

Why do some men commit domestic violence? Trauma and social isolation may play a role

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Support for survivors of domestic violence is important, but to end domestic violence once and for all, society needs to understand the people who perpetrate it and how to intervene successfully.

Domestic [violence](#) is very common in the United States. [Nearly half of women and men in the U.S.](#) experience sexual or [physical violence](#), stalking, or psychological harm or coercion in a [romantic relationship](#) during their lifetime.

Domestic violence is also experienced unevenly across the U.S. population. Young people are most vulnerable, with [nearly three-fourths](#) of female victims reporting that their first experience of domestic violence occurred before age 25. [People of color](#) and [LGBTQ+ people](#) also experience considerably higher rates of domestic violence than the national average. And despite similar rates of domestic violence across men and women, women report [more severe effects on their lives](#), including higher rates of injury and need for [medical care](#), needing help from law enforcement and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

I am a [social worker](#) who has spent the [past 10 years studying](#) how men come to use violence against their intimate partners, since the [effects of their violence](#) is often the most severe. My research has found that consistent supportive relationships with attentive adults in childhood and adulthood, along with stress management that takes [trauma](#) into account, are two promising approaches to prevent domestic violence.

The roots of domestic violence

Understanding how someone comes to perpetrate violence is necessary to stop violence from happening in the first place.

Certain [childhood experiences](#) can put people at risk of committing domestic violence in the future. Researchers have found that [child abuse](#), neglect and a [negative parent-child relationship](#) are significant risk factors that may lead someone to later perpetrate domestic violence.

Experiencing trauma in [early childhood](#) can [alter the brain, how the body](#)

[responds to stress](#) and whether someone sees the world as a [threatening, harmful and untrustworthy place](#). For example, research has shown that people who have been exposed to trauma have increased activity in the amygdala of the brain, resulting in [heightened fear and arousal](#) that can lead to aggressive responses in the face of conflict and stress. Trauma exposure is also linked to a [decrease in activity in the prefrontal cortex](#)—that's the part of the brain responsible for impulse control, concentration and emotional reasoning. These are essential qualities to navigate interpersonal relationships.

Toxic stress—excessive or prolonged activation of the body's stress response—happens when someone encounters constant threats to their physical or mental safety during sensitive developmental periods. Compared to their peers, youth facing [disproportionate levels of hardship](#) and threats of poverty, racism and other structural inequities are at greater risk for toxic stress. These bodily changes can set kids up for [PTSD, depression](#), and [alcohol or drug abuse](#) later in life, which are some of the most common risk factors of perpetrating domestic violence. One study found that nearly one-third of men in a domestic violence intervention program [reported clinical levels of PTSD](#).

Beliefs about [traditional gender roles](#) dictating how men and women should act is another significant contributing factor to domestic violence. Unresolved trauma mixed with rigid gender views can limit the coping skills and tools people have to navigate complex emotional challenges in romantic relationships. For example, homes that promote rigid gender scripts, such as "boys don't cry," and limit opportunities to learn from activities that are considered "feminine," like caring for baby dolls, can [stunt the emotional expression](#) of boys and make them less skilled in recognizing emotions in others and themselves. Anger typically becomes the most accessible emotion.

Certainly not all people who have faced childhood adversity and trauma

are destined to perpetrate violence. Studies show that a [secure parent-child attachment](#) and the presence of safe, nurturing relationships and environments during childhood protect against future violence. Positive childhood experiences, such as feeling understood in difficult times and having at least two nonparental adults taking interest in your life, can help. One study of over 6,000 adults in Wisconsin found that those reporting [three to five positive childhood experiences](#) were 50% less likely to have depressive symptoms or poor mental health days compared to those who had fewer or no positive childhood experiences.

Without these protective factors, however, many children are at risk of [carrying their trauma](#) into their adolescent and adult romantic relationships.

Prevention and intervention

Supporting the health and well-being of society calls for research-based efforts to prevent and address domestic violence. Responsive relationships, or relationships where the other person is attentive, attuned, and supportive, are a key way to improve the well-being of children and adults, including the [mental health of survivors](#) of abuse.

Researchers are paying more attention to the dangers of [social isolation among adults](#). This has been exacerbated by cultural shifts stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work and [social media](#). Social isolation and unhealthy social networks can be [dangerous for victims of violence](#) and damaging for someone prone to committing violence because they can [worsen mental health conditions](#) like PTSD. [Community-based programs](#) that build supportive social networks have the potential to improve mental health risk factors for perpetrating violence.

Most [domestic violence intervention programs for men](#) have not

incorporated the understanding that trauma registers in the body as much as it does in someone's way of thinking. These programs mostly focus on unlearning abusive tendencies and relearning healthy ways of engagement. This kind of approach includes using workbooks and thought exercises to identify abusive behaviors and thoughts about subjugating women, understand why they're harmful, and learn healthy ways to resolve conflict.

However, focusing on cognitive thought processes as the primary mechanism for change by itself is insufficient for lasting change. In order to meaningfully alter the effects of trauma, interventions must also [engage autonomic brain processes](#).

Interventions that focus on [regulating stress and emotions](#), such as deep breathing and mindfulness, can help address physiological symptoms of trauma and reset the body's stress response. Resetting the body's stress response can then help people engage in the higher-level learning necessary to adopt nonviolent thinking and behaviors and discard abusive tendencies.

Alleviating symptoms of PTSD and trauma in people who have perpetrated [domestic violence](#) may help them identify key triggers and develop the coping skills to respond to [stress](#) in healthier ways instead of violence.

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