

# Conflict, Abuse, and Violence in Intimate Relationships

## Conflict in Intimate Relationships

The term *conflict* usually refers to antagonistic opinions or actions resulting from opposing ideas, values, beliefs, interests, needs, drives, wishes, or internal and external demands. Although the term *conflict* is often used to mean hostile disputes and dysfunctional relationships, research has shown that the mere existence of conflict does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes in a long-term interpersonal relationship. In fact, sometimes conflict can lead to positive outcomes. Conflict may create an atmosphere in which relational partners can candidly express their pent up emotion and important feelings that may lead to exploring creative solutions to problems. Moreover, successful management of conflicts can strengthen relational bonds and increase relational cohesion and solidarity (Cupach & Canary, 2016).

## Frequency and Intensity of Conflicts

It is difficult to determine how much conflict in an intimate relationship is typical or common and how much is too much. Because some couples develop a relational culture of arguing frequently over any major or minor issues; others develop a norm to argue infrequently only when they disagree on any major issues. Researchers have found that various factors are related to the amount of conflict couples are likely to encounter, including but not limited to the following factors (Asadi et al., 2016).

## Personality

A couple of researchers have demonstrated that personality is related to exposure and reactivity in interpersonal conflicts as individuals differ in their propensity to avoid, accommodate, compromise, compete, or collaborate with partners in long-term marital or nonmarital relationships (Bono et al., 2002). There are at least three levels in which individual differences in personality can be related to conflict: level 1—traits or characteristics (what a person has); level 2—contextual factors including plans, strategies, and goals (what a person does); and level 3—life narratives (how a person makes sense or meaning of his/her experiences (McAdams, 1995). In addition, the following personality traits have been found to have significant influences on interpersonal conflicts (Bono et al., 2002; Heaven et al., 2006).

**Agreeableness.** Individuals who are high on agreeableness tend to be altruistic, trusting, cooperative, compliant, and are likely to experience fewer conflicts than those who are low on agreeableness.

**Extroversion.** Individuals who are extroverts generally tend to be positive, social, energetic, joyful, friendly, and interested in other people. Individuals who score high on extroversion are likely to experience less interpersonal conflicts than those who score low on extroversion.

**Neuroticism.** People who are high on neuroticism tend to experience negative affect and emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and hostility; and they are likely to experience more conflict in interpersonal relationships than those who score low on neuroticism.

## Attachment Style

People with secure attachment style experience less interpersonal conflict and manage it more effectively if and when it does occur than do people with insecure attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013). Moreover, individuals with secure attachment style tend to be more cool and calm, and less angry during conflicts than individuals with insecure attachment style (Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013). People with anxious and avoidant attachment style are likely to have high tensions and exaggerated fear and worries about the outcomes of conflict on the stability of intimate relationships (Overall et al., 2014).

## Lifestyle

Life style factors such as alcohol addiction, drug abuse, and sleep deprivation have been found to be associated with interpersonal conflicts. For

example, heavy alcohol drinking was reported to be associated with increased problems in intimate relationships including both marital and nonmarital relationships, and these problems further aggravate when one partner drinks heavily and the other fully abstains from drinking (Homish & Leonard, 2008). Poor quantity and quality of sleep make partners short-tempered, irritable, and prone to conflict; if and when either or both partners experience sleep problems—they tend to get involved in more frequent and unexpected conflicts even on minor issues (Gordon & Chen, 2014).

### *Stage of Life*

Some young adults are likely to experience more frequent conflicts with partners at the early stage of an intimate relationship. But this trend changes and the rate of conflict goes down as they establish a stable romantic relationship and settle down with a professional career in their midtwenties (Chen et al., 2006). Older adults, generally, experience fewer partner conflicts than do young and middle adults (Holley, Haase, & Levenson, 2013).

### *Intensity of Conflicts*

However, the mere frequency of conflict has little impact on the quality and stability of intimate relationships. More important factors are the seriousness of conflicts and the manner in which they are resolved (Gottman, 2011). The intensity and seriousness of conflicts can vary largely within and between couples. Mild forms of disagreements and conflicts are likely to have minimal and short-lived effects. But serious and long-term ongoing struggles can produce intense personal anxiety and relational tension among couples. Stable or recurring intense conflicts are most problematic for relational stability. However, relational harm can be partially or fully mitigated through positive communication and mutual understanding (Johnson & Roloff, 2000).

### **Is Conflict Inevitable in Any Intimate Relationship?**

Difference of opinions, disagreements, and conflicts are natural and inevitable in any intimate relationships, no matter how deeply two partners are close to each other and how intensely they feel and care for one another (Canary & Lakey, 2013). No two partners are identical in their personalities, preferences, ideas, and habits. It is inconceivable and undesirable to have partners who match each other on every single human

characteristic. These are some of the reasons why disagreements and conflicts in any relationship are a common feature. Thus some forms of conflict are certainly inevitable in any healthy relationships. Whether conflicts are sporadic or frequent, it is quite common to have differences of interests, opinions, approaches, and viewpoints on any relevant issues. The point is how effectively conflict is managed and resolved rather than whether there will be any conflict or no conflict in a relationship. So the fact of the matter is, conflict has its place in any relationship, and it does not get resolved itself automatically. If the parties involved do not control the conflict fairly quickly, the conflict may start controlling them and make their relationship worse.

