



BaptistCare

HOPESTREET

Domestic Violence More than Skin Deep.

*Knowing the signs and how
to respond can save lives*

A photograph of two women. The woman in the foreground is wearing a blue polo shirt and looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The woman behind her is looking slightly to the left with a more somber expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

*Care you
can trust.*

This paper contains potentially distressing content regarding domestic violence. If you or someone you know is impacted by domestic or family violence or sexual assault, call **1800 RESPECT** on 1800 737 732 or visit **1800RESPECT.org.au**.

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Introduction

On 28 February 2015, BaptistCare employee and devoted mother-of-three Tara Costigan was brutally murdered in her home by her ex-partner, just one day after taking out a domestic violence order against him.

Tara was killed with an axe in front of her two young sons while holding her newborn baby girl.

Her death shocked the community, sparked national outrage, and drew a flurry of media attention to the cracks in our system that leave women vulnerable even after they take steps to protect themselves against a violent partner.

The day Tara's ex-partner murdered her was the first day he was ever physically violent, but he had been abusive in other ways for months prior.

Tara's story highlights the fundamental fact that domestic violence is more than skin deep. Bruises and black eyes aren't the only signs of violence and conflict in the home, which can remain undetected for days, months or even years, and can escalate without warning.

While Tara didn't show any of the physical signs that many people would recognise as the tell-tale symptoms of someone experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her partner, other signs were there – signs her partner had become controlling, abusive and dangerous.

Although Tara did what she could to protect herself and her children, the systems we have in place to protect women – both social and legal – are failing Australian women.

Everyday Australians need to be better-educated about the various types of domestic violence and what to do after recognising a woman is being abused.

BaptistCare recently conducted a survey of one thousand Australians to test their recognition of various forms of domestic violence and understand how they would react to a range of domestic violence scenarios.

The research revealed some forms of domestic abuse are far more widely recognised than others, suggesting either tacit acceptance of this behaviour or a lack of awareness of the different types of domestic violence. There was also rarely a clear consensus on how best to respond to a situation where respondents witnessed or became aware of domestic violence occurring.

This research, and the collective experience of our frontline team working with women and children experiencing domestic and family violence, suggests more should be done to educate the public about what constitutes domestic violence and how best to respond.

Defining Domestic Violence

The terms ‘domestic violence’, ‘family violence’ and ‘intimate partner violence’ have been used almost interchangeably in research, reporting and even legislation for years. So how is domestic or family violence actually defined? Are they the same thing?

From a legal standpoint, the [Australian Family Law Act 1975](#)¹ defines family violence as “violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of the person’s family (the family member), or causes the family member to be fearful.”

The [Federal Government’s National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children](#)² defines domestic violence as “acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship”. It also refers to “an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear”.

Meanwhile, the Australian Institute of Criminology draws a clear distinction between the two in its [Research in Practice](#)³ series (Morgan A & Chadwick H, 2007). According to the Institute’s definition, domestic violence is identified as violence occurring within intimate relationships in a domestic setting including physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse; family violence is a broader term that refers to violence between family members.

All these definitions draw together the themes of controlling, manipulative, coercive, and fear-inducing behaviour – not necessarily involving physical violence. Statistics from a wide range of sources – including the Australian Bureau of Statistics, advocacy organisations like White Ribbon and Our Watch, and government research – demonstrate domestic and family violence are gendered issues, overwhelmingly impacting women and their children.

In its [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#)⁴ in the General Assembly in 1993 the UN stated that “women are entitled to the equal enjoyment and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

The UN used this wording with the understanding that domestic violence and violence against women is not restricted to physical violence. It is about control and intimidation, which limits a woman’s fundamental freedoms and human rights.

For the purposes of this paper, BaptistCare defines domestic violence as a pattern of abusive behaviour through which a person acts to harm, control and intimidate another person in a domestic setting.

Prevalence

Australia continues to experience alarmingly high levels of domestic and family violence; and while the data paints a damning picture, it doesn't tell the full story.

