

Domestic Violence (DV) and Disability



How Common Are Disabilities?

Up to 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. have some form of mental, physical, or developmental disability according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. These disabilities can impact mobility, cognition, independent living, hearing, vision, and self-care.

Signs of Abuse:

While people with disabilities may experience the same forms of abuse as people without disabilities, there are a few unique ways that abusive partners may exert power and control that is directly linked to a victim's disability:

Physical Abuse: Handling a victim roughly during a transfer, harming or threatening to harm service animals, preventing a victim from getting food, water, or using the toilet, breaking mobility or communication devices

Emotional Abuse: Threatening abandonment, accusations of faking the disability, threatening to place a victim in an institution, justifying their abusive behavior as caregiver stress

Sexual Abuse: Demanding sex in return for helping, intentionally leaving a victim naked or otherwise exposed, forcing them into nonconsensual sex acts, controlling a victim's reproductive decisions, inappropriate touches during baths or dressing

Neglect: Refusing to give medication, not allowing a victim to seek medical treatments, not providing them with adequate fluids or nutrition, preventing a victim from seeing a doctor or caregiver, refusing to turn a victim to relieve pressure sores, intentionally neglecting a person's personal hygiene

“*You finally say, ‘Okay...I’m going to do whatever I can to change this marriage.’ And by the way, can you bring my scooter to me so I can leave you?’*”

Barriers to Assistance:

Leaving an abusive partner is always difficult. However, if a victim's partner is a caregiver, it can present more challenges. These victims may feel like they must choose between being abused and not being able to fulfill their basic needs. This powerful method of control forces victims of domestic violence to wonder: “If I'm being abused by my caregiver, who will care for me if I leave?”

Additionally, some of the abusive tactics that are uniquely used against people with disabilities may make leaving their partner exceptionally difficult. Such as removing the battery from powered wheelchairs, destroying communication devices, or placing a walker out of reach could completely immobilize a person.