### Sources of Conflicts

Some of the common sources of conflict in a long-term intimate relationship (either marital or nonmarital) are as follows:

**Role expectations.** Each couple in a dyadic relationship has her/his unique expectations. Similarity and consistency of expectations and finding agreed ways and means of fulfilling expectations of each partner are important for avoiding interpersonal conflicts. Differences in expectations may be a major source of tension and conflict in any long-term marital or nonmarital close relationship (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2011).

**Needs for connectedness and separateness.** In an intimate relationship, people want to fulfill, among others, two needs—connectedness and separateness. Connectedness refers to needs for intimacy, closeness, belongingness, companionship, and togetherness. Contrarily, separateness refers to needs for privacy, autonomy, individual freedom, and independence. To develop and maintain a harmonious intimate relationship, couples need to devise a right balance between these two competing demands of connectedness and separateness. Misunderstanding, frustration, disappointment, and conflicts in intimate relationships are likely to occur when couples have to sacrifice one for the sake of the other. An intimate relationship usually thrives when both needs can be fulfilled; and couples can stay close without becoming lost, and stay separate without becoming isolated (Busch & Jarosewitsch, 2012).

**Fairness and equity.** Fair sharing of duties and responsibilities, resources, and benefits is important to assure partners feel that the relationship is just. The behavioral interactions between the couples should also be guided by the principles of fairness and equity. The violation of these norms can lead to conflict in the intimate relationship (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2011). Partners who are overbenefited are likely to feel guilty, and

partners who are underbenefited tend to be angry with their privileged peers (Hatfield, Rapson, & Aumer-Ryan, 2007).

**Power sharing.** Another potential source of conflict in an intimate relationship is unequal power sharing (Conroy, 2014). The power distribution between couples should be equal and balanced, and not uneven like the power distribution between a master and a slave, or a boss and a subordinate employee. Interpersonal power between couples is based on the control of valuable resources and how these resources are used in the relationships. When one partner has more control over important resources (such as income and wealth) of the family, she/he may try to dominate the other partner by exercising more decision-making power and controlling joint activities (Impett & Peplau, 2006). As male partners usually enjoy more power, they often tend to be more controlling and domineering over female partners, and that often leads to conflict and violence among the couples (Vescio, Schlenker, & Lenes, 2010).

**Incompatible and conflicting goals and unfair demands.** Couples often engage in conflict because their goals are incompatible, and goals of both partners can't be attained at the same time. So the more powerful partner often tries to block the goals of the less powerful partner, and tries to attain his/her own goals at the cost of goals of the weaker partner (Fisher, 2000). Peterson (2007) reported that the four most common factors that often trigger conflicts between couples are:

- **Unfair demands.** Unjust and unexpected demands can upset a partner.
- **Criticism.** Frequent criticism even about trivial matters can provoke conflicts.
- **Cumulative annoyances.** Repeated trivial differences and recurring nuisances can cause cumulative annoyance.
- **Rebuffs.** Ignoring or not responding to a partner's desired expectations, such as having sex, may cause rebuffs.

Peterson (2007) argued that undue criticism can damage a partner's self-esteem, unfair demands can create a feeling of inequality among partners, cumulative annoyances can cause a sense of mutual disrespect between partners, and being rebuffed can create a sense of self-devaluation in a partner.

**Attributions.** Attribution is another potential source of interpersonal conflict. For example, partners may agree about a wrong action but may disagree about each other's explanations. Attributions can be either internal—assigning the cause of behavior to some internal characteristics, rather than to some outside forces; or external—assigning the cause of

behavior to some outside factors, rather than to some internal characteristics. Internal attributions, generally, instigate more anger and trigger more conflicts than do external attributions (Canary & Lakey, 2013).

**The role of significant others.** The role of significant others, especially mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, can be a potential source in the development of conflicts between marital couples. Although couples may live far from their in-laws, the in-laws can and often do interfere in married couples' decision-making processes, especially in Oriental societies (Asadi et al., 2016).

