

Understanding Relationships

Experiencing Conflict, Violence and Abuse in Romantic and Close Relationships

Relationships are not always easy. While many can bring us joy, happiness and fulfilment, others break our heart, cause anxiety, frustrate or negatively affect us. Sometimes, these emotions are associated with the same relationship! Consider the saying “we hurt the ones we love”.

Relationships are complex, some more so than others. Inevitably, we all face conflict in relationships at some stage and in many respects, conflict is a natural part of the human experience. Dealing with it, however, is not easy. Few of us are taught about positive and healthy relationships, let alone how to manage the disagreements, arguments and conflict that may emerge.

But arguments can quickly escalate, and can generate (with it) **negative behaviours**, such as **anger** and **aggression, threats** and even **violence**. These are behaviours that can jeopardise the safety of those in the relationship, making the relationship feel (overall) **confusing, worrying** and sometimes **frightening**. Experiencing this is never easy, but working out just how harmful these behaviours can be, and which strategies can help, depends on a number of different factors. To understand these, we must look more closely at conflict, what it is, and the behaviours that can be associated with it.



What is conflict?

Conflict is essentially a serious disagreement or argument, that is usually drawn out or recurring - in other words, it keeps coming up! There are many negative behaviours that we use during conflict, but the most harmful ones tend to be linked with aggression, threats, violence and/or abuse. Some reasons for their use are outlined below;

- | | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| 1. Fear – we may use aggression or violence to protect our-self and/or others | 2. Guilt – we may use aggression or violence if we are defensive about something we have done, which deep down we feel bad about | 3. Letting off steam – we may use aggression or violence to express rage, anger, frustration, or fear | 4. Revenge – we may feel justified to cause hurt, upset or fear toward others, particularly if we feel they have wronged us | 5. Power – we may use aggression or violence to get what we want |
|--|---|--|--|---|

Whilst positive outcomes are likely to be limited when behaviours such as aggression, threats or violence are used, the level of harm and the impact they have, may differ greatly between relationships.

Different types of conflict

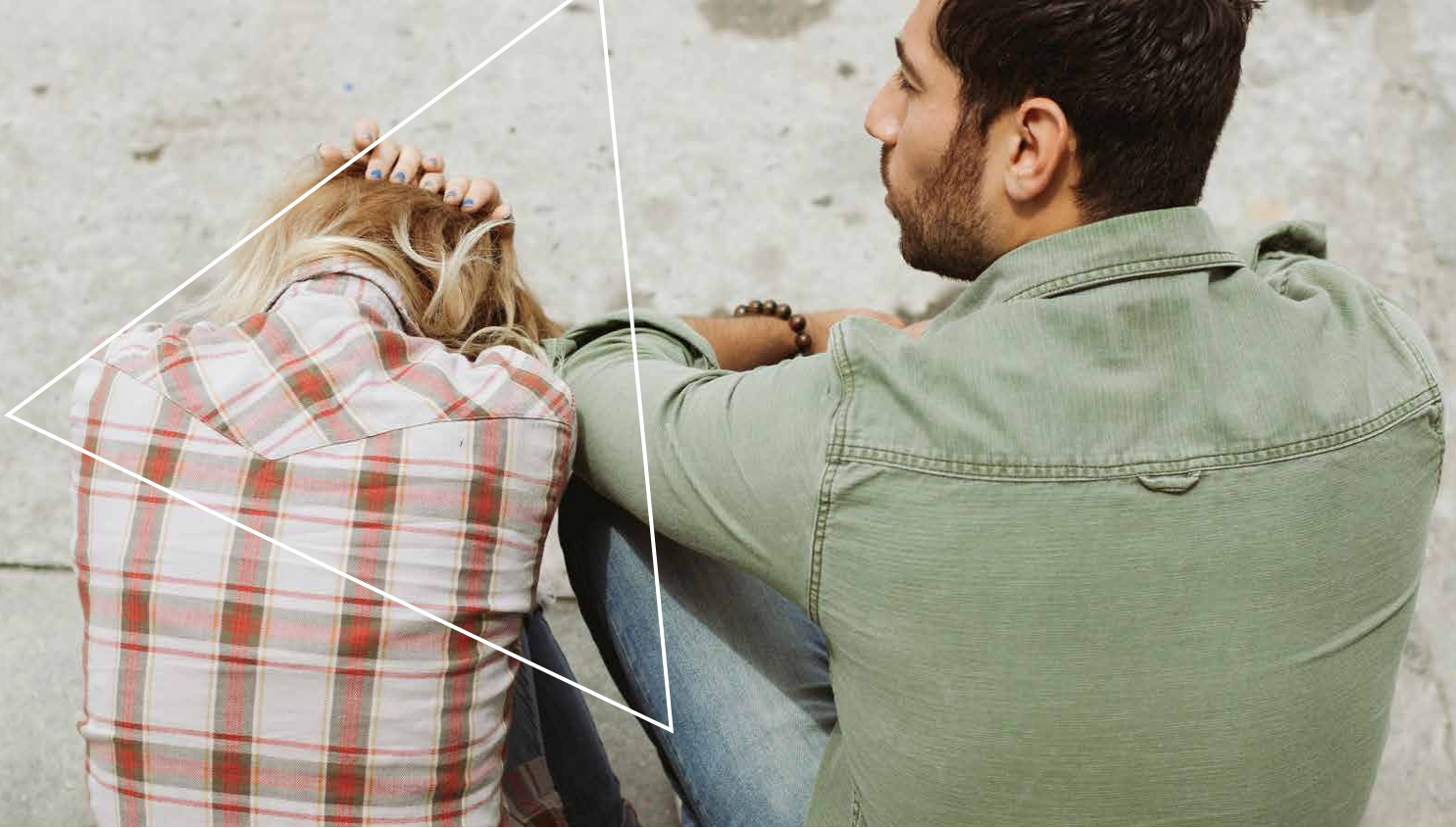
A good starting point to understand differences between types of conflict, violence or abuse, in romantic/close relationships, is the work of someone called Michael P Johnson. In his research, looking into violence in relationships between romantic partners, Johnson found that aggression and violence differed radically in type, intent and impact. He identified 3 major types of intimate partner violence outlined below;