According to the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(2018\)⁵](#), in the two years between 2012 and 2014, one woman was killed by a current or former partner each week. One in 6 (1.6 million) women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a cohabiting partner since age 15, and 2,800 women were hospitalised in 2014–15 after being assaulted by a spouse or partner. Three in 4 (75%) of victims of domestic violence reported the perpetrator was male.

However, many cases go unreported and domestic violence does not always escalate to violence or death. As damning as these statistics are, they are still not a holistic representation of the prevalence of domestic violence in Australia.

The issue is even more widespread than it appears. In our experience on the frontline of family violence, for every case reported to care workers or police, there are many more that go unreported.

Women and families may choose to stay silent rather than seek help for a range of reasons; longstanding emotional connection to the abusive partner, a desire to keep the family together, financial dependence, and a variety of cultural and social considerations that make it difficult for women to separate from their partners are all powerful factors that keep many Australian women silent in the face of abuse. This silence means that the available statistics as horrifying as they are, do not paint a complete picture of the levels of violence that Australian women currently face.

This lack of holistic data may be why our own survey of Australians revealed a clear lack of consensus regarding the perceived prevalence of domestic violence among respondents. When asked how many Australian women experience domestic violence in their lifetime, there was a fairly even spread across all available answers; 22% said it is one in five women, 20% said one in ten, and 20% said one in three. A further 15% of respondents said one in 20 women experience domestic violence, 10% said one in four, and 14% said they didn't know.

As Australians, we are unsure of the magnitude of this issue lurking under the surface of our society.

This uncertainty is likely to be hindering definitive action on the issue.

By looking at rates of homelessness, we can begin to see the depth and breadth of domestic violence as a social and economic issue in Australia outside the scope of physical violence. In its [Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report⁶](#), the AIHW reported a total of 288,000 people were assisted by specialist homelessness agencies in 2016–17. Forty percent of these clients received assistance because of family and domestic violence. The majority were women (72,000) and children (34,000).

Recognising all types of abuse

The broad range of legal and industry definitions of domestic violence point to the fact that abusive behaviour goes well beyond physical assault, and the full spectrum of domestic abuse encompasses physical, emotional and psychological abuse. While every woman's individual experience of domestic abuse will be different, we can generally divide abuse into seven recognised archetypes of domestic violence. These archetypes have the potential to provide a greater understanding of the types of domestic violence that are commonly experienced by women and children in Australia, and allow for more comprehensive discussion of domestic abuse. As defined by [White Ribbon Australia](#), they are:

Economic Abuse

Having complete control of all monies, granting no access to bank accounts, providing only an inadequate 'allowance', using wages earned by the victim for household expenses.

Sexual Abuse

Any form of forced sex or sexual degradation, such as sexual activity without consent, causing pain during sex, coercive sex without protection against pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, making the victim perform sexual acts unwillingly, criticising a partner sexually, or using sexually degrading insults.

Spiritual Abuse

Denying access to ceremonies, land, or family, preventing religious observance, forcing victims to do things that go against their spiritual or religious beliefs, denigration of cultural background, or using religious teachings or cultural tradition as a reason for violence.

Verbal Abuse

Frequent insults and comments intended to cause humiliation (either privately or publicly), with attacks following themes such as intelligence, sexuality, body image, or capacity as a parent and spouse.

Emotional Abuse

Blaming the victim for all problems in the relationship, constantly comparing the victim with others to undermine the victim's sense of self-esteem and self-worth, or sporadic withdrawal all interest and engagement (e.g. days or weeks of silence). This can include 'gaslighting', which involves psychologically manipulating a victim to the extent that they question or change their own understanding of reality.

Social Abuse

Systematic isolation from family and friends through techniques such as ongoing rudeness to family and friends, moving to locations where the victim knows nobody, and forbidding or physically preventing the victim from going out and meeting people - in effect, imprisonment. This can include technological abuse, where a victim's privacy and consent are breached through sharing personal content (such as photos or texts) or accessing the victim's devices without their consent with the intent of surveilling, embarrassing or harming the victim.