In addition, Gary Lewandowski (2016) has identified the following behaviors as potential sources of conflict in intimate relationships:

1. **Condescending.** Treating a partner as stupid or inferior.
2. **Possessive.** Demanding too much attention or time of a partner.
3. **Neglecting.** Ignoring or rejecting a partner's feelings.
4. **Abusive.** Verbally abusing (using insulting language, such as name calling) and behaviorally abusing (such as slapping) a partner.
5. **Unfaithful.** Breach of trust, such as having sex with a person other than a partner.
6. **Inconsiderate.** Unsupportive and noncooperative partner.
7. **Physically self-absorbed.** Worrying and focusing too much about appearance.
8. **Moody.** Emotionally and behaviorally unstable partner.
9. **Sexually withholding.** Frequently refusing to respond to a partner's request for sex.
10. **Attraction for others.** Talking about others as sex partners or showing sexual attraction for others.
11. **Substance abuse.** Being an alcoholic or a drug addict.
12. **Disheveled.** Being careless about dress and appearance.
13. **Lack of respect for partner.** Being rude and discourteous to a partner (such as saying to a partner that he/she looks ugly and unattractive).
14. **Sexually aggressive.** Forcing sex on a partner.
15. **Self-centered.** Thinking and behaving selfishly.

### Instigation and Escalation of Conflicts

Researchers have identified two types of behaviors or tactics of partners that frequently incite and ignite interpersonal conflicts directly or indirectly (Canary & Lakey, 2013). Direct tactics include (1) accusation, criticism, and attributions of negative qualities to the partner; (2) threats of

physical and emotional harm to the partner; (3) using hurtful, demeaning, sarcastic, and abusive language about the partner's physical appearance, choices, dresses, and lifestyles; and (4) shouting at and putting down the partner.

Indirect tactics include (1) showing a feeling of superiority, arrogance, and snobbish attitudes toward the partner; (2) showing displeasure, dejection, and depression; (3) abrupt and erratic conducts; and (4) tendency to be evasive and elusive. These sorts of obnoxious behavior, whether direct or indirect, tend to instigate and inflame partner conflicts (Birditt et al., 2010a). Surly and rude interactions between partners, especially when such interactions escalate too much and too often, can have damaging effects not only on their relationships but also on their health. A study in England, for instance, on a sample of 9,000 people over a period of 12 years, showed that individuals who encounter frequent surly conflicts with their partners are more likely to have heart attacks (De Vogli, Chandola, & Marmot, 2007).

### Areas of Conflicts

Several researchers have identified a couple of common areas of conflicts in intimate relationships, including but not limited to financial issues, sexual issues, issues related to children, sharing housework, etc. (e.g., Cahn, 2009; Thompson, 2015).

**Financial matters.** Conflicts concerning money are more frequently about how much money is earned and spent. How do the couples make budget? What do they spend it on? Who makes the decisions about what is spent? How do they save? Each one of these topics can be a source of conflict. It is more often about sharing bank accounts, making decisions about buying or selling properties, daily expenses, etc. Parrott and Parrott (2013) indicated that sometimes conflicts arise for fear of (1) not having power and influence in spending money on important matters impacting her/his life, (2) not feeling secure about financial stability in the future, (3) a partner not showing respect for one's choice and values while spending money, (4) not realizing one's dreams, and (5) a partner spending too much on unnecessary things and too little on essential things.

**Sexual issues.** Most couples do not expect that their sexual relationship will be an issue when they start an intimate relationship. They tend to believe that their sexual relationship will continue to be very enjoyable and fulfilling; yet it is a common area of frustration and conflict for many couples. It is also not uncommon for one or both partners to feel resentful that he/she is not getting his/her sexual needs fulfilled for a long time,

because he/she is not having enough sex or satisfactory sex due to a partner's lack of mood, interest, and motivation, or feeling of tiredness, etc. Other sexual issues that often lead to conflicts are being unfaithful to partners, having extradyadic sex with multiple partners, having sex without love for the partner, forcing sex on the partner, sexual pressures, and coercive sexual behavior.

**Children.** Couples quite often fight about children. The topics of concern about children are when to have a child, how many children the couple should have, how to share responsibilities of caring children, how to educate the children, and how to discipline them. The issue of discipline can become more delicate when a couple have children from other relationships. Moreover, with the birth of a child, one partner (typically male), may begin to feel not getting enough attention and love from the partner, because after the birth a child or children she gives more time and attention to the kid(s).

**Household chores.** Housework can trigger conflicts when one partner believes that the other partner is not contributing his/her fair share of the domestic duties. Not sharing domestic duties equitably is one of the major predictors of conflict between intimate couples in marital and nonmarital long-term relationships. Couples fight over who does what around the house almost as much as they fight over money. A couple of researchers noted that conflicts sometimes occur because even though many women work outside the home, they have to do most of the household chores because their husbands or partners don't like to share domestic work equitably (Blumstein & Schwartz, 2008; Cardoso et al., 2016). That does not necessarily mean a 50–50 split of domestic work but rather splitting housework in a way that both partners work as a team of a well-organized home, where each partner does the work he/she likes to do (Gregoire, 2013).

