HEALTH EFFECTS OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Considering long-term, chronic illnesses in female survivors
Health Consequences of DV

- When most Americans think of the health consequences of intimate partner violence, they’re likely picturing the bruises and broken bones resulting from the physical abuse in the relationship.

- Once the immediate bruises and broken bones heal, there's evidence that the majority of the 3 million to 4 million women who report a domestic violence incident each year, according to the American Medical Association, have an exceptionally high rate of health problems.
Domestic violence is a crime. These crimes cost the healthcare industry billions each year, and portend long-term, chronic illnesses among victims.
Costs of Intimate Partner Violence Per Year

- Exceed $5.8 billion
  - $4.1 billion is for direct medical/mental health treatment
  - 24% to 54% of all women who visit ER’s have been abused in their lifetime.
  - Victims use the healthcare system 2.5 times as often as non-abused counterparts.
Domestic violence victims are 20% more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions like depression, diabetes, asthma, and digestive disease.
Chronic Abuse Leads to Chronic Illnesses

• DV has a long half-life. Women who left their abusers five, 10, even 20 years ago now face far higher than normal rates of chronic health problems, including:
  • Arthritis
  • Hormonal disorders
  • Asthma
  • Diabetes
  • Hypertension
  • Chronic pain
  • Severe headaches
  • Irritable Bowel Syndrome
  • Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
Long-term Stress Impacts DNA

A recent study at the School of Nursing at the University of California at San Francisco found that women who have endured long periods of abuse, particularly if they had young children at the time, tend to have shorter telomeres (strands of DNA that protectively cap the ends of chromosomes) than other women. Telomeres shorten in response to chronic stress, which can lead to premature cell death. The result: Even women who left their abusers years before often have the physiological profile of women a decade older.
Medical Professionals Don’t Ask

- Seventy-five percent of the women surveyed said they'd never been asked about domestic violence during a physical exam.
- Only 6 percent said a doctor or nurse had ever made a connection between their abuse and health problems.
- And less than 20 percent of abuse victims were offered any resources or referrals from a health care professional.
Children and Domestic Violence

- There is substantial evidence indicating that children who witness domestic violence (DV) have psychosocial maladaptation that is associated with demonstrable changes in the anatomic and physiological make up of their central nervous system.

- Individuals with these changes do not function well in society and present communities with serious medical, sociological, and economic dilemmas.
When you encounter a perceived threat — a large dog barks at you during your morning walk, for instance — your hypothalamus, a tiny region at the base of your brain, sets off an alarm system in your body. Through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts your adrenal glands, located atop your kidneys, to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues.

Cortisol also curbs functions that would be nonessential or detrimental in a fight-or-flight situation. It alters immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and growth processes. This complex natural alarm system also communicates with regions of your brain that control mood, motivation and fear. (Mayo Clinic)
The long-term activation of the stress-response system — and the subsequent overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones — can disrupt almost all your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk of numerous health problems, including:

Anxiety
Depression
Digestive problems
Headaches
Heart disease
Sleep problems
Weight gain
Memory and concentration impairment

Health Problems Due to Stress
Compared to the general population, they’re 15 times more likely to self-medicate by using alcohol and drugs.
Stress and strain release chemicals in the brain that impact brain function and memory.

One expert calls the stress and strain “allostatic load,” a runaway neurochemical and hormonal train that can be stoked for years—long after a woman makes her escape—by traumatic memories embedded in the brain. Such memories, stored in the amygdala, generate cytokines, chemical messengers that elevate inflammation in nearly every system in the body.

In response, the body releases cortisol, the stress hormone.

Normally the body’s system of checks and balances keeps that response under control. But if traumatic memories in the brain keep sounding the alarm for years afterward and generate too much inflammation for too long, the body can become desensitized to the regulating effects of cortisol.
• Chronic Stress causes the muscles in the body to be in a more or less constant state of guardedness.

• When muscles are taut and tense for long periods of time, this may trigger other reactions of the body and even promote stress-related disorders.

• For example, both tension-type headache and migraine headache are associated with chronic muscle tension in the area of the shoulders, neck and head.
Respiratory System

- Stress can make you breathe harder. That's not a problem for most people, but for those with asthma or a lung disease such as emphysema, getting the oxygen you need to breathe easier can be difficult.

- And some studies show that an acute stress — such as the death of a loved one — can actually trigger asthma attacks, in which the airway between the nose and the lungs constricts.

- In addition, stress can cause the rapid breathing — or hyperventilation — that can bring on a panic attack in someone prone to panic attacks.

- Working with a psychologist to develop relaxation and breathing strategies can help.
• Chronic stress, or a constant stress experienced over a prolonged period of time, can contribute to long-term problems for heart and blood vessels. The consistent and ongoing increase in heart rate, and the elevated levels of stress hormones and of blood pressure, can take a toll on the body. This long-term ongoing stress can increase the risk for hypertension, heart attack or stroke.

• Repeated acute stress and persistent chronic stress may also contribute to inflammation in the circulatory system, particularly in the coronary arteries, and this is one pathway that is thought to tie stress to heart attack. It also appears that how a person responds to stress can affect cholesterol levels.

