

MEDIA GUIDE

Covering Domestic Violence

This guide brings attention to the valuable role that media can play when reporting on domestic violence.



DC Coalition
Against Domestic Violence

Challenging Cultural Beliefs and Norms

The media has a unique opportunity to raise awareness about the prevalence of domestic violence and challenge the social norms and attitudes that reinforce the use of violence. Journalists can share life-saving information to increase understanding, highlight warning signs, and connect people to local resources to get the help they need. Moreover, the media can educate the audience about perpetrators and ways they can be held accountable.

Best practices for the media when covering domestic violence:

- Break the silence
- Name root factors and societal causes
- Identify warning signs
- Suggest ways to support survivors
- Connect people to resources
- Promote healthy relationships

There are many social and cultural norms that ignore the seriousness of domestic violence. The media has an opportunity to educate people about domestic violence and challenge these norms.

- Help people understand the reality and dynamics of domestic violence.
- Emphasize that domestic violence is a community problem and can effect everyone's safety.
- Highlight that domestic violence is a complex issue and requires intervention on various levels; there are multiple approaches that can be used in various communities.
- Change the perception about domestic violence, underline that domestic violence should not be normal and gender inequity, homophobia, and sexual exploitation are not acceptable.
- Convey a sense of hope and empowerment, encourage the public to take action.
- Acknowledge that perpetrators are products of our culture and hold them accountable.

Considerations When Reporting on Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a complex issue to report on. Abusers are very good at portraying a false image of events and manipulating people to confuse those involved.

Best Practices

The following are best practices for the media to use to protect and respect survivors:

- Name the violence and sensitize the public to how common domestic violence is. The more the public sees and hears an accurate description, and the more accurate language and terminology is used, the less isolated survivors will feel.
- Focus on the abusive, violent, and/or grooming behaviors of the perpetrator, not on the survivor.
- Talk to domestic violence experts and law enforcement to put the crime into its social context. Identify warning signs and share information about how the community can respond.
- Explore possible obstacles the survivor faced when choosing to leave or stay in the abusive relationship.
- Identify and include local domestic violence resources. Go beyond mentioning emergency shelter to include local programs that provide individual counseling, group counseling, legal advocacy, and survivor-centered safety planning.
- Consider the link with other forms of violence such as child abuse, sexual violence, or human trafficking.
- Check the final report for any information that might compromise the survivor's anonymity. Check to ensure nothing about a survivor's location or employment might unintentionally identify them.
- Be considerate when looking for, or using, photographs of those affected by domestic violence. First, ensure you obscure faces or clothes in photographs or videos. Second, ensure that the selected images do not misrepresent the story, contribute to the problem, or objectify women. Images should not reinforce women as powerless or domestic violence as only physical.
- Consider the impact of domestic violence on the community including workplace, school, and faith organization, and include their responses.
- Highlight the gendered nature and root causes of domestic violence.
- Emphasize domestic violence:
 - Is a form of control, not a loss of control.
 - Is always a crime, whether the perpetrator is a relative, friend, or acquaintance.
 - People of all ages, backgrounds and races can experience abuse.
 - The perpetrator is solely responsible for the acts of violence.

Things to Avoid

- Do not rely heavily on police reports, they may not be a neutral source of information.
- Do not confuse where the blame belongs.
- Do not ask questions that imply that a survivor could have done something to prevent the violence, or use victim-blaming language such as:
 - The survivor was engaged in risky behavior.
 - The survivor was dressed provocatively or was engaging in flirtatious behavior.
 - The survivor was impaired by drink, drugs, etc.
 - The survivor provoked their partner to violence.
 - The survivor was unfaithful/dating others.
 - The survivor chose to be with a violent partner.
 - The survivor has been married many times, was argumentative, nagging, flaunting success, etc.
- Do not reinforce the idea that violence is unpredictable or an isolated act. Domestic violence is a pattern of controlling behaviors and, in addition to physical abuse, includes intimidation, threats, economic deprivation, isolation, stalking, psychological/emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, reproductive coercion, and sexual violence. See the Power and Control Wheel on next page for more information.

- Do not use language such as:
 - The perpetrator “snapped,” acting spontaneously or out of character.
 - The perpetrator acted violently due to drinking or drug use.
 - The perpetrator acted violently out of love for a spouse or children including fear of losing children.
- Do not treat domestic violence as an inexplicable tragedy or a private matter.
- Do not reveal the identity of the survivor by naming the individual or reporting stories in such a way that he/she becomes identifiable in their community. Special attention should be given, unless individuals are willing to be named in the media.
- Do not report in front of a domestic violence shelter as these are confidential locations.