## Effects of Conflict

The effects of interpersonal conflict can vary from positive to negative. Conflicts can lead to constructive outcomes, such as changing attitudes and behavior, minimizing differences of opinion, making compromises, and improving relationships. On the other hand, conflicts can lead to destructive and damaging outcomes, such as aggression, abuse, and separation. As noted earlier, disagreements and fighting are not uncommon in any partnership, but some fighting styles are destructive and damaging. Couples who use hurtful language during arguments—such as yelling, resorting to personal criticisms or accusation and attributions of negative qualities to the partner—are more likely to break up the relationships than



couples who fight constructively—trying to figure out ways of resolving disagreements in a mutually acceptable manner focusing on the partner's feelings, listening to his/her point of view, and trying to make him/her feel happy. Individuals who either withhold conflicts or withdraw from conflicts without resolving them tend to be unhappy in their long-term relationships (Noller, 2012). Keeping concerns or problems to oneself can breed resentment. Trying to sort out disagreements and conflicts by discussing problems more deeply often minimizes resentment and helps one to stay connected to one's partner over the long term (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). Looking critically at the problem and understanding its nature and the root and making sincere efforts to eliminate the problem before it becomes severe can save the relationship (McNulty & Russell, 2010). Effective handling of conflict, not withdrawing from it, helps intimate relationships to grow and prosper (Fincham, 2003).

The outcomes of conflicts can range from constructive and beneficial to destructive and damaging (Peterson, 2002). Constructive outcomes can occur through *compromise*—settling a dispute by mutual concession, *integrative agreements*—making selective concessions by minimizing and prioritizing goals, and *structural improvement*—making desirable changes in the characteristics and dynamics of the relationship. Whereas destructive and damaging outcomes can occur through *domination*—one partner forcing the other to concede, *separation*—one or both partners withdrawing without resolving the conflict, and *termination*—ending the relationship when the partners feel that nothing will work and little or no hope is left to salvage the relationship.

## Conflict Management

Conflict is not necessarily always harmful to intimate relationships; rather it can be helpful if managed constructively. But if not managed properly, it can have corrosive effects on intimate relationships and destructive conflict can erode the basic foundations of intimate relationships. Goals and strategies for conflict management can vary from individual to individual and from couple to couple. However, some of the common goals include maintaining intimacy and minimizing or eliminating conflicts. Minimizing conflicts and maintaining intimacy through compromise and cooperation, patience, self-control, flexibility, and integrative agreements are likely to work better than using power assertive techniques, such as forcing the partner to give up differences and agree (Canary & Lakey, 2013). Differences and disagreements are common in any intimate relationship, but some fighting styles are damaging and destructive. Couples

who resort to destructive behaviors during conflicts—such as yelling, personal criticisms, or name calling—are more likely to break up the relationship than do couples who fight constructively (Birditt et al., 2010b). Couples generally differ in their styles and skills of managing conflicts (Zeidner & Kloda, 2013). When a couple develops successful techniques or strategies of managing conflict that tend to last long (Kamp & Taylor, 2012).

## Conflict Management Strategies

Couples often try to eliminate their conflicts using positive and/or negative strategies. These two types of strategies are discussed in the following pages.

**Positive strategies.** Common positive strategies for conflict management include (Birditt et al., 2010a; Lavner & Bradbury, 2012):

- **Maintaining intimacy.** Emphasis on compromise and cooperation.
- **Talking openly.** Discussing deeper or more personal subjects with the partner to stay connected.
- **Finding constructive strategies for resolving disagreements.** Listening to the partner's viewpoints patiently with an open mind and trying to make the partner feel better.
- **Situational adaptability.** Adapting conversational styles and behaviors in a situation appropriate manner.
- **Setting boundaries.** Keeping the argument or fight within the limit of decency and civility.
- **Positive understanding.** Developing awareness that differences are not problems but hurtful behaviors are, and the couples are lovers and not enemies.
- **Win-win approach.** Trying to resolve conflicts in a way that both partners can save face and feel positive about it.
- **Keeping things interesting.** Breaking old routines and trying new things or news ways of doing the same thing.
- **Agree to disagree.** If the couples can't dissolve a conflict, it is better to drop it without escalating it any further.
- **Saying what one means.** Being clear in conveying messages and seeking partner's confirmation and agreement.
- **Being polite and staying cool.** Not to make the situation too tense, taking a break when the discussion becomes too heated, and coming back to the issue later.
- **Asking professional help.** Seeking professional advice when the conflicts are too complex to resolve through mutual discussions.

**Negative strategies.** Common negative strategies for conflict resolutions include (Spangle & Isenbart, 2003; Wertheim et al., 2006):

- **Denial.** Refusing to admit the existence of conflict in the relationship or trying to suppress conflict.
- **Power assertion.** Trying to win an argument at any cost, such as by asserting power and dominance over the partner, or forcing the partner to concede.
- **Fear of retaliation.** One partner, generally the weaker one, often doesn't protest or fight for fear of personal attack or verbal abuse.
- **Unfair demand.** Insisting that the partner apologize publicly for a minor mistake.
- **Win-lose approach.** Trying to resolve conflicts in a way that fulfills one partner's interests at the expense of the other partner.
- **Displaying a negative attitude.** Mocking or insulting the partner, being defensive, withdrawing from the conversation, and being aggressive or belligerent.