Physical Abuse

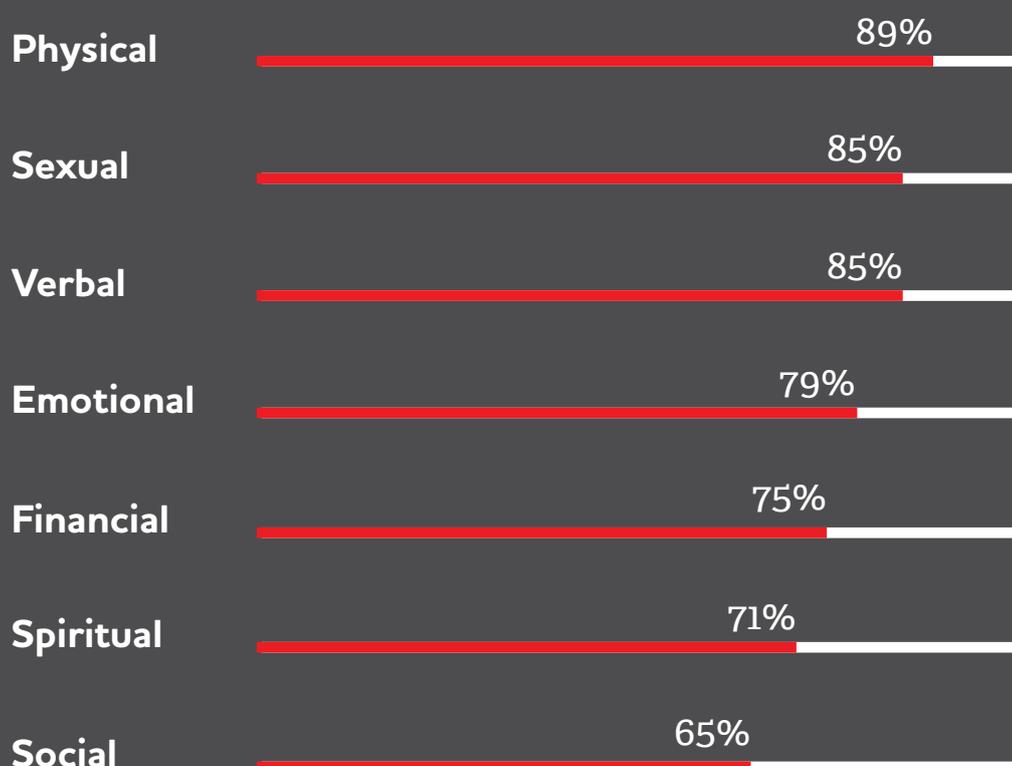
Physical abuse includes bodily assault, using or brandishing weapons, driving dangerously, destructing property, abusing pets in front of family members, assaulting children, locking the victim out of the house, and depriving them of sleep.

In March 2018, BaptistCare commissioned a survey of one thousand Australians in which respondents were provided with common examples of each form of abuse to determine which types are most commonly recognised and acknowledged as domestic violence.

Unsurprisingly, respondents were most likely to recognise the example of physical abuse, with 89% agreeing this constituted domestic violence. Sexual and verbal abuse were the second most widely-recognised types of violence at 85% recognition; and emotional abuse followed at 79%, financial abuse at 74%, and spiritual abuse at 71%.

Social abuse was the least-recognised form of abuse, with only 65% of respondents agreeing that the example constituted domestic violence. This is a strong indication that Australians may be less aware of how the manipulation of a woman's time with friends and family constitutes a form of abuse.

Recognition of abuse by type



Gender recognition gaps

Female respondents were more likely to recognise all types of abuse than male respondents. The largest recognition gap occurred around spiritual abuse, with 79% of women considering the example of spiritual abuse to constitute domestic violence while only 63% of men recognised the example as abuse – a recognition gap of 16%.

Financial abuse had the second highest gender recognition gap of **15%**, with **82%** of women and **67%** of men recognising the example given as a form of domestic abuse.

