivors of domestic/family violence who are fleeing abuse.

Emotional/psychological abuse: A tactic that includes the use of emotions, self-esteem, and/or a person's mental health to establish and maintain power and control over a survivor/victim. May include putting the survivor/victim down or making them feel bad about themselves, calling the survivor/victim names, playing mind games, making the survivor/victim think they are crazy, making the survivor/victim feel guilty, and humiliating the survivor/victim.

Family violence: Any form of abuse, mistreatment, or neglect that a child or adult experiences from a family member or from someone with whom they have an intimate relationship. May include child abuse, elder abuse, caregiver violence, violence toward pets, and more. See also Domestic violence and Intimate partner violence.

Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn: A survival response to stress, trauma, or a perceived threat in which a survivor/victim attempts to escape a situation as safely as possible. This response typically causes increased heart rate, sharper hearing, and lower pain response. Fight response: facing a perceived threat aggressively. Flight response: fleeing the danger. Freeze response: unable to move or act against a threat. Fawn response: trying to please or appease in order to avoid danger. These are automatic reactions, not conscious decisions.

Harm reduction: The practice of taking steps to reduce harm when a person continues to participate or experience risky behaviors or situations.

Intersection: Refers to the relationship between family violence and other issues, such as sexual violence, child abuse, and sex trafficking. May also refer to the intersection of these issues with gender, race, culture, disability, substance use, mental health, systems, and more.

Intersectionality: Refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations that lead to discrimination and oppression, including race, class, sexual identity, gender, disability, and more. People who use violence may rely on these intersecting forms of oppression to maintain power and control over others.

Intimate partner violence: Abuse or violence that occurs in a romantic relationship. “Intimate partner” refers to current and former spouses, dating partners, and sexual partners.

Intimidation: A tactic that includes the use of threats to cause another person fear and/or to coerce them into doing something. May include making someone afraid by using looks, actions, gestures, yelling, verbal threats, destroying property, abusing pets, and displaying weapons.

Isolation: A tactic that includes the use of friends, family, and social networks to establish and maintain power and control over a survivor/victim. May include controlling where a survivor/victim goes, who they talk to, what they wear, who they see, limiting involvement in places of worship, confining them to a space, and controlling their social networks (physically and virtually).

Mirrored power imbalance: Refers to power discrepancies that resemble, or mirror, those experienced by survivors/victims in their relationship. May include sense of powerlessness that survivors/victims feel when being questioned by attorneys, feelings brought up by hearing testimony from the person who harmed them, and power imbalances felt in workplaces, and more.

Neglect: Allowing a child to be in a situation where the child would be exposed to a substantial risk of physical or mental harm and failing to arrange the necessary care for the child. May include failure to provide food, clothing, medication, emotional care, supervision, and more.

Perpetrator: Refers to a person who uses, or perpetrates, abuse. In legal contexts, refers to a person who commits a crime. Generally, advocates should mirror the language used by survivors and avoid the terms “perpetrator,” “batterer,” and “abuser” except in legal contexts. See also Person who uses violence/abuse.

Person experiencing violence/abuse: A way to refer to a survivor/victim that avoids labeling them. Implies the violence/abuse in their life was an experience, not something that defines them. Advocates should mirror the language used by survivors.

Person who uses violence/abuse: A person who uses tactics and behaviors to exert power and control over others. May include strangers, coworkers, intimate partners, dating partners, sexual partners, family relationship, and more.

Physical abuse: A tactic that includes the use of the body or other objects to cause harm or injury to establish and maintain power and control over a survivor/victim. May include hitting, kicking, biting, pushing, scratching, slapping, hair pulling, strangling, beating, use of weapons, punching, throwing, burning, poisoning, stabbing, and shooting.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): A psychological condition that can occur in an individual after they have suffered a traumatic event (such as family violence) and is characterized by flashbacks, avoidance of things that may trigger a memory of the traumatic event, and a significantly heightened state of alertness.

Power and control wheel: A tool created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota that many advocates use to illustrate abusive tactics and behaviors.

Protective order: A court order that generally requires a person who has used abuse to avoid contact with the survivor. The order can also specify terms of custody, require the person who used abuse to vacate the household, and more. Types of protective orders include temporary, permanent (effective for a set time period), and emergency (issued in cases of severe need and/or when courts are closed).