Positive strategies have been found to be more effective than negative strategies for managing conflicts (Deutsch, 2006; Rizkalla, Wertheim, & Hodgson, 2008). Conflicts in intimate relationships often lead to abuse of and violence against the weaker partner by the stronger or more powerful partner.

## Partner Abuse

Partner abuse refers to a pattern of offensive and insulting behavior of one partner intended to establish and maintain control over the other partner. A common pattern of partner abuse is that the perpetrator often alternates between abusive behavior and apologetic behavior with apparent promises to change. The abuser may be quite pleasant much of the time, which is why many abused partners don't leave the abusive relationship, hoping that the perpetrating partner will change behavior in course of time. The victim of partner abuse or violence may be a woman or a man. Partner abuse usually occurs in traditional heterosexual marriages, in cohabiting relationships, and in same-sex partnerships. The abuse may happen during a relationship, or while the couple is on the point of breaking up, or after the relationship has ended. Partner abuse can aggravate and escalate from threats and verbal abuse to physical violence ending up in murder. Partner abuse is not a result of unintended losing of control, but trying to control the partner by intentionally abusing her/him verbally, emotionally, or physically. Unfortunately, in many cultures, control of

women by men has been an accepted norm with a long history. However, some cultures, especially Western cultures, are gradually moving from male dominance to egalitarian family relationships with decreased subordination of women to increased equality in relationships.

### **Types of Partner Abuse**

The common types of partner abuse, though somewhat overlapping, are (de Benedictis, 2016; Smith & Segal, 2014):

- Physical abuse.
- Emotional or psychological abuse.
- Sexual abuse.
- Stalking.
- Economic abuse or financial abuse.
- Spiritual abuse.

### **Physical Abuse**

Physical abuse is characterized by the use of physical force against the partner ranging from physical injury to murder. In most cultures of the world, physical assault is a criminal offense whether it occurs inside or outside a family.

**Patterns of physical abuse.** Some common modes of physical abuse include:

- Pushing, throwing, kicking, slapping, hitting, punching, beating, pinching, biting, bruising, choking, etc.
- Restraining or confinement.
- Forcing partner for alcohol and/or drug use.
- Assaulting with a stick or a weapon such as a knife or a firearm.
- Burning.
- Murder and so on.

### **Emotional or Psychological Abuse**

Emotional or psychological abuse can be either verbal or nonverbal or both. Although physical abuse might appear worse, the effects of emotional abuse are more deeply rooted. Research shows that emotional abuse is as damaging or even more damaging than physical abuse.

Some common patterns of emotional abuse may include:

- Intimidation or threat to gain control and compliance.
- Threat to damage or destroy or the actual destruction of the victim's personal property and possessions, or for example, harming a pet, name calling.
- Yelling or screaming.
- Making fun of, or mocking the victim, either alone or in front of family or friends.
- Downplaying the victim's accomplishments or goals.
- Undermining the partner's self-worth and self-esteem.
- Trying to isolate the victim from friends and family.
- Making the victim feel that there is no way out of the relationship, etc.

### ***Sexual Abuse***

Some common forms of sexual abuse include:

- Sexual assault: forcing the partner to participate in unsafe or degrading sexual activity.
- Sexual harassment: ridiculing the partner's sexual choices and ability to perform satisfactorily in sexual activity.
- Marital rape, attack on sex organs, forcing sex through physical violence.
- Sexual exploitation: forcing the partner to look at pornography, or to participate in pornographic filmmaking, etc.

### ***Stalking***

Stalking can take place in many different ways, such as:

- Repeated phone calls.
- Tracking personal documents and records (possibly even with a global positioning device).
- Online searching.
- Watching with hidden cameras.
- Suddenly showing up where the victim is, such as at home, school, or work.
- Cyberstalking, such as sending e-mails and instant messaging.
- Sending unwanted packages, cards, or gifts.
- Monitoring the victim's phone calls or e-mails.
- Contacting the victim's friends, family, coworkers, or neighbors for his/her personal information.

### ***Economic or Financial Abuse***

Some common financial abuse includes:

- Withholding money or credit cards.
- Trying to make the partner financially dependent by controlling her/his financial resources.
- Stealing from or defrauding a partner of money or assets.
- Exploiting the partner's money for personal gain.
- Forcing the partner to share bank account or real estate property.
- Preventing the partner from working or choosing an occupation or not allowing the partner to work outside the home, etc.

### ***Spiritual Abuse***

Some common spiritual abuse includes:

- Criticizing the partner's religious rituals.
- Forcing the partner to follow one's own religious values and beliefs against his/her will.
- Ridiculing the partner's religious or spiritual beliefs.
- Forcing the children to be reared with religious faith that the partner does not approve.

