The term “intimate partner violence” describes physical, sexual, psychological or even economical harm by a current or former partner or spouse.

This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy.

Usually the woman is the victim but there are men and many children who are also abused. There are different types of abuse and sometimes we are unaware that we are being abused or that we are abusers ourselves.

Four main types of intimate partner violence

Physical violence is the intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury or harm. Physical violence includes, but is not limited to, scratching, pushing, shoving, throwing, grabbing, biting, choking, shaking, slapping, punching, burning, use of a weapon and use of restraints or one’s body, size or strength against another person. Physical abuse also includes hitting, punching or pushing with a weapon.

Emotional abuse includes swearing, belittling, undermining, shouting or making one partner feel worthless. It may also take the form of withholding love and affection. A person who is physically abused is always emotionally abused as well. The emotional effects of physical abuse often leave both partners feeling inadequate and negative about themselves. The third form of abuse is sexual. This involves withholding and negating the rights of one partner in terms of choices and decisions in the sexual relationship. It includes forcing one spouse to engage in sexual activities against his or her will. This may be forcing them to watch pornographic material, to use sexual aids or forcing oneself on them without considering their needs and desires, in other words, rape.

Financial or economic abuse, the fourth type, is when money is used to control or undermine one’s partner from getting a job, or they may take all the money or even withhold knowledge of the joint finances. Financial abuse entails the misuse of power and control and is presented in:

- Unreasonable keeping of money from the partner (which he/she is legally entitled to);
- Refusal to pay or share rent or mortgage (bond) for the home they share;
- Disposing of property (household goods) in which the other person has interest without his/her permission, etc.

What to do?

Take action

Being in an abusive relationship leaves both parties with feelings of guilt, hurt, anxiety and anger. You may feel helpless, trapped, ashamed, isolated and believe that the abuse is your fault. You are not to blame - you did not give permission nor did you ‘ask for it’.

The abuse will only stop when you take control of your own life. To ensure your safety and to work towards your own happiness is not something unusual or unfair - it is your right as an individual. Learn to be assertive and ask for what you want. You will most certainly be facing a struggle for the rest of your life if you do not take action. This struggle will not be towards growth, but survival.

Talk to someone you can trust

If you experience your relationship as abusive, you are unable to resolve your conflict constructively on your own. During good times (when you may not want to rouse), you should talk to someone. Start sharing your experience and feelings with a best friend. You will feel better after sharing your pain with someone else.

Go for counselling; there are professional people specially trained to help you. You will not be criticised or rejected for your behaviour. You will both be helped to understand your own and your partner’s feelings. Professional assistance will focus on enhancing assertiveness, conflict resolution and communication skills.

Legal Advice

Any abuse is against the law; it should be punished. You can lay a charge against your partner or get an interdict from the court, but in the long term it will only be effective if you change the issues (that are creating tension) in the relationship. The conflict should be resolved in a constructive way.

Abuse is not the solution to your problem, there are more constructive ways of communicating and dealing with conflict in the relationship!

Resources available:

- CLW (Centurion Life Skills Workshop): (012) 664 1931 / (012) 664 7415
- Family Life Centre: (011) 788 4784/5
- POWA: People Opposing Women’s Abuse: (011) 642 4345
- Trauma Centre for survivors of violence and torture: (021) 465 7373