Rape: A form of sexual assault. Refers to sexual penetration without consent of the survivor/victim.

Re-victimization: Refers to a survivor/victim being victimized more than once in related ways. May refer to a survivor/victim of one type of violence (such as child abuse) experiencing another type of violence (such as sexual assault) later in life. Re-victimization may also occur when survivors/victims deliver testimony to service providers or police or during court appearances that require them to discuss or relive the trauma they experienced. See also Secondary victimization.

Safety plan: A verbal or written plan that a survivor of violence creates, typically with an advocate. The plan consists of actions survivors can take to keep themselves, their children, their pets, and their essential belongings safe when violence takes place or to stop violence from happening. Focuses on harm reduction related to a survivor's unique circumstances.

Secondary trauma: A risk advocates and helping professionals incur when engaging compassionately or empathically with adults or children who have experienced trauma.

Secondary victimization: Refers to further harm that a survivor/victim may feel as a direct result of their experience with institutions, such as the judicial system. Occurs after the initial traumatic experience that led to the survivor/victim interacting with various institutions.

Sexual abuse: A tactic that includes the use of sexual acts to establish and maintain power and control over a survivor/victim without their consent. May include making the survivor/victim do sexual acts against their will, sexual assault, treating the survivor/victim to force them to do sexual acts, forcing sex after violence, and forcing the survivor/victim to watch pornography.

Sexual assault: Any unwanted sexual activity forced on a person by another.

Sexual exploitation: Refers to acts in which a person takes advantage of a power imbalance to force or entice a survivor/victim to engage in sexual activity in return for something, such as money, shelter, food, etc.

Spiritual/religious abuse: A tactic that includes the use of spirituality or religion to establish and maintain power and control over a survivor/victim. May include controlling the survivor/victim's ability to practice their own religion or attend services, forcing the survivor/victim to convert or practice another religion against their will, and using the spiritual or religious environment, leaders, and/or congregation to influence a survivor/victim's behavior.

Stalking: A tactic that includes following or harassing someone against their wishes. May include repeated, unwanted phone calls, following a survivor/victim, sending unwanted gifts, destroying or vandalizing property, repeated threats, and tracking a survivor/victim's online activity.

Survivor: A person who is experiencing or has experienced abuse by another person. Advocates generally use the term "survivor" as it implies more agency than "victim." If someone who has experienced abuse does not prefer the term "survivor," then use "victim" or whatever term is preferred. See also Victim and Complainant.

Threats: An expression that demonstrates the intention of one person to inflict pain or injury on others. May include verbal threats (threats to leave, harm, or kill) or physical threats (raised hand, fists, or gestures).

Transitional housing: Shelter for victims of family violence and their children that typically lasts up to two years. Serves as a housing option for survivors who are actively or who have recently received emergency services and are seeking permanent housing.

Trauma: Experiencing an event that causes injury or stress to a person's physical or psychological well-being.

Trauma informed: Refers to practices that promote safety, empowerment, and healing in survivors/victims. Involves recognizing perceived power differentials, showing compassion and understanding, creating settings that are as comfortable as possible for survivors/victims, and much more.

Trauma reminder: Refers to anything that reminds someone of previous trauma. Trauma reminders may result in the survivor/victim experiencing intense emotional or physical reactions. Some advocates prefer the term "trigger." See also Trigger.

Trigger: Refers to anything that reminds someone of previous trauma. Survivors/victims who experience a trigger may have intense emotional or physical reactions, such as panic attacks, physical pain, anxiety, and more. Some advocates prefer the term "trauma reminder." See also Trauma reminder.

Verbal abuse: A tactic that includes the use of the words to establish and maintain power and control over a survivor/victim. May include the use of language to manipulate, control, ridicule, insult, humiliate, belittle, vilify, and/or show disrespect and disdain.

Vicarious trauma: The impact of exposure to extreme events experienced by another person resulting in the listener feeling overwhelmed by the trauma or triggering the listener's own past trauma or traumas.

Victim: A person who is abused, harmed, or killed by another person. In legal contexts, "victim" is often preferred over "survivor." See also Survivor.

Victim blaming: Refers to statements or implications that a person experienced violence, abuse, or other harm as a result of their own actions or inaction, statements, clothes, behaviors, or other factors. Implies the survivor/victim was responsible for the violence they experienced rather than the person who harmed them.

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