### ***Causes of Partner Abuse***

Some individuals tend to resort to partner abuse and violence because:

- They have past experience of solving their problems through abusive means.
- They might have effectively exerted control and power over partners through abuse in the past.
- They have encountered no effective opposition from partners to stop abuse.

Some common causes of partner abuse are (CDC, 2014; de Benedictis, 2016):

- Stress.
- Provocation from the partner.
- Economic hardship—prolonged unemployment.
- Depression.

- Anxiety and frustration.
- Alcohol and drug addiction.
- Rejection and isolation.

### **Characteristics of Partner Abuse**

Research literature has revealed some common characteristics of partner abuse worldwide as follows (Itzin, Taket, & Barter-Godfrey, 2010; National Institutes of Justice, 2015; Vagianos, 2015; WHO, 2016):

- Women are generally subjected to partner abuse more often and more severely than are men.
- The most likely victims of partner abuse are women who are young, poor, uneducated, separated, or divorced.
- Men who abuse women tend to have low self-esteem, sexual inadequacy, a feeling of dominance, social isolation, and frustration.
- Intimate partner abuse happens to adults of all ages, regardless of race, ethnicity, and geographical boundaries.
- Partner abuse can take place during a relationship or after a relationship has ended.
- Most often older abuse happens to frail elderly people living with a spouse or an intimate partner, and the abuser is most likely to be a spouse, since more elder people live with spouses.

### **Outcomes of Partner Abuse**

Several studies have indicated that people who are abused by a spouse or by an intimate partner may develop following problems (Archer, 2000; CDC, 2014):

- Sleeping problems.
- Depression.
- Anxiety and tension.
- Low self-esteem.
- Low self-adequacy.
- Lack of trust between partners.
- Feelings of abandonment.
- Rejection sensitivity.
- Diminished mental and physical health.

- Inability to work.
- Poor relationships with children.
- Substance abuse as a way of coping.
- Physical injury and death.
- Termination or end of relationships.
- Financial problems, such as poverty and homelessness.

## **Prevention of Partner Abuse**

Rising political agitation and the women's movement during the 19th century led to increasing awareness of domestic violence against women, and changes in popular opinion and legislation regarding domestic violence in Western Europe and North America (Gordon, 2002). Consequently, some measures for intervention and prevention of domestic violence were adopted by the government and private organizations in Western Europe and North America, especially in the United States. Some of these measures are:

- Enacting laws—Violence Against Women Act, Family Violence Prevention and Services Act.
- Domestic Violence Prevention Enhancement and Leadership Through Alliances (DELTA) program, funded by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- Domestic Violence Offender Gun Ban. This is a U.S. federal law enacted in 1996 to ban firearms and ammunitions to individuals convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence.
- U.S. asylum for victims of domestic violence.
- Freedom from domestic violence resolution movement. In 2011, 26 local governments in the United States have passed resolutions declaring freedom from domestic violence to be a fundamental human right.
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. This is a private organization in the United States, working to develop a culture where domestic violence is not tolerated.
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline. This is a 24-hour confidential and toll-free hotline in the United States, created through the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act to provide help to the domestic violence victims immediately connecting to a service provider in his/her area. This hotline consists of highly trained advocates to provide support, information, referrals, safety planning, and crisis intervention in 170 languages.

However, partner abuse tends to perpetuate in a society where abuse is not considered a crime but a “domestic dispute,” the abuser is not



ostracized but socially accepted, abuse is considered a normal part of intimate relationships, people don't take it seriously because they tend to think that both partners are more or less responsible for domestic violence, and there is no specific law to try offenders (de Benedictis, 2016).

## Violence in Intimate Relationships

Partner violence is an extreme form of partner abuse. Violence refers to behaviors involving intimidation and/or exertion of physical force intended to do physical harm, injury, or damage to others (Spitzberg, 2013). Family violence, especially partner violence, is quite common and happening quite often all over the world (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

### Global Statistics About Partner Violence

Here are some global statistics about partner violence:

- Globally, 10–50 percent of women report of being physically assaulted by an intimate partner at some time in their lives (Itzin, Taket, & Barter-Godfrey, 2010).
- About one-third of all women are victims of domestic violence during their lifetime (Huss, 2009).
- Approximately, 4 million women are assaulted by a domestic partner yearly (Sartin, Hansen, & Huss, 2006).
- About 1 in 4 women and 1 in 8 men, aged 18 to 59, reported experiencing partner abuse and violence from 2008 to 2009 (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).
- A woman's pregnancy is the high-risk period for the escalation of intimate partner violence, and partner violence is one of the leading causes of maternal mortality in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (Itzin, Taket, & Barter-Godfrey, 2010).
- The dangerous type of violence against women often occurs at the ending of an intimate relationship (Huss, 2009).
- About 6 percent of older couples reported partner violence in the past one year, and the rate was much higher (25 percent) for vulnerable (disabled) elders who were abused by their caregiving partners (Itzin, Taket, & Barter-Godfrey, 2010).

