

# RECOGNIZING THE HARM OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

Violence and abuse in interpersonal relationships cause harm to the individual, the family and the community.

## WHAT EXACTLY IS FAMILY VIOLENCE?

There are many definitions of family violence. Generally, they refer to people who experience controlling and violent acts by family members—people who are supposed to love them. In Aboriginal communities, 'family' may refer to a large extended network of relatives. Family violence definitions explain the types of abuse associated with family violence, such as

- Physical abuse (hitting, slapping, punching)
- Emotional abuse (belittling, accusing, threatening)
- Financial abuse (controlling all the money)
- Sexual abuse (forcing unwanted sexual acts)
- Spiritual abuse (denying or making fun of spiritual beliefs).

The teachings of the Medicine Wheel can help us understand the various forms of family violence and how they make us feel. The Medicine Wheel shows the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects present within all of us. Family violence affects all of these elements. The wheel can help us to understand the behaviours and the feelings commonly associated with family violence. These acts and feelings are sometimes called the "signs" of abuse. Later, you can use the Medicine Wheel to explore solutions to relationship violence.

## WHO GETS ABUSED?

Anyone can become a victim of family violence. Family violence can happen to women, children, babies, youth, men, and elders. Some people in the community may be more vulnerable. Those who are frail, young or weak are at greater risk. Aboriginal women experience much higher rates of harmful assaults and abuse than non-Aboriginal women.

## ARE YOU BEING ABUSED?

Check out the Medicine Wheel for the signs and symptoms of a hurtful relationship. If you are experiencing these behaviours and feelings, then you are probably being abused. Don't blame yourself for what is happening. Remember, abuse is **NEVER** the victim's fault. Reach out for help. Knowing where to turn for help is the first step of the journey.

## WHY DON'T PEOPLE WHO ARE BEING ABUSED JUST LEAVE?

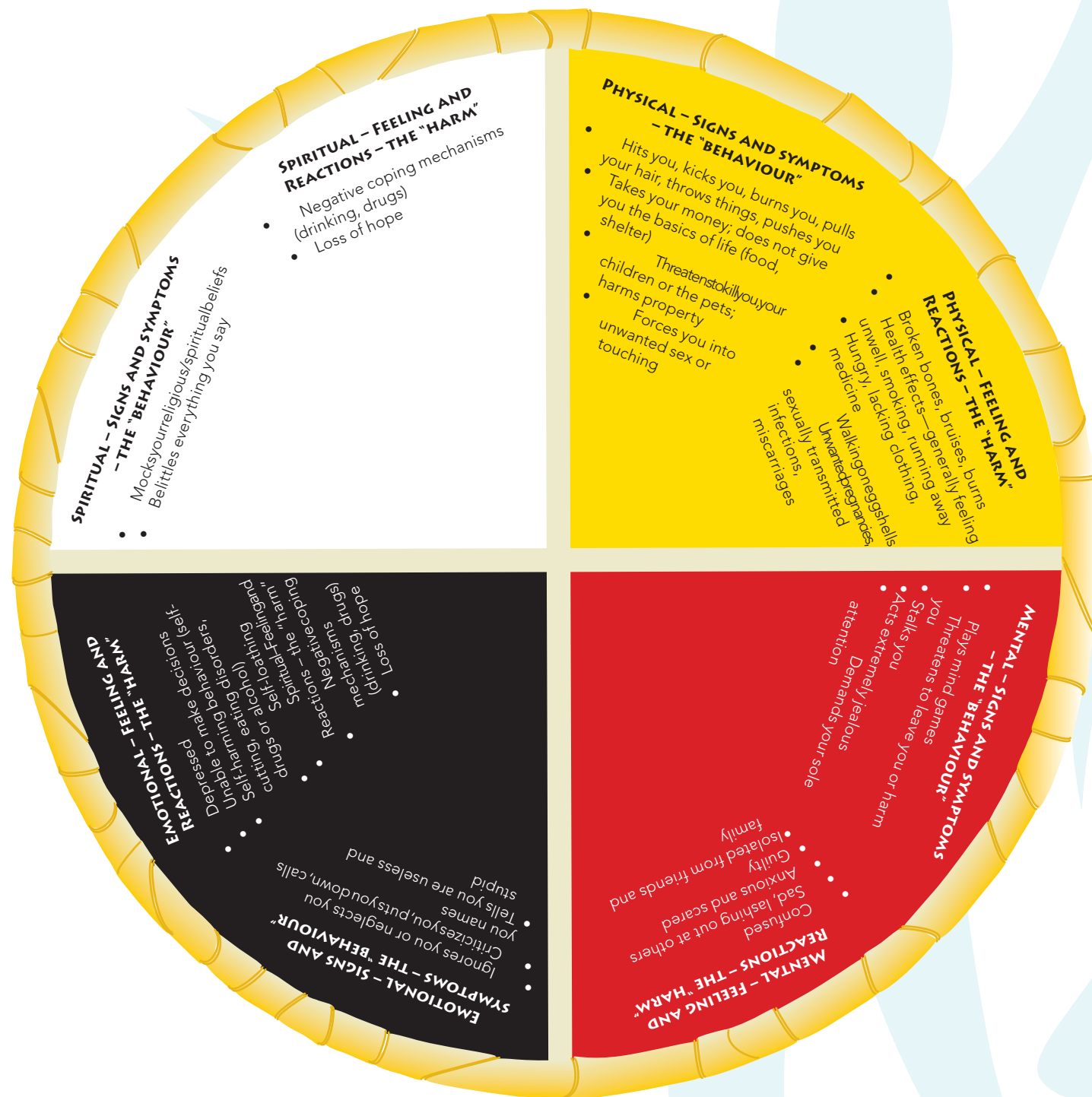
It is not that easy to leave. Here are a few barriers that victims may face:

