

# ★ HEALING HOUSEHOLD

WHAT MAKES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE/  
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE UNIQUE  
AMONG VETERAN CAREGIVER FAMILIES?

**AUTHOR**  
Ashley Shulski

**With Special Thanks to the Executive Board Members of  
Healing Household 6:**

Lisa Colella  
Megan Morseth  
Rhonda Ashby

## WHAT MAKES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE/INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE UNIQUE AMONG VETERAN CAREGIVER FAMILIES?

As of 2016, there are 36 million dependents of veterans of all eras in the United States, which makes up approximately 19 percent of our nation's population (Zottarelli, 2012, p. 4). Not all military veteran families will experience domestic violence (DV) or intimate partner violence (IPV); but for those veteran families that do, the added stressors of military service, job duties and responsibilities to our country first, and the trauma of war all easily weave their way into the homes of our veteran families. Often, the caregivers have the additional stressors of economic, emotional, and relational strains upon their relationships with their injured veterans they care for.

Mental health providers who work directly with caregivers of veterans who have experienced domestic violence or intimate partner violence should be keenly aware of the additional needs of their clients and the unique circumstances and types of violence potentially being experienced by the caregiver and/or family member(s). **It is important to stress that NOT all of our veteran families experience or will experience violence in their homes.** Further, domestic violence and/or intimate partner violence among veteran families is not limited to these scenarios.

**THE REASONS FOR DV AND IPV** may be a complex set of circumstances—including mental and cognitive trauma, and economic factors after transitioning out of the military—that can create a recipe for violence. But the exact nexus between the root cause and the violence may or may not be directly linked to military service-related trauma. Research on veteran IPV generally focuses on the relationship between combat-related PTSD and IPV perpetration (Gerlock, 2004; Sayers, Farrow, Ross, & Oslin, 2009).

Caregivers often feel the natural need to manage the veteran's well-being completely so as to help their partner avoid their triggers at all costs for self-preservation. Through supporting the veteran and helping manage their service-related trauma it can bring about a sense of helplessness, self-blame, poor self-care, and an overall sense of losing themselves in the relationship. Couple this with an abusive response pattern by a veteran who is violent in the home towards the caregiver, it is likely one or more of the following tactics may be experienced by the caregiver.

## TYPES OF ABUSE THE CAREGIVER MAY EXPERIENCE

The following are some of the most common tactics a perpetrator may use in order to gain power and control over the victim. One or more may be present at the same time in an abusive relationship.

\* No tactic is less important or impactful than another.

### **Caregiver burden**

A multidimensional response to physical, psychological, emotional, social, and financial stressors associated with caregiving. Naturally, caregivers of combat-wounded veterans face an unprecedentedly high level of caregiver burden due to being their veteran's full-time caregiver on top of all other familial responsibilities. Because of this increased responsibility of maintaining the relationship and household tasks, the caregiver will exhibit emotional and financial strain (Price & Stevens, 2016).

### **Economic abuse**

A common tactic used by those who desire to gain power and control in a relationship. It may be subtle where the caregiver may not realize she or he is being economically abused, or it may be severe where the caregiver has grossly limited access to all assets and family finances (NNEDV, 2016). Of all domestic violence cases, financial abuse is experienced in 98% of cases and is one of the top reasons victims remain in the home or return to the battering relationship (NNEDV, 2016). The caregiver may hear statements like "I'll give you money every week for whatever you need." Or "I know you are stressed, let me handle the finances." Sometimes economic abuse may be more apparent where the caregiver is not permitted to have access to bank accounts, is only provided with an "allowance", has his or her identity stolen or refusal of bills being paid causing the caregiver's credit score to be ruined. The short-term impact of economic abuse to a caregiver trying to leave his or her abuser can be devastating. It can mean the difference between staying safe or becoming homeless.