In addition, the key facts of a recent report of the World Health Organization on partner violence and sexual violence against women reveal (WHO, 2016):

- About (35 percent) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime.
- Worldwide, almost 1 in 3 women (30 percent), who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner.
- Globally, about 38 percent of murders of women are committed by intimate partners.
- About 15 percent of women in Japan and 71 percent of women in Ethiopia reported physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
- Between 0.3 and 12 percent of women reported sexual violence by someone other than a partner since the age of 15 years.
- About 17 percent of women in Tanzania, 24 percent in Peru, and 30 percent in Bangladesh, all of them from rural areas, reported that their first sexual experience was forced.

The WHO report also showed that factors associated with increased risk of physical and sexual violence against women by male partners include low education, exposure to violence in the family, financial dependence of women, harmful use of alcohol, attitudes of accepting violence, and gender inequality.

### **U.S. Statistics About Intimate Partner Violence**

According to a report of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence in the United States (NCADV, 2012):

- On average, about 24 persons per minute are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States.
- More than 12 million women and men over the course of a year are abused by intimate partners.
- Nearly 29 percent of women and 10 percent of men in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a partner in a year.
- Nearly 15 percent of women and 4 percent of men have been injured as a result of intimate partner violence including rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
- 24.3 percent of women and 13.8 percent of men aged 18 and older have been the victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime in the United States.

- Nearly half (48.4 percent) of all women in the United States have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
- Women aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 generally experienced the highest rates of intimate partner violence.
- From 1994 to 2010, about 80 percent of victims of partner violence were women.
- About 77 percent of females aged 18 to 34 and 81 percent aged 35 to 49 were victimized more than once by the same offenders.

### **Power Inequality and Partner Violence**

Power inequality between partners, especially between male and female partners, is one of the major causes of partner violence. Interpersonal power in an intimate relationship depends on the control of valuable resources. The partner who has control over more resources is likely to exercise more power on the partner who has control over less resources. Although the balance of power generally tends to be heavier for a male partner than for a female partner, the balance of power may change when a female partner enters the workforce and gains economic independence (Lennon, Stewart, & Ledermann, 2013). In most societies throughout the ages, there has been power inequality between men and women, and men have enjoyed more power than did women in most heterosexual relationships (Impett & Peplau, 2006). Globally, most societies are still governed by male dominant and patriarchal norms and beliefs (Carli, 2001). Educational, economic, and technological development do not seem to have made many significant changes in the power inequality between women and men. For example, many Americans still tend to prefer their political leaders, lawyers, surgeons, and airline pilots to be men rather than women (Morin & Cohen, 2008). A report of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence (2016) about power and control inequality between men and women reveals that male partners generally use their greater economic power and privileges as tools for intimidation, coercion, threats, and emotional abuse against female partners.

### **Correlates of Intimate Partner Violence**

Intimate partner violence may be related to a variety of factors, such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, income, substance abuse, history of family violence, history of criminal activity, peoples' attitudes and beliefs, sexual orientations, etc. A number of organizations in the United States and

worldwide (e.g., the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013; the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010; the National Institutes of Justice, 2015; and the World Health Organization, 2016) have conducted several surveys on different aspects of partner violence and found that the following factors are associated with intimate partner violence:

**Gender.** About 85 percent of domestic violence victims in the United States are women (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). Globally, about 38 percent of murders of women are committed by intimate male partners (World Health Organization, 2016).

**Age.** The age ranges and frequencies of women's intimate partner violence experiences are age 11–17 (22 percent), followed by age 18–24 (38.6 percent), age 35–44 (7 percent), and age 45+ (3 percent). Whereas that for men are age 11–17 (15.0 percent), followed by age 18–24 (47 percent), age 25–34 (31 percent), age 35–44 (10 percent), and age 45+ (5 percent) (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010).

**Ethnicity.** Approximately 44 percent of Black women and 46 percent of Native Americans have been the victim of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. These rates are 30–50 percent higher than those experienced by Hispanic, White, and Asian women in the United States (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010). On the other hand, about 45 percent of Native American men and about 39 percent of Black men in the United States reported experiencing rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by their intimate partners during their lifetime. These rates are nearly twice the rate experienced by Hispanic and White men (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010).

**Sexual orientations.** Approximately 44 percent of lesbian women, 61 percent of bisexual women, and 35 percent of heterosexual women experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. On the other hand, about 26 percent of gay men, 37 percent of bisexual men, and 29 percent of heterosexual men experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010).

**Criminal history.** Most studies found that the majority of domestic violence perpetrators have a prior criminal history for a variety of nonviolent and violent, and domestic or nondomestic offenses against males and females (National Institutes of Justice, 2015).

