

Traumatic Brain Injury & Domestic Violence

Facts for Service Providers

Domestic violence (or intimate partner violence) is a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over the other. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions against another person¹. The connection between domestic violence and traumatic brain injury (TBI) is strong, but often overlooked. Service providers play a key role in screening for and addressing the signs and behaviors associated with TBI and domestic violence, as this fact sheet will explain.

Domestic Violence and TBI by the Numbers

- » Research on the link between domestic violence and TBI is growing; 2019 evidence showed 75% of women who experienced domestic violence sustained a TBI directly connected to their partner and 50% of women sustained multiple TBIs because of domestic violence².
- » Injuries to the head, neck, and face are far more common than all other areas of the body combined. Injuries to the head sometimes don't show any visible signs of trauma.
- » Strangulation is often overlooked as a cause of brain injury, but up to 83% of domestic violence survivors report a history of head injury in addition to being choked and/or strangled³.
- » Very few survivors of domestic violence are screened for TBI unless they seek medical attention immediately after an injury to the head or neck and are able to state what happened. In fact, studies show about 20% of domestic violence survivors see a physician for their injuries⁴.

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2. Valera, E., Cao, A., Pasternak, O., Shenton, M. E., Kubicki, M., Makris, N., & Adra, N. (2019). White matter correlates of mild traumatic brain injuries in women subjected to intimate-partner violence: a preliminary study. *Journal of Neurotrauma*, 36(5), 661–668. 10.1089/neu.2018.5734
3. Nemeth, J., Mengo, C., Kulow, E., Brown, A., & Ramirez, R. (2019). Provider perceptions and domestic violence (dv) survivor experiences of traumatic and anoxic-hypoxic brain injury: implications for dv advocacy service provision. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 28(6), 744-763. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2019.1591562>
4. Zieman, G., Bridwell, A., & Cárdenas, J.F. (2017). Traumatic brain injury in domestic violence victims: a retrospective study at the barrow neurological institute. *Journal of Neurotrauma*, 34(4), 876-880. 10.1089/neu.2016.4579.

Signs & Symptoms

Common signs someone may have sustained a TBI include:

- Dizziness/balance issues
- Frequent headaches
- More than normal fatigue
- Sensitivity to light/noise
- Trouble remembering things
- "Slower" thinking
- Sleep disturbances
- Mood swings/changes
- Speech issues
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased irritability
- Problems with vision

» When we think about causes of brain injury related to domestic violence, we don't often think about strangulation. Unfortunately, strangulation and choking are very common in domestic violence and can result in serious symptoms. Strangulation is not a traumatic brain injury, but rather a type of anoxic brain injury, which is caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain. After about 4 minutes of oxygen deprivation, brain cells begin to die. Individuals who have been strangled or choked may experience more noticeable memory problems because the part of the brain responsible for forming new memories is especially sensitive to oxygen deprivation.

Service providers should keep in mind that brain injury can make it harder to:

- Assess danger and defend against assaults
- Make and remember safety plans
- Go to school or hold a job (increasing financial dependency on the abuser)
- Leave an abusive partner
- Access services
- Adapt to living in a shelter/residential program for victims of violence. The person may become stressed, anxious and confused or disruptive, or have trouble understanding or remembering shelter procedures.

Why this Information is Important

Many staff working in domestic violence programs and agencies across the country receive little to no formal training on brain injury. And if you work in healthcare, it's important to remember any patient could be experiencing domestic violence. However, there are resources available for service providers to conduct brain injury screenings easily and quickly. If you interact with someone experiencing domestic violence and/or you notice any of the signs and symptoms listed above in someone you work with, use these free, easy tools to screen them: HELPS or CHATS. These online resources do not require additional training to perform and can help service providers make referrals for additional brain injury services if needed.

The Brain Injury Association of Virginia can help you better understand brain injury and consult with you about your clients. Our services are confidential and free.

To get in touch:

Call **1-800-444-6443**

Visit **biav.net**

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