• The risk for heart disease associated with stress appears to differ for women, depending on whether the woman is pre- or post-menopausal. Levels of estrogen in pre-menopausal women appears to help blood vessels respond better during stress, thereby helping their bodies to better handle stress and protecting them against heart disease. Postmenopausal women lose this level of protection due to loss of estrogen, therefore putting them at greater risk for the effects of stress on heart disease.
When the body is stressed, the hypothalamus signals the autonomic nervous system and the pituitary gland and the process is started to produce epinephrine and cortisol, sometimes called the "stress hormones."

**Adrenal Glands (near kidneys)**

Stress signals from the hypothalamus cause the adrenal cortex to produce cortisol and the adrenal medulla to produce epinephrine. This starts the process that gives your body the energy to run from danger.

**Liver**

When cortisol and epinephrine are released, the liver produces more glucose, a blood sugar that would give you the energy for "fight or flight" in an emergency. For most, if you don't use all of that extra energy, the body is able to reabsorb the blood sugar, even if you're stressed again and again. But for some people — especially people vulnerable to Type 2 diabetes — that extra blood sugar can mean diabetes. Who's vulnerable? The obese and races more inclined to diabetes, such as Native Americans.

Studies show that if you learn how to manage stress, you can control your blood sugar level, sometimes nearly as much as with medication.
Esophagus

When you're stressed, you may eat much more or much less than you usually do. If you eat more or different foods, or increase your use of alcohol or tobacco, you can experience heartburn or acid reflux. Stress or exhaustion can also increase the severity of heartburn pain.

Stomach

When you're stressed, your brain becomes more alert to sensations in your stomach. Your stomach can react with "butterflies" or even nausea or pain. You may vomit if the stress is severe enough. And, if the stress becomes chronic, you may develop ulcers or severe stomach pain even without ulcers.

Bowel

Stress can affect digestion, and what nutrients your intestines absorb. It can also affect how fast food moves through your body. You may find that you have either diarrhea or constipation.
The nervous system has several divisions: the central division involving the brain and spinal cord and the peripheral division consisting of the autonomic and somatic nervous systems.

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) has a direct role in physical response to stress and is divided into:

- the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS).

When the body is stressed, the SNS generates what is known as the "fight or flight" response.

The body shifts all of its energy resources toward fighting off a life threat, or fleeing from an enemy.

The SNS signals the adrenal glands to release hormones called adrenalin and cortisol.

These hormones cause the heart to beat faster, respiration rate to increase, blood vessels in the arms and legs to dilate, digestive process to change and glucose levels (sugar energy) in the bloodstream to increase to deal with the emergency.

The SNS response is fairly sudden in order to prepare the body to respond to an emergency situation or acute stress, short term stressors. Once the crisis is over, the body usually returns to the pre-emergency, unstressed state.

Chronic stress, experiencing stressors over a prolonged period of time, can result in a long-term drain on the body. As the SNS continues to trigger physical reactions, it causes a wear-and-tear on the body. It's not so much what chronic stress does to the nervous system, but what continuous activation of the nervous system does to other bodily systems that become problematic.
Menstruation
Stress may affect menstruation among adolescent girls and women in several ways. For example, high levels of stress may be associated with absent or irregular menstrual cycles, more painful periods and changes in the length of cycles.

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)
Stress may make premenstrual symptoms worse or more difficult to cope with and premenstrual symptoms may be stressful for many women. These symptoms include cramping, fluid retention and bloating, negative mood (feeling irritable and "blue") and mood swings.

Menopause
As menopause approaches, hormone levels fluctuate rapidly. These changes are associated with anxiety, mood swings and feelings of distress. Thus menopause can be a stressor in and of itself. Some of the physical changes associated with menopause, especially hot flashes, can be difficult to cope with. Furthermore, emotional distress may cause the physical symptoms to be worse. For example, women who are more anxious may experience an increased number of hot flashes and/or more severe or intense hot flashes.
Many times a perpetrator will hide or destroy their victims’ birth control pills.

Perpetrators may also have sexual relationships outside of their primary relationships, lie about it, and purposely expose partners to STI’s.

One expert said, “There are so many ways someone can be placed at risk for an STI or an unwanted pregnancy, and that can obviously have great consequences down the road.”
DV and Pregnancy

- Pregnant women are at especially high risk for low weight gain, anemia, infections, first and second trimester bleeding, depression, suicide attempts, tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use.
Susceptibility to Infection
There is no doubt that under stress the immune system is suppressed, making you more vulnerable to infections. Allergies and autoimmune diseases (including arthritis and multiple sclerosis) may be exacerbated by stress. This effect can be partly offset by social support from friends and family. Being stressed also slows the rate at which you recover from any illnesses you already have.

Skin Problems
Stress is known to aggravate skin problems such as acne, psoriasis and eczema. It also has been linked to unexplained itchy skin rashes. These skin problems are themselves intensely stressful.