**Other factors.** The high rates of intimate partner violence in the United States cannot be explained by any single factor, but seems to be related to many risk factors including but not limited to substance

abuse, unemployment, low education, cohabitation of unmarried partners, pregnancy, and low income (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010).

### Health Consequences of Partner Violence

Intimate partner and sexual violence have serious short-term and long-term physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health problems for the victims and for their children; and such violence often leads to serious social and economic sufferings for them including (WHO, 2013):

- Violence against women can have fatal consequences, such as homicide or suicide.
- About 42 percent of women who experienced intimate partner violence reported an injury as a consequence of this violence.
- Sexual violence of an intimate partner can lead to unintended pregnancies, induced abortions, gynecological problems, and sexually transmitted infections and diseases. Women who had been physically or sexually abused were found about twice as likely to have a sexually transmitted disease and HIV, compared with women who had not experienced partner violence.
- The women victims are also twice as likely to have an abortion.
- Pregnancy due to intimate partner sexual violence also increases the likelihood of stillbirth, premature delivery, and low birth weight babies.
- The women who experienced intimate partner violence were almost twice as likely to experience depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, sleep difficulties, eating disorders, emotional distress, problem drinking, and suicidal tendency. The rates were even higher for women who had experienced non-partner aggressions.
- Children who grow up in families where there is violence tend to suffer a range of behavioral and emotional disturbances throughout the lifespan.
- Intimate partner violence has also been found to be associated with higher rates of infant and child morbidity (e.g., diarrhoeal disease and malnutrition) and mortality.

### CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 14 addresses issues about conflict in intimate relationships including frequency and intensity of conflict; sources of conflict; instigation and escalation of conflict; areas of conflict; effects of conflict; conflict management strategies; partner abuse; types of partner abuse; causes of

partner abuse; characteristics of partner abuse; outcomes of partner abuse; prevention of partner abuse; violence in intimate relationships; global statistics about partner violence; power inequality and partner violence; correlates of intimate partner violence; and health consequences of partner violence.

**Conflict in intimate relationships.** Conflict usually means hostile disputes and dysfunctional relationships, but the mere existence of conflict does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes in a long-term interpersonal relationship. In fact, sometimes conflict can lead to positive outcomes. Moreover, successful management of conflicts can strengthen relational bonds and increase relational cohesion and solidarity.

**Frequency and intensity of conflicts.** Numerous factors are related with the frequency and intensity of conflict couples are likely to encounter, including personality, attachment style, lifestyle, stage of life, etc.

**Sources of conflicts.** Some of the common sources of conflict in a long-term intimate relationship include role expectations, fairness and equity, power sharing, incompatible goals, and unfair demands.

**Instigation and escalation of conflicts.** Several factors have been found to incite and ignite interpersonal conflicts such as accusation, criticism, attributions of negative qualities to the partner, threats of physical and emotional harms to the partner, using hurtful, demeaning, sarcastic and abusive language about the partner's physical appearance, choices, dresses, and lifestyles, and shouting at and putting down the partner.

**Areas of conflicts.** Common areas of conflicts in intimate relationships include financial issues, sexual issues, issues related to children, sharing housework, etc.

**Conflict management.** Effective management can minimize or eliminate conflicts. Strategies such as compromise, cooperation, patience, self-control, and flexibility are likely to work better than using power assertive techniques, such as forcing the partner to give up differences and agree.

**Partner abuse.** Partner abuse is a pattern of offensive and insulting behavior of a partner intended to establish and maintain control over the other partner.

**Types of partner abuse.** The common types of partner abuse are physical abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, sexual abuse, stalking, economic abuse or financial abuse, and spiritual abuse.

**Characteristics of partner abuse.** The most likely victims of partner abuse are women who are young, poor, uneducated, separated, or divorced. Men who abuse women tend to have low self-esteem, sexual inadequacy, a feeling of dominance, social isolation, and frustration.

**Violence in intimate relationships.** Partner violence is an extreme form of partner abuse, involving intimidation and/or exertion of physical force intended to do physical harm, injury, or damage to a partner.

**Correlates of partner violence.** Partner violence is likely to be related to a variety of factors, such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, income, substance abuse, history of family violence, history of criminal activity, peoples' attitudes and beliefs, sexual orientations, etc.

**Health consequences of partner violence.** Partner violence has serious short-term and long-term physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health problems for the victims and for their children.

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Discuss important factors that are related to frequency and intensity of conflict in intimate relationships.
2. Is conflict inevitable in an intimate relationship? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Discuss different sources and areas of conflict in intimate relationships.
4. Discuss different types of behaviors or tactics of partners that frequently incite and ignite interpersonal conflicts directly or indirectly.
5. Explain why conflict is not necessarily harmful to intimate relationships. How can it be helpful if managed constructively?
6. Discuss different types of conflict management strategies.
7. Discuss different types, causes, and consequences of partner abuse. How can partner abuse be prevented?
8. Discuss the effects of partner violence on physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health for the victims and for their children.

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