Language and Terminology

Good and unbiased reports require accurate and non-judgmental language. This guide encourages the use of language that puts the responsibility on the reported perpetrator. Moreover, in order to describe domestic violence correctly, it is important to use the most accurate name(s).

TRADITIONAL: battered person

SUGGESTED: “person who has/have experienced domestic violence” or “person who was/is being physically abused”

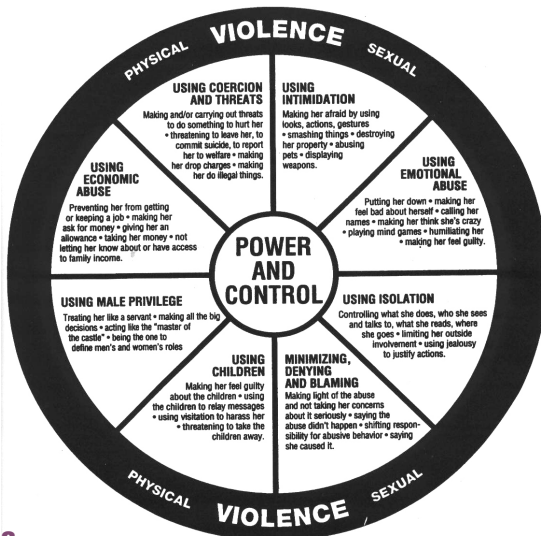
Tips for Interviewing a Survivor

- TRADITIONAL:** victim
SUGGESTED: “survivor” or “person who experienced abuse or violence”
- TRADITIONAL:** abusive relationship
SUGGESTED: “abusive partner”
- TRADITIONAL:** domestic dispute
SUGGESTED: “intimate partner violence”
- TRADITIONAL:** victim admits or victim confesses
SUGGESTED: victim “reports,” “shares,” “identifies,” or “reveals”
- TRADITIONAL:** snapped or just snapped
SUGGESTED: *Describe tactic(s) used from Power and Control Wheel*
- TRADITIONAL:** relationship problem, violent relationship
SUGGESTED: “abusive relationship”
- TRADITIONAL:** troubled marriage
SUGGESTED: “abusive marriage”
- TRADITIONAL:** domestic dispute, quarrel
SUGGESTED: *Describe tactic(s) used from Power and Control Wheel*
- TRADITIONAL:** love triangle or argument
SUGGESTED: *Describe tactic(s) used from Power and Control Wheel*

An interview with a survivor can offer a realistic view of the impact domestic violence can have on survivors, children, their families, and their communities. In fact, the passion, energy, and commitment of a survivor’s story is valuable, powerful, and can be instrumental in bringing change. However, journalists and reporters have to remember that incidents of domestic violence can be profoundly traumatic and it may be challenging to find people willing and able to speak openly about their experiences. Thus, it is okay for survivors to decline interviews especially during court proceedings. In fact, sometimes interviews may have legal ramifications in criminal trials and custody cases. Survivors may be bound by court orders prohibiting them from making comments. In summary, the media should respect survivors, their dignity, confidentiality, and privacy to help protect them from further physical and emotional harm.

Tips to be considered during an interview:

- Do not interview children.
- Acknowledge the survivor’s right to determine the parameters for being interviewed.
- Honor that the survivor is the expert on their own experiences.



- Make the survivor as comfortable as possible:
 - Get informed consent before you record an interview.
 - Consider the time and place for the interview.
 - Avoid bright lights and large groups of people.
 - Offer to use a silhouette for on-camera interviews.
 - Do not touch the person; people who are traumatized may not want to be touched.
 - Ask ahead of time if they would like an interpreter.

- Set ground rules in order to create a sense of safety during the interview. Inform the survivor what the story is about, how it will be used, who else will be interviewed, if a television or radio interview be live or taped, and the length of the interview.

- Allow the survivor to have some control over the interview in terms of what subjects are off limits, what is going to be discussed, their right to say no and to refuse to answer certain questions, and when there is a need to stop or take a break.

- Ask the survivor if it is safe to use their real name or if a pseudonym might better protect them and their family. Ask the survivor if they would like to seek advice from local domestic violence experts prior to being interviewed to discuss the potential safety and confidentiality concerns of sharing their story. (It is recommended to check in advance whether your editor will approve changing names and some details.)

- Do not ask traumatizing or inappropriate questions that can trigger intense or painful memories. Do not ask the “why” questions that are often victim-blaming. Replace them with open-ended, non-judgmental questions that allow the survivor to share their story.

- Do not use offensive pictures or graphic footage.

- Be an active, non-judgmental listener and control your own reactions to traumatic detail.

- Give the survivor your contact information in case they have further questions or would like to clarify any errors.





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