- Intimate terrorism (or coercive control)
- Violent resistance
- Situational couple violence

Intimate terrorism, perpetrated predominantly (but not exclusively) by men toward women, is a continuous pattern of behavior (coercive control), designed to limit someone's ability to make decisions, take action, resist or think for themselves. It is more commonly known as **domestic abuse**. The goal of a coercive controller is power over their partner and a relationship entirely on their terms. Violence used in

this context is focused on getting what the perpetrator wants, and **their** needs are prioritised over everything else. This includes the needs of their children. Intimate terrorism (or coercive control), is **more likely to escalate over time, not likely to be mutual (even where both parties have used violence), and more likely to involve serious injury**. Repeated acts of cruelty and violence mean that even where seemingly positive behavior is used by a coercive controller, the **overall pattern of the relationship is abusive**.

Entrenched patterns of coercive control are present in over 90% of domestic homicides, which suggest it is a critical factor in the identification of those most at risk. Survivors of intimate terrorism are most likely to require medical intervention and safety advice, and those using coercive control in a systematic way **require extensive intervention** that challenges both their behavior and their beliefs. This will **unlikely be achieved through counselling or anger management** and these types of interventions **can increase risk** for those living with a coercive controller.



Violent resistance, perpetrated predominantly (but not exclusively) by women toward men, is a response to living with the abuse perpetrated by coercive controllers. Those living with systematic abuse will find many ways to **protect themselves, their children and manage the behavior of the perpetrator**. This may include the use of violence, for e.g. to provoke someone who regularly uses violence to get it 'over and done with', maybe while the children are not present, or to simply avoid the experience of 'walking on eggshells' while waiting for the violence to take place. People who have experienced coercive control will know the 'signs' when violence is on its way, but are often made to wait for long periods of time before it actually happens – part of the pattern of coercive control. There are several high profile cases, where women have murdered their partners and been granted 'diminished responsibility' on the grounds of suffering years of abuse.

[https://www.wlv.ac.uk/media/departments/faculty-of-social-sciences/documents/wolverhampton-law-journal/edition-3/\(2019\)-3-WLJ-21.pdf](https://www.wlv.ac.uk/media/departments/faculty-of-social-sciences/documents/wolverhampton-law-journal/edition-3/(2019)-3-WLJ-21.pdf)

Situational couple violence on the other hand, perpetrated equally by men and women, tends to be less frequent, **less severe and motivated by intentions different from gaining and maintaining control**. There may, for example, be a flash point in the relationship that causes emotional distress, such as the discovery of an 'affair', relationship breakdown, change in life circumstance e.g. bereavement, redundancy, physical or mental health. These situations can be highly emotional and stressful for anyone to manage and aggression and violence may be a result, as frustration and anger are expressed. There are also many people who **struggle to contain and manage their emotions more generally**, who have angry, violent and potentially harmful outbursts when faced with certain situations. This may look similar to some of the behaviour perpetrated within a coercive controlling relationship, but the key difference is that those who **genuinely** struggle with their behaviour (anger management issues, substance misuse/addiction), will struggle whether they are in or out of a relationship. The anger/aggression or violence is unlikely to be focused exclusively on one person, or the immediate family, and is visible to others. People who have used aggression and/or violence as a result of situational factors, are more likely to acknowledge the impact of their actions. Coercive controllers on the other hand will likely deny their behavior (and its impact!) and are able to manage anger, aggression and violence, perfectly well in e.g. the workplace, social situations or public. Indeed, they can be very charming, but switch their behavior when 'behind closed doors'.

Assessing your situation - conflict, violence and abuse in relationships

When intimate and close relationships become difficult, and conflict, violence or abuse take place, it can be difficult to know what to do. It is difficult and complicated to understand and interpret what conflict means, and to work out just how harmful acts of violence or aggression might be. When people behave in these ways there are many diverse tactics that can be used and therefore various different factors to take into account.

A helpful first step in this process may be thinking through the following questions:

- What is the nature of the aggression/violence (e.g. verbal abuse, threats, physical/sexual/economic, combination)?
- Who has used it and how often?
- Who was the aggression/violence aimed at (e.g. partner, children, everyone)
- What was the impact?
- What were the intentions or possible intentions behind the aggression/violence?
- Who is taking responsibility for what happened?
- What is the relationship like overall? Are people free to make decisions, have their say, choose their friends, take part in hobbies? (Nb. this may not be straightforward if the relationship we are considering is a parent/child relationship or other relationship where responsibility is not shared equally)

Understanding conflict, violence and abuse in relationships

Where you draw the line or name domestic abuse, is up to each of us individually. It can often take some working out! The spectrum of behaviour in relationships is wide, and we can only work out if the harm caused by aggression and violence can be reduced, worked with and ultimately, eliminated, by examining those behaviours within the context of the wider relationship. Whilst aggression and violence may be abusive in themselves, if no one is fearful for their safety, and both parties are willing to take responsibility, people involved in the relationship can learn to develop strategies that return it to a positive place, which is respectful, supportive, and ultimately, safe.

Healthy

Unhealthy

Abusive