The gender gap in recognising abuse

Recognising **spiritual** abuse



Recognising **financial** abuse



Recognising **social** abuse



Recognising **emotional** abuse



Recognising **verbal** abuse



Recognising **physical** abuse



Recognising **sexual** abuse



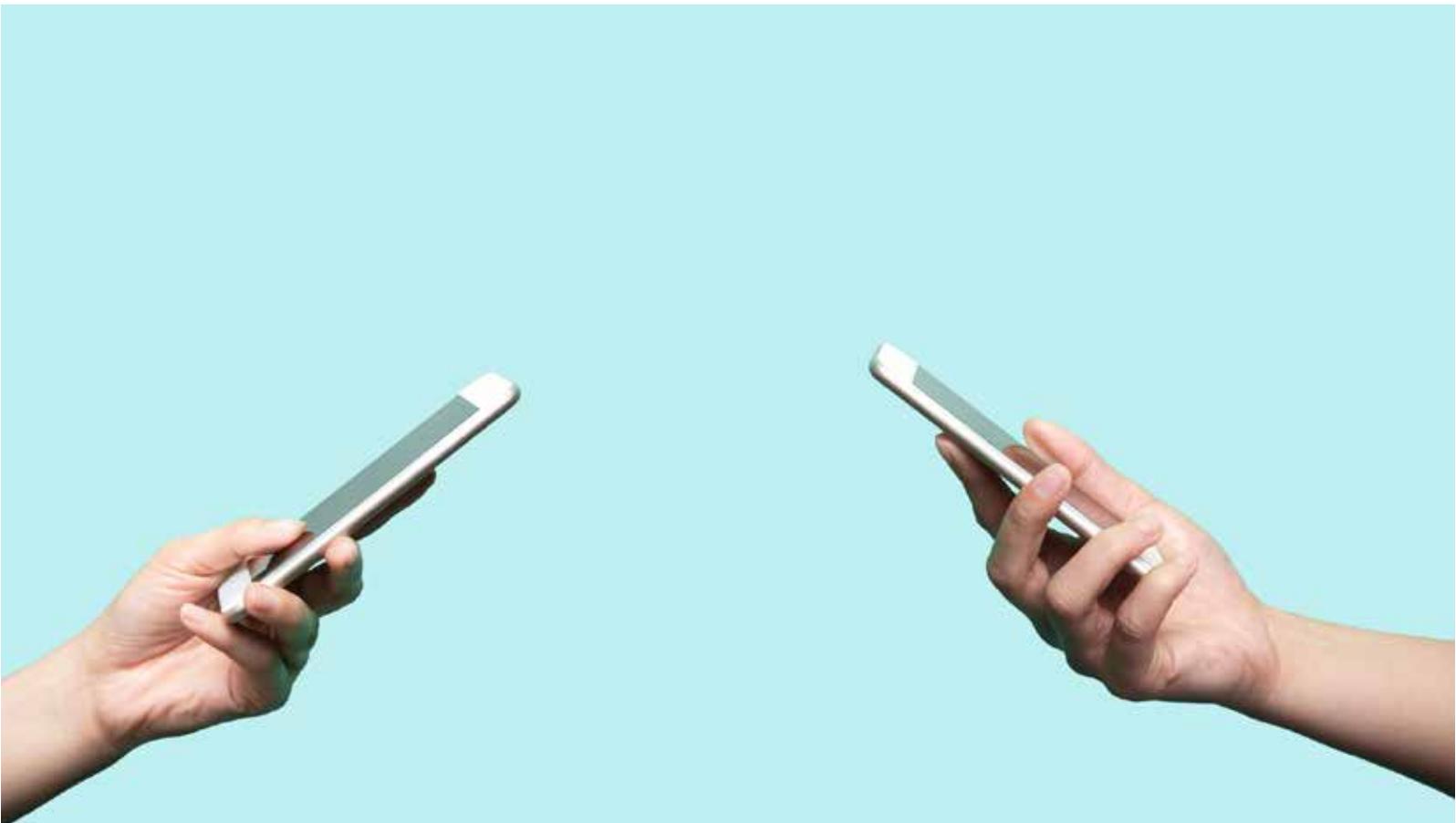
Generational recognition gaps

The research showed that older respondents were much more likely to recognise the scenarios provided in the survey as signs of domestic violence.