### **Gas lighting**

A form of emotional abuse; situations are repeatedly manipulated to trick the caregiver into distrusting his or her own memory and perceptions (Tracy, 2014). Some caregivers may experience "withholding" by the veteran refusing to listen or share his/her emotions. An example of this is "You're just trying to confuse me." Other caregivers may experience veterans attempting to "block" or "divert" by changing the subject of a conversation to now questioning the caregiver's thoughts and controlling the conversation. An example of this is "Where did you get that crazy idea?" or "You're hurting me on purpose."

**Isolation**

Used to gain control over the partner through isolation from family and friends. The veteran may allege to be disliked and use this as the reason for not permitting the caregiver to associate with the family or friends. Phone calls, texts, emails, mail, and messages are often withheld as a form of isolation. An attempt to sever all support in their caregiver's life is the veteran's goal.

**Psychological abuse**

As devastating as physical abuse but often times more devastating. It can affect a caregiver's inner thoughts and feelings, or exert control over one's life if the caregiver experiences this type of abuse long enough. Caregivers experiencing this type of abuse will see the veteran "testing the waters" to see what he or she is willing to accept. If left long enough without proper professional mental health counseling, the caregiver may find herself being called names, bullied, insulted, threatened to have something taken away, mocked, ignored, isolated, or excluded from meaningful events (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2016).

## QUICK RESOURCE LIST

Battered Women's Justice Project: [www.bwjp.org/our-work/projects/military-and-veterans-advocacy-program.html](http://www.bwjp.org/our-work/projects/military-and-veterans-advocacy-program.html)

Break the Cycle: [www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org)

Legal Momentum: <http://www.legalmomentum.org>

Legal Resource Center on Violence Against Women: [www.lrcvaw.org](http://www.lrcvaw.org)

Legal Services Corporation: [www.lsc.gov](http://www.lsc.gov)

National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence: [www.ncdsv.org/ncd\\_militaryresponse.html](http://www.ncdsv.org/ncd_militaryresponse.html)

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: [www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)

National Network to End Domestic Violence: [www.nnedv.org](http://www.nnedv.org)

National Organization for Victim Assistance: [www.trynova.org/help-crime-victim/nalc/nvaa/](http://www.trynova.org/help-crime-victim/nalc/nvaa/)

Sojourner Center: [www.sojournercenter.org](http://www.sojournercenter.org)

State and Territorial Coalitions against DV: [www.nnedv.org/resources/coalitions.html](http://www.nnedv.org/resources/coalitions.html)

Women's Law: [www.womenslaw.org](http://www.womenslaw.org)

## REFERENCES

- Gerlock, A. (2004). Domestic violence and post-traumatic stress disorder severity for participants of a domestic violence rehabilitation program. *Military Medicine*.
- National Network to End Domestic Violence. (2016). About financial abuse. Retrieved from <http://nnedv.org/resources/ejresources/about-financial-abuse.html>
- Price, J. & Stevens, S. (2016). Partners of veterans with ptsd: research findings. Retrieved from [http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/family/partners\\_of\\_vets\\_research\\_findings.asp](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/family/partners_of_vets_research_findings.asp)
- Sayers, et. al. (2009). Family problems among recently returned military veterans referred for a mental health evaluation. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. Retrieved from <http://www.dcoe.health.mil/DcoEV2/Content/navigation/documents/sayers%202008%20family%20problems%20among%20recently%20returned%20military%20veterans%20referred%20for%20a%20mental%20health%20evaluation.pdf>
- Tracy, N. (2014). Gas lighting definition, techniques and being gas lighted. Retrieved from <http://www.healthyplace.com/abuse/emotional-psychological-abuse/gaslighting-definition-techniques-and-being-gaslighted/>
- Vancouver Coastal Health. (2016). About adult abuse and neglect. Retrieved from [http://www.vchreact.ca/read\\_psychological.htm](http://www.vchreact.ca/read_psychological.htm)
- Zottarelli, M. (2012). Domestic violence among veteran families screening guide. *Swords to Plow shares*, 4-6.