- ✦ **Denial.** Victims of abuse will often deny they are being harmed. It is hard to admit that the person who is supposed to love you is hurting you. Often victims have not even "named" what is happening to them as abuse. Others may tell them that the hurtful acts are normal. Friends may say all relationships are like that. They may even say the behaviour isn't that bad and tell the victim that he or she is weak.
- ✦ **Blame.** People may tell the victim that the abuse is "their fault". They may say that the victim was "pushing the abuser's buttons" or not being a "good" spouse or parent. And abusive people almost always blame the victim for "making it happen". Eventually, the victim may blame him or herself too.

... ABUSE IS **NEVER** THE VICTIM'S FAULT. REACH OUT FOR HELP. KNOWING WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP IS THE FIRST STEP OF THE JOURNEY.



# THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE A MEDICINE WHEEL APPROACH



**IF YOU ARE BEING ABUSED, YOU SHOULD KNOW  
IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT.**

- ✦ **Shame.** The victim may be afraid that others in their community will not believe them. After all, the abuse usually happens in the privacy of the home and everyone may know and like the abuser. Perhaps they won't even believe the victim. They may even judge the victim to be a bad person.
- ✦ **Fear.** Many victims fear that leaving, calling the police, or looking for help will just make things worse. The abuser may destroy property, harm or kill pets and/or threaten to harm or kill the victim, the children or other family members if the victim leaves.
- ✦ **Loyalty.** Sometimes victims do not get help because they do not want to get their abuser in trouble. They may not trust the criminal law system and the way that it treats Aboriginal people. They may feel that looking for help from outside, such as calling the police, is a betrayal of their own cultural roots. They may feel that they should be loyal to the abuser whether it is their spouse, common-law partner, or parent.
- ✦ **Nowhere to go.** The victim may have nowhere to go. If he or she lives on-reserve, there may be no housing for them if they leave. The victim may not have any right to the home where he or she is living if the abuser refuses to move out. The victim may have gone to live with family and friends when things got bad, but they always returned because they did not have enough room. Elderly victims or children may be completely dependent on the people who are abusing them and they may decide to live with the abuse rather than live with the unknown alternative.
- ✦ **Leaving community.** Sometimes leaving the relationship means moving off-reserve and leaving behind family, friends and natural supports. When this happens, the victim may feel lonely and isolated away from the community. The victim's children may also get upset and angry at being taken away from their friends.
- ✦ **Leaving culture behind.** If a victim has to move off-reserve to end the relationship, it means leaving behind Aboriginal culture and perhaps language, and living in unfamiliar situations. It can mean a loss of many other benefits as well.
- ✦ **No money and no support.** The victim may have no way to support him or herself and the children if he or she leaves the abuser. The victim may decide that living with an occasional beating is better than living on welfare and looking for support and services from non-Aboriginal agencies who may not understand his or her needs.