On average, respondents in the 18-24 age bracket were least likely to recognise domestic violence of any kind, and the 65+ age group were the most likely to recognise all forms of domestic abuse across all archetypes.

The greatest intergenerational recognition gap related to social abuse. Respondents over the age of 65 were twice as likely to recognise social abuse as 18-24 year-olds. Respondents were asked if they considered a man “harassing his wife by text repeatedly about where she is, who she’s spending time with, and when she’ll be home” to be an example of abuse. Only 40% of 18-24 year olds agreed, compared with 81% of those over 65 years old.

While younger generations’ widespread dependence on their smartphones may be resulting in a more constant stream of communication becoming the norm, it is important that younger Australians recognise the difference between a woman communicating frequently with her partner by choice and being controlled through fear, threats and constant demands for updates on where she is and who she’s with at any given time.



The generational gap in recognising abuse

Recognising **social** abuse



Recognising **verbal** abuse



Recognising **financial** abuse



Recognising **spiritual** abuse



Recognising **physical** abuse



Recognising **emotional** abuse



Recognising **sexual** abuse



An urgent call for better education

These statistics support an urgent call for greater investment in education for young Australians about healthy relationships and how to identify abusive behaviours.

If we are able to increase recognition of all forms of domestic violence and provide a suite of interventions when violence and abuse is present, especially those signs which emerge before a situation escalates to violence, we will have greater opportunity to save lives and eradicate domestic violence altogether.

How would you react to domestic violence?

The first step in supporting those experiencing domestic violence is improving our ability to recognise the signs. But what happens when you have become aware that someone is experiencing abuse?

Our survey research highlights that there are still many people who are not sure how they would respond once becoming aware a friend, family member or co-worker is experiencing domestic violence. There was rarely a clear consensus on what the best course of action would be in any scenario, but encouragingly, the majority of respondents would most likely take the best practice steps of either raising the topic in a private conversation and offering to listen to the person's experiences, or finding information on support services and offering to help the person access them.

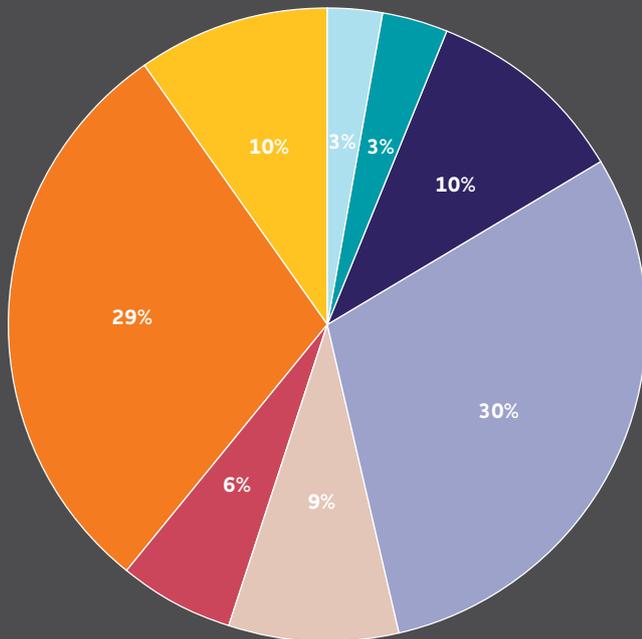
We provided survey participants with a range of scenarios in which they became aware a friend, family member or co-worker were experiencing abuse. We also provided them a scenario in which they witnessed a stranger being physically abused by her partner on the street.

Participants were 2% more likely to do nothing when becoming aware of a co-worker's experience of domestic violence than if they witnessed a stranger being abused in front of their eyes on the street. While this is only a slight difference, it may reflect the impact of social norms around maintaining appropriate boundaries with our colleagues and acquaintances.

