



Health Effects of Family Violence

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence



Overview Paper

Introduction

Many studies have shown that people who are abused in family relationships are more likely to experience low self esteem, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁻³ Although the public tends to associate such mental health conditions with exposure to family violence, they are less likely to recognize the impact of family violence on general health.

Family violence occurs in relationships of intimacy, kinship, dependency, or trust. Family violence ranges from physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse to neglect.

People who have experienced family violence include those who have been abused and those who have witnessed violence within the family. This paper explores the growing body of research linking family violence with a range of health effects, both short and long term. Not all this research is conclusive, but it suggests a growing awareness of the far-reaching health impacts of family violence.

Public Attitudes Towards Family Violence

A 2002 survey by EKOS Research Associates shows that people are aware that directly experiencing family violence and/or witnessing it leads to health impacts.

Family violence results in . . .	% people who believe in the impact of directly experiencing family violence	% people who believe in the impact of witnessing family violence
negative psychological effects	44%	54%
low self-esteem	40%	27%
isolation	19%	15%
poor childhood development	17%	12%
aggressive behaviour	37%	38%

Family Violence and Physical Health

Sexual abuse may trigger severe physical reactions particularly in people with epilepsy, diabetes, and cerebral palsy.⁴

Family violence has a direct effect on physical health.

- Babies born to women living with physical or sexual violence are more likely to be of low birth weight,⁵ which is linked to infant and child illnesses, disabilities, and death.⁶
- Children who experience physical violence are at risk of serious physical injury and even death. Physical violence between parents may also result in injuries to children who are accidentally struck during a physical argument. Infants in particular are at risk because parents may be holding them during a confrontation.⁷ As well, children may suffer harm in utero, for example, if a pregnant mother is punched in the stomach. Researchers are beginning to recognize the far-reaching consequences of family violence on childhood development. They have now linked child maltreatment in the early years to permanent damage to the development of the brain.⁸
- Adults who are physically assaulted by intimate partners or caregivers may have broken bones and teeth, fractures, bruises, bites, cuts, scalds, and burns. The most serious cases may result in disfigurement or even

death. Sexual abuse of a partner can result in unplanned pregnancy,⁹ sexually transmitted disease, pelvic pain, urinary tract and bladder infections, and related problems.¹⁰

Between 1991 and 1999, 617 women and 165 men were killed in Canada by a current or ex-spouse. Stalking behaviour was associated with 12% of the homicides committed by men.¹¹

Younger women,¹² pregnant women,¹³ Aboriginal women,¹⁴ and women in common law relationships are at greatest risk of family violence and domestic homicide. People with disabilities also experience significantly higher rates of family violence.¹⁵

Family Violence, Well-Being and Coping Strategies

Even when family violence does not result directly in injury and illness, research suggests that some people exposed to family violence cope with their situation and feelings in ways that are harmful to their health. The following coping strategies and responses to stress are associated with a greater risk of illness, or more severe and frequent symptoms.¹⁶

Addictions

Studies show that some people living with family violence cope with the abuse through addictions such as smoking,¹⁷ drinking excessively, and misusing drugs.¹⁸ Many addictions have been linked to long term health problems. For example, drinking alcohol during pregnancy

contributes to fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effects in children. Smoking is known to contribute to high blood pressure, cancer, heart disease, low birth weight babies, and greater risk of having children who develop diabetes and obesity.¹⁹

Exposure to family violence may indirectly increase a person's risk of acquiring a range of diseases:²⁰

- diabetes
- heart disease
- high blood pressure
- sleep disorders
- fibromyalgia
- chronic pain/disability
- cancer
- osteoporosis
- asthma
- anemia
- hepatitis
- lung and liver disease
- thyroid disease

Self-Destructive Behaviours

Some victims of family violence may not care for themselves, eat properly, take prescribed medications, or visit their doctor. Some withdraw from all sources of support.²¹ Studies link self-cutting, disordered eating, and suicide²² to exposure to family violence. Children living with family violence have an increased risk of adopting self-destructive and health-harming behaviour.²³ When victims of family violence cope with their situation by engaging in self-harming behaviours, there may be long term negative health effects. For example,

women with eating disorders were found to be more likely to develop osteoporosis and to experience complications during pregnancy.^{24,25}

High Risk Sexual Practices

Some people exposed to family violence engage in high risk sexual practices.²⁶ Children who experience sexual abuse, for example, are more likely as adolescents and adults to participate in risky practices^{27,28} such as unprotected sexual activity with multiple partners. This may result in sexually transmitted diseases^{29,30} (including HIV), unplanned pregnancy,³¹⁻³³ and birth complications.³⁴

Many youth who experience prolonged abuse or witness family violence, leave home at a young age. For example, a study of youth living on the streets in Toronto found that 70% had been exposed to family violence.³⁵ Living on the streets may expose youth to lifestyles that pose serious health risks, including prostitution, addictions, unprotected sexual activity, and gang activity.

Reactions to Stress

Exposure to family violence clearly contributes to higher levels of stress and tension. Stress can have a serious impact on numerous health conditions. Lupus,³⁶ fibromyalgia,³⁷ chronic fatigue syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic pain, and sleep loss are a few examples of conditions that may worsen or flare up under stress.³⁸

A Final Word

People who experience family violence are at greater risk of mental health disorders and problems. Moreover, their general health and well-being are likely to be affected in both the short and long term. They may be injured, maimed, or neglected. They may adopt negative coping techniques that contribute to or worsen medical conditions.

Does abuse increase the risk of accidents?

A qualitative study examining family violence in farm and rural communities found that, for some women, abuse contributed to fatigue and a general lack of concern for their health. As a consequence, they felt they were less careful performing their work around the farm and at greater risk for serious farm accidents.³⁹

New research findings demonstrate that family violence is a health care issue. Not surprisingly, studies show that women living with family violence need substantially more medical treatment than non-victimized people.⁴⁰ Often people who experience family violence lack a support network. They may have only health care providers or social service workers to turn to for help. Medical professionals and health care providers are well-positioned to play a major role in family violence intervention.

Helping professionals who are aware of and attentive to the signs of family violence can better identify those factors that contribute to health and physical problems. They can also direct patients to community services that might provide support and offer positive ways of dealing with the violence in their lives.⁴¹ Health

care workers can offer information on family violence and raise awareness of the health risks and consequences. They can offer adults confidential opportunities to discuss the abusive situation, although they must report to child protection authorities if they suspect a child is being abused or neglected.^{42,43} They can encourage adults experiencing family violence to report physical assaults to the police.

It is important to stress that exposure to family violence does not predestine individuals to negative outcomes. Family violence is not a determinant of life-long ill health. Most children and victims of intimate partner violence show remarkably positive coping strategies, such as developing a positive relationship with a primary care giver, seeking out social support, and achieving subsequent positive life experiences.⁴⁴ These strategies help to foster the protective atmosphere that has been shown to reduce some of the harmful health outcomes of family violence.

Suggested Readings and Resources

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Wiehe, V.R. *Understanding Family Violence: Treating and Preventing Partner, Child, Sibling, and Elder Abuse*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 1998.

Reports on the Web

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

The NCFV contains publications, newsletters and videos dealing with many aspects of family violence.

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/nc-cn

World Health Organization (WHO)

The WHO library contains reports on family violence and health.

<http://www.who.int/home-page/>

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