- ✦ **Best for the children.** Many victims stay in abusive relationships because they think it is best for the children to have two parents in the home. However, research shows that children who see or hear a parent being abused by the other parent do feel the effects. These children are more likely to have emotional problems, trouble in school and feelings of anger. They may grow up to model the violent behaviour in their own adult relationships. Child protection laws in some provinces recognize that exposure to family violence may be a reason to remove the children from their home if their development and security is at risk.

### WHAT ABOUT THE THE ABUSER?

Usually when people are acting hateful and abusive, they have lots of problems of their own. They may have had a rough childhood. They may have lost a job. They may be struggling with addictions. This is not an excuse for abusive behaviour. People must be responsible for the way they behave. The abuser needs help too. Perhaps the abuser can get help to find non-

violent, healthy ways to deal with their feelings and express anger and frustration. Sometimes, the couple can both get help. If this is not possible, the victim may have to leave the relationship to get help. If the children are witnessing the abuse, there is help available for them too. Help for victims, abusers and children may be available both on- and off-reserve, from traditional and non-traditional counselors, spiritual advisors and professionals.

### WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN WHO ARE ABUSED? IS THAT FAMILY VIOLENCE TOO?

Yes, when family violence happens to children it is called "child abuse". Children can experience most of the same forms of abuse described above. Our child protection laws state that exposing children to adult violence is another form of child abuse, even if they are not being physically harmed or neglected. The consequences of abuse on children can be devastating and last a lifetime. Moreover, children who grow up witnessing and experiencing abuse are more likely to lash out at their own partners and their own children whenever they are angry or feel out of control. For more information about child abuse and the affects on children, refer to our website: [www.thehealingjourney.ca](http://www.thehealingjourney.ca).

### DOES ABUSE STOP WHEN PEOPLE GET OLDER?

Not necessarily. Where there has been a pattern of physical violence in a spousal relationship, the abusive behaviour often continues over time, regardless of the age of the spouses. Generally, older members of a family who are abused by relatives other than spouses are more likely to be victims of neglect, emotional or financial abuse than physical abuse.

### IF FAMILY VIOLENCE HAPPENS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS, HOW DOES IT HARM THE COMMUNITY?

People experiencing abuse are often not happy or productive members of society. They cannot contribute to their full potential. They may even do things that harm others in community, like turning to alcohol or drugs, committing crimes, running away or perhaps committing suicide. When families and communities are coping with problems such as addictions, family stress, poverty, crime and so on, the chances increase that feelings of anger and frustration will result in abusive acts.

Whether you have been affected directly or indirectly, one thing is clear—family violence hurts the entire community. As long as individuals suffer from family violence, either as victims or perpetrators, then the community cannot be strong.

**THE PATH TO HEALING IS NOT  
ONLY AN INDIVIDUAL JOURNEY,  
IT IS A JOURNEY THAT THE ENTIRE  
COMMUNITY MUST TAKE TO FOSTER  
NON-VIOLENT WAYS OF BEING AND  
LIVING WITH EACH OTHER.**



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