We may be more hesitant to act on a suspicion based on a co-worker's behaviour, whereas we may have a more distinct and unavoidable sense of accountability if we witness domestic abuse.

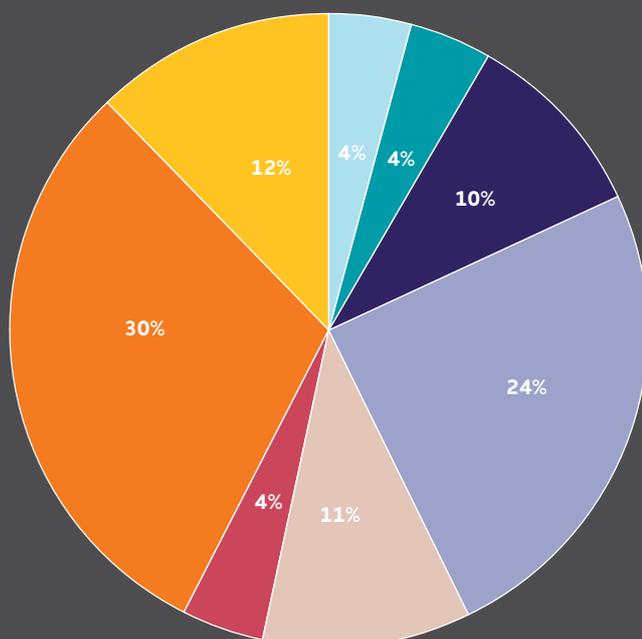
However, the hesitation and lack of surety that stems from slowly or indirectly becoming aware of domestic abuse is a serious barrier to offering the support needed to bolster someone as she attempts to address or leave a dangerous relationship.

If you became aware a **friend** was in an abusive relationship, what would you do?



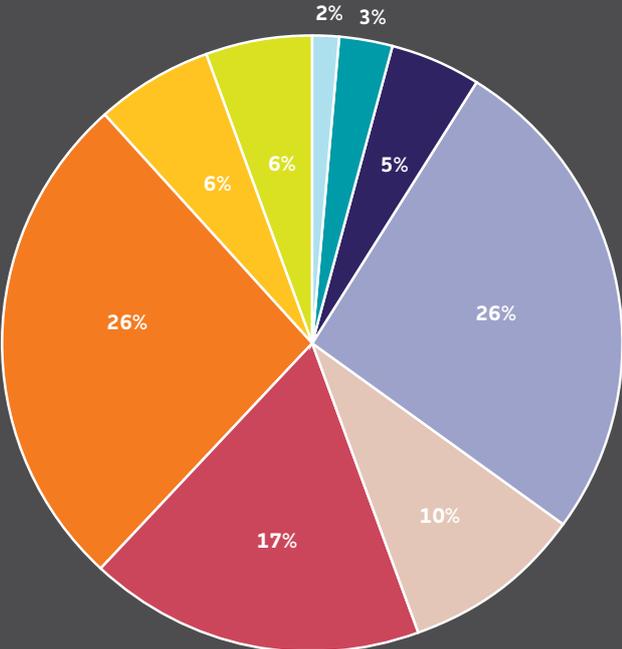
- Nothing, it's not my place to get involved
- Give them space to deal with it themselves
- Show them additional support in other areas of their life, but not raise it with them directly
- Raise the topic with them in a private conversation and offer to listen to their experiences
- Offer advice on how the person can deal with the situation
- Confront their partner and let them know others are aware of what's happening
- Find information on support services and offer to help the person access them
- I don't know what I would do

If you became aware a **colleague or co-worker** was in an abusive relationship, what would you do?