Diabetes
There is some evidence that chronic stress may lead to insulin-dependent diabetes in people who are predisposed to the disease. It could be that stress causes the immune system to destroy insulin-producing cells.
• Survivors of domestic violence can actually re-experience pain years later.

• It isn’t surprising that old fears would be retriggers by new ones.

• The amygdala, which processes feelings of fear and anxiety, tends to weave traumatic memories together, causing them to blur.

• It also helps create the sensation of pain. Rewired by past stress, the amygdala can produce neuropathic pain in response to new trauma.
Jacquelyn Campbell, a professor of public health at the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing and a pioneer in the field of DV research, says that old injuries are not often explored by medical professionals.

“A woman comes in with a black eye, and nobody asks, ‘Where else were you injured?’ She might say, ‘He slammed my entire body against a wall.’ But doctors don’t look beyond that for a history of injury. They don’t ask, ‘Have you ever been strangled by him? Had a head injury? Had a broken bone?’

That’s what we have to be doing so that it’s not 10 years later that she’s starting to complain of memory loss.”

Ideally, Campbell says, DV survivors should be given the same advice about traumatic brain injuries that professional athletes are: Rest. Don’t get hit again.

For an abused woman, of course, that’s very difficult. “So as a doctor or nurse, you want to do some safety planning with her. You try to get her out of harm’s way.”
Maggie has long suspected that the savage beating she received 30 years ago triggered the chronic bronchitis, sinus infections and asthma from which she now suffers. But she couldn’t find a doctor who took that idea seriously. On the day she went to the hospital, Maggie says no doctors examined her; they just suggested she take Tylenol. And because hospital technicians didn’t get a good X-ray of her sinuses, they never found the fragments from her shattered orbital bone. For decades, Maggie complained to her doctors of pain behind her eye. “But as soon as I explained how I got the injuries that I thought were the cause of the pain, they told me it was psychosomatic.”

Finally, in 2002, Maggie saw a new doctor, who ordered a CAT scan, found that bone fragments were blocking her sinuses and had them surgically removed. But the damage was done. Fifteen years after she left her husband, Maggie was diagnosed with asthma, which was exacerbated by the sinus infections. Now the combination of steroids and antibiotics she is taking simply to breathe are damaging her immune system, affecting her blood sugar levels and sending her blood pressure sky-high.
Power & Control Wheel

Physical
- Using Coercion & Threats
  Making and/or carrying out threats to do something to hurt her, threatening to leave her, to commit suicide, to report her to welfare, making her drop charges, making her do illegal things.

- Using Economic Abuse
  Preventing her from getting or keeping a job, making her ask for money, giving her an allowance, taking her money, not letting her know about or have access to family income.

- Using Male Privilege
  Treating her like a servant, making all the big decisions, acting like the “master of the castle,” being the one to define men’s and women’s roles, societal privilege in general.

- Using Children
  Making her feel guilty about the children, using the children to relay messages, using visitation to harass her, threatening to take the children away.

Sexual
- Using Intimidation
  Making her afraid by using looks, actions, gestures, smashing things, destroying her property, abusing pets, displaying weapons.

- Using Emotional Abuse
  Putting her down, making her feel bad about herself, calling her names, making her think she’s crazy, playing mind games, humiliating her, making her feel guilty.

- Using Isolation
  Controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, where she goes, limiting her outside involvement, using jealousy to justify actions.

- Minimizing, Denying & Blaming
  Making light of the abuse and not taking her concerns about it seriously, saying the abuse didn’t happen, shifting responsibility for abusive behavior, saying she caused it.
Bonding

Relationship Continuum

- Prince Charming
- Bond Stage
- Power and Control Escalates
The Cycle of Abuse

**Honeymoon Phase**

Abuser may show jealousy, which makes the victim feel special and important at first. They feel love & dependency on each other. No abuse is taking place and acts as though abuse never happened. Victim hopes the abuse is over, and the abuser may give gifts to victim.

**Reconciliation**

The abuser apologizes & begs the victim to believe the violence won’t happen again. Blames the victim for abuse. Victim is still in shock the violence happened & leaves them vulnerable to accept abuser’s apologies & flowers. False resolution based on denial & minimizing of abuse, and life goes on. Abuser may encourage victim to go shopping, or call family & friends.

**Tension-Building Phase**

Minor incidents occur, such as criticizing, yelling and blaming. The victim often is “walking on eggshells” because they believe it may be their fault the abuser is upset. The victim spends time trying to figure out how they can prevent any violence from happening and keeping the abuser calm.

**Explosive Phase**

Tension will be released in a variety of ways, depending on the history of violence in the relationship. Typically, it gets worse over time. The abuser is out of control, terrorizes victim for hours, breaking things, hitting, spitting, pushing, choking, burning, tying up, raping or kicking victim. Victim will survive this stage with bruises & broken bones, & may end up in the hospital. Sometimes police will be called during this stage.
Family Sunshine Center Services

FSC Services

- Crisis Line
- Shelter
- Counseling
- Medical Clinic
- Volunteer Services
- Outreach and Prevention
- Development
- Exodus
- Rural Counseling
- Family Assessor
- CARES Program