



Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research.

# RESEARCHUPDATE

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## Alcohol Use and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence can be defined as the intentional use of force by one family member or partner to control another. Domestic violence can take the form of physical, psychological, sexual, economic or emotional abuse, intimidation, isolation, and/or exerting power and control by using privilege.<sup>1</sup> This Research Update focuses on male to female domestic violence because it is the most prevalent, but violence can and does occur in other situations including female to male and within same-gender couples.

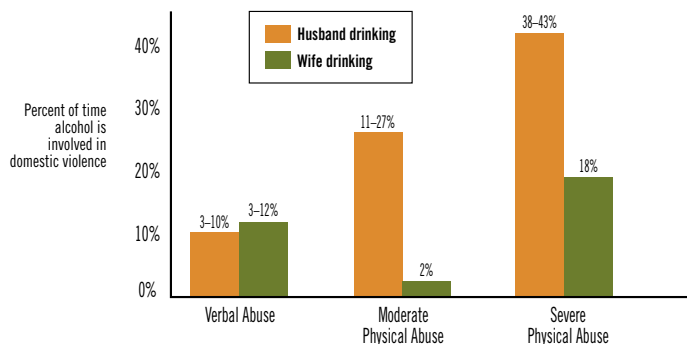
A strong correlation exists between alcohol use and physical violence in marital or partner relationships. In fact, domestic violence is a significant public health issue in the U.S.—one in six couples experience a physical assault each year.<sup>2</sup> One fourth to one half of those who commit acts of domestic violence also have substance abuse problems.<sup>1</sup> While alcohol and/or drug use does not cause or explain domestic violence, the importance of its correlation cannot be overlooked.

### Prevalence

Domestic violence, the most common cause of nonfatal injury to women, represents a substantial threat to women for both injury and death. Women in the U.S. experience a risk of up to 22% for any type of injury resulting from domestic violence. One third of women who are victims of homicide die as a result of violence committed by a spouse or partner.<sup>3</sup> Perpetrators are not easily categorized and multiple factors are involved including: experience of violence while growing up; need for control and power; and intimacy and dependency issues. All of these factors occur and in the context of societal sexism and cultural acceptability of violence toward women.<sup>1</sup>

Injuries inflicted on women by their partners cost society over \$44 million each year. For example, 30% of women who are trauma patients have been victims of domestic violence. Severe physical assaults occur in 8-13% of marriages and re-occur in two-thirds of these marriages.<sup>1</sup>

Relationship Between Alcohol Use and Domestic Violence



SOURCE: Leonard, K.E., and Quigley, B.M. (1999). Drinking and marital aggression in newlyweds: An event-based analysis of drinking and the occurrence of husband marital aggression. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 60, 541. Range reflects both husband's and wife's report.

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### THE HAZELDEN EXPERIENCE

Of the patients who received residential primary treatment at the Hazelden Center City campus in 1999, 4.8% had a prior domestic assault arrest. The multidisciplinary aspect of the Hazelden model of treatment involves identifying and treating dual disorders and other problems that can interfere with treatment success. Hazelden assesses a variety of issues including domestic violence and addresses it as part of the individualized treatment plan. Hazelden also provides special groups for women who have experienced domestic violence.

### CONTROVERSIES & QUESTIONS

*If one problem is treated, won't the other one disappear?*

Alcohol/drug treatment providers recognize that other issues such as domestic violence affect substance abuse patterns and can undermine recovery. Both problems must be addressed. In some cases, it may be best for perpetrators not to return home until significant progress is made specifically regarding their physical violence. This may need to occur in a halfway house or other facility that can provide special services for domestic abuse.

*Is alcohol use a legitimate excuse for committing acts of domestic violence?*

No, never. Using "alcohol made me do it" as an excuse for domestic violence isn't justifiable. Not everyone who uses alcohol to excess commits violent acts. And conversely, not everyone who is violent is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

### HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

Domestic violence can be a silent part of alcohol/drug dependency so be sure to assess for it. Accurate assessment for domestic violence requires asking specific, sensitive questions. Consult effective models for incorporating marital counseling into treatment. Examples include behavior couples treatment and the Treatment Improvement Protocol Series sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.<sup>1</sup>

## Alcohol Use and Domestic Violence



### Strong Correlation

A strong correlation exists between alcohol use and domestic violence. In one study, in which newlyweds were asked about their relationship one year after marriage, researchers found a strong association between alcohol use and increasing severity of domestic violence.<sup>4</sup> In cases of verbal abuse, 3-10% of the husbands were using alcohol. In cases of mild physical abuse (defined as throwing something, pushing, grabbing, shoving, or slapping), 11-27% of the husbands were using alcohol. In cases of severe physical aggression (defined as being kicked, hit with a fist, hit with an object, beaten up), 38-43% of the husbands were drinking.

These researchers followed the couples into the third year of their marriage and found that the violence present in the first year predicted violence in the third year. The relationship between drinking and violence of husbands and wives was complex: the most violence occurred in marriages where the husband was a heavy drinker and the wife was not.<sup>5</sup>

Violence appears to be more closely associated with alcohol than other drug use. In one study of women who were injured intentionally, 52% reported that their partners were using alcohol just before the assault while 15% said partners used drugs prior to the assault.<sup>3</sup> In general, women's drinking does not seem to predict whether a woman is a victim of marital violence.<sup>3,4</sup>

But even though there appears to be a strong correlation between alcohol/drug use and domestic violence, two factors remain unexplained. First, we do not know the direction of the correlation between alcohol and domestic violence. Abuse of alcohol or drugs may cause domestic violence, or domestic violence may cause alcohol/drug abuse, or an entirely different factor may cause both. And second, the fact remains that a large proportion of domestic violence (i.e., probably at least 50%) is NOT associated with alcohol use. Alcohol may increase the distortion of power and control, which is believed to be the main determinant of conflict in intimate relationships, and lead to violence.<sup>3</sup> Some researchers have theorized there are different types of perpetrators for example: (1) antisocial types who are generally violent, both inside and outside the home; (2) controlling, perfectionistic, or domineering men whose violence mainly occurs in the home; and, (3) men with attachment and abandonment issues, who vacillate between being calculatingly violent and desperately needy and remorseful.<sup>1</sup>

### Breaking the Cycle

To interrupt the cycle of alcohol/drug use and domestic violence, violence must be addressed in alcohol/drug treatment. Research shows that providing alcohol/drug treatment (especially couples therapy for alcoholism) reduces domestic violence considerably. Rates of violence decreased dramatically after behavioral couples therapy (BCT) for alcoholism: the rate of physical assault by men was 64% the year before BCT therapy, 28% one year after, and 19% two years after therapy.<sup>6</sup> Recurrence of violence was associated most with relapse to alcohol use: the rate of violence by relapsed alcoholics was 35% one year after BCT and 29% after two years.<sup>6</sup> After BCT treatment, domestic violence returned to the level experienced by other families in general.<sup>1</sup>

The effectiveness of alcohol/drug treatment and relapse prevention improves when domestic violence issues are addressed in treatment.<sup>1</sup> It is critical for treatment programs to not portray or sanction sexism, sexual harassment, or an environment of subtle denigration of women, but instead, to make concerted efforts to dispel societal stereotypes and mores that makes domestic violence socially acceptable.

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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

**Patricia Owen, Ph.D.**, Director

If you have questions, or would like to request copies of Research Update, please call 800-257-7800 ext. 4405, email [butlerresearch@hazelden.org](mailto:butlerresearch@hazelden.org), or write BC 4, P.O. Box 11, Center City, MN 55012-0011.

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