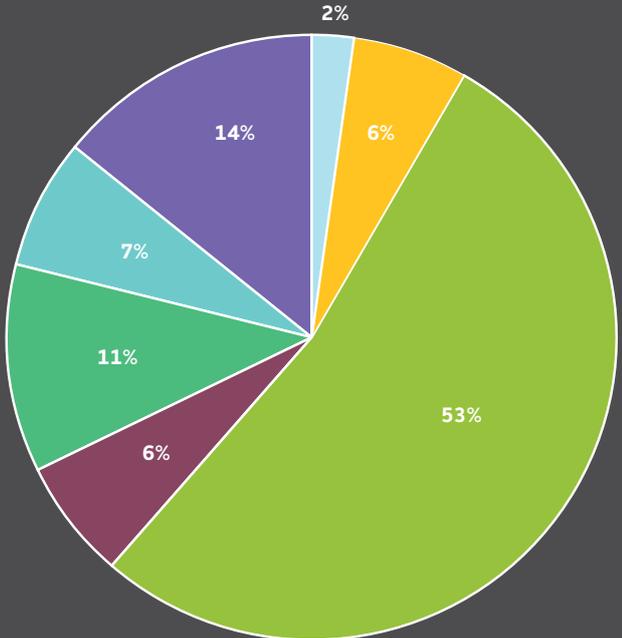
- Nothing, it's not my place to get involved
- Give them space to deal with it themselves
- Show them additional support in other areas of their life, but not raise it with them directly
- Raise the topic with them in a private conversation and offer to listen to their experiences
- Offer advice on how the person can deal with the situation
- Confront their partner and let them know others are aware of what's happening
- Find information on support services and offer to help the person access them
- I don't know what I would do

If you became aware a **family member (e.g. your mother or daughter)** was in an abusive relationship, what would you do?



- Nothing, it's not my place to get involved
- Give them space to deal with it themselves
- Show them additional support in other areas of their life, but not raise it with them directly
- Raise the topic with them in a private conversation and offer to listen to their experiences
- Offer advice on how the person can deal with the situation
- Confront their partner and let them know others are aware of what's happening
- Find information on support services and offer to help the person access them
- I don't know what I would do
- Talk to other family members about the situation, but don't speak to the affected family member in case I upset them

If you witnessed a **woman you didn't know** being physically abused by her partner on the street what would you do?



- Nothing, I don't want to get involved
- I don't know what I would do
- Call the police
- Intervene and confront the perpetrator
- Intervene and try to defuse the situation
- Call for others nearby to help
- It depends how violent the attack is

In much the same vein, there was also a greater level of uncertainty in how respondents would act in regards to a friend or co-worker compared to how they would choose to act with a family member or stranger. Again, a sense of confidence in knowing how to respond to a family member or stranger likely stems from a greater sense of accountability due to either having a closer (familial) relationship to the woman experiencing the violence, or from the certainty of having actually witnessed the violence happening to a stranger.

The results suggest Australians need more guidance on how to act, and also a sense of social permission to act, in the event they realise someone is experiencing domestic violence. Social constructs relating to personal relationships, and a family's privacy and right to determine their own affairs, are complex and deeply engrained. These social constructs, even those upheld with the best of intentions, present a serious barrier to an individual making the decision to take action when they suspect domestic abuse is occurring. A better understanding of what constitutes abuse, and a stronger awareness of how to respond once you've identified an abusive situation, will result in a greater sense of accountability and action.

Police, doctors and front-line responders like counsellors are all trained in best practice response to domestic and family violence situations. Increasingly workplaces are introducing domestic violence clauses into their enterprise agreements, or introducing specific policies and procedures to support and promote the safety of those employees who may be experiencing domestic violence. BaptistCare is one of the first organisations in Australia to participate in the White Ribbon Workplace Accreditation program.

Given the prevalence and impact of domestic violence, and based upon our research findings and frontline experience, we know the average Australian needs training and education around how to recognise and respond to domestic violence. This could include investment in education campaigns through schools that teach children about healthy relationships, through to broader public awareness campaigns and workplace training.

This is a highly emotive topic that will affect hundreds of thousands of Australians each year. Our collective response has the potential to save lives, to promote greater safety of women and children, and to prevent the cycle of abuse from rolling on.

How should you respond to domestic violence?

The best practice approach to domestic violence is widely viewed as the “Recognise, Respond, Refer” approach.

RECOGNISE

The first step is to recognise domestic violence when it occurs. Our attitudes to one another and the way we interact is at the heart of how and when we will recognise that something isn't right. When you connect with your colleagues, friends and families through trusting and respectful relationships, you're more likely to be aware of changes to someone's behaviour – whether they're a friend, family member or colleague – which might indicate someone is experiencing domestic and family violence.

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour through which a person seeks to control and dominate another person. The violence doesn't have to be just physical, you don't have to be hit to be hurt. Signs can include:

- Unexplained or numerous injuries
- Depression or withdrawal, or uncharacteristic outbursts and anger
- Confusion and poor concentration
- Increased lack of confidence and self esteem
- Changes to physical appearance (e.g. stops wearing makeup)
- The need to seek unreasonable approval and permission from a partner before making a decision
- Often mentions her partner is 'jealous' or has a 'bad temper'
- Criticised and/or humiliated by her partner in public

Sadly, we all need to keep an eye out for the hidden side of domestic violence and the inner pain survivors often try to keep hidden. You can also familiarise yourself with the seven types of violence, so you have a better understanding of what domestic and family violence looks like.

RESPOND

The second step is to respond. It's not possible for all of us to become experts in domestic violence, but there are little things you can do if you recognise a colleague or friend may be experiencing domestic violence in their home or their relationship.

- Make yourself available, in a quiet and private location
- Listen to your friend and encourage them to talk about their concerns
- Resist the temptation to tell someone what they should do
- Check their immediate safety at work and home
- Find out whether other staff members/friend/family are assisting
- If in the workplace debrief with your manager/supervisor and follow through any mandatory reporting requirements
- Believe your friend's story and reassure her that it is not her fault.

REFER

The final step is referral. It's important that you believe and validate the person's experience, strive to be non-judgmental, and continue to be supportive, encouraging, open and honest.

You can be prepared with information about support services available, and encourage the person to:

- Contact 1800 RESPECT (**1800 737 732** or **1800respect.org.au**) or Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia (**1800 424 017** or **rape-dvservices.org.au**)
- Visit the Police or see a Doctor
- Make an appointment with a specialised domestic violence counselling service, such as BaptistCare Relationship Services or Relationships Australia

If you, or someone close to you, has or is experiencing domestic violence there is support available. A full list of referral options is available on our More Than Skin Deep website at morethanskindeep.org.au/refer.

In Conclusion

Our research has confirmed Australians need a better understanding of domestic violence and a clear consensus on what to do when we realise it is occurring. We need to reinforce a sense of social permission to step in and offer support when we realise a woman is in danger.

An improved understanding of what constitutes abuse will be key to prevention along with other practical initiatives, such as an increase in the supply of safe housing and accommodation for women and children escaping violence. This should constitute both crisis accommodation and secure long term housing.

Although domestic violence is a gendered issue and this report has largely focused on how to help women who are facing abusive partners, it's important to remember that this issue disproportionately affects children, and often affects them long after the original abuse has ceased.

Tara Costigan's sons were nine and eleven years old when they saw their mother die a violent death at the hands of her ex-partner. Her daughter was eight days old. They should never have had to witness her demise. In striving to overcome domestic violence, we help women and children alike, and help stop the cycle of abuse from affecting future generations as heavily as it has affected our own.

As per the 'National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children' and [BaptistCare's Position Statement on domestic and family violence⁹](#), education and funding is the key to eradicating domestic violence. Promoting respectful relationships in school-based and work-based programs will require more funding, as will fixing critical gaps in services available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and regional communities; more broadly, further action and funding is required to increase all Australians' ability to identify signs of domestic violence, and the availability of support services to everyone in need of them.

We know primary prevention strategies offer one of the most critical ways to address the link between gender inequality and violence against women and children. Funding should be prioritised for prevention initiatives, early intervention programs, and specialist men’s services that address perpetrator behaviour.

In understanding the signs of the seven types of domestic violence, and learning the options for responding appropriately, we will empower individual Australians to take definitive action on this crucial issue.

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