

# FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ANIMAL CRUELTY

For Veterinary Professionals



# FAMILY VIOLENCE &

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# ANIMAL CRUELTY

## Warning

Do not give copies of this booklet to victims of family violence. It may increase the chance of violence towards them.

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## What is family violence?

The Victorian Family Violence Protection Act (2008) defines family violence as behaviour by a person towards a family member of that person that:

1. is physically or sexually abusive; or
2. is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or
3. is economically abusive; or
4. is threatening; or
5. is coercive; or
6. in any other way controls or dominates the family member and causes that family member to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of that family member or another person.
7. It also includes behaviour by a person that causes a child to hear or witness, or otherwise be exposed to the effects of behaviour referred to in these ways.

Family violence is common in Australia.

It is a pattern of abusive behaviour through which a person seeks to control and dominate another person.

Family violence does not take the form of a single incident. It is ongoing behaviour that gradually undermines the victim's confidence and ability to leave the violent person.

The severity and frequency of violence often escalates over time.

This violence takes many forms, none of which are mutually exclusive.

While physical violence may be the most visible form, others such as sexual, emotional, social, spiritual and economic abuse can be equally harmful.

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Examples include:

- isolating a victim from family and friends
- harm to children
- controlling a victim's access to money
- diminishing their self-esteem
- preventing them from practising their religious beliefs
- intimidating them
- threatening them, and
- harm to pets.

## The causes of family violence

Gender inequality between men and women is a significant factor that contributes to the high rate of violence by men towards women in relationships.

There is no such thing as a 'typical' perpetrator of family violence. However, researchers have found that perpetrators often:


- use violence and emotional abuse to control their families
- believe that they have the right to behave in whatever way they choose while in their own home
- hold certain beliefs about masculinity, including that a 'real' man should be tough, powerful and the head of the household. They may believe that they should make most of the decisions, including about how money is spent
- believe that men are entitled to sex from their partners
- don't take responsibility for their behaviour and prefer to think that loved ones or circumstances provoked their behaviour
- make excuses for their violence – for example, they will blame alcohol or stress
- report 'losing control' when angry around their families, but can control their anger around other people. They don't tend to use violence in other situations, for example, around friends, bosses, work colleagues or the police
- try to minimise, blame others for, justify or deny their use of violence, or the impact of their violence on family members.

Some perpetrators have grown up in an abusive household themselves, but the majority have not.

## Where does it happen?

Family violence happens in all kinds of relationships, within our community including:

- intimate partners, lovers, husband and wife, ex-partners
- older people and their children (elder abuse)
- other family members, including step-parents
- parents and their teenage or adult children
- friends
- people with disabilities and their carers



*"Youth who engage in animal cruelty ... have often been exposed to family violence, including animal cruelty perpetrated on their beloved pets by violent adults."*

Bright et al 2018

## Prevalence of family violence?

- Since the age of 15 approximately one in four women (23%) has experienced at least one incident of violence by an intimate partner (intimate partner = a current or previous partner with whom the respondent lives or has lived, or a current or former boyfriend, girlfriend or date with whom the respondent has not lived with). (ABS, 2017)
- Since the age of 15 one in six women (17%) has experienced at least one incident of violence by a partner (partner = a person whom the respondent lives with, or lived with at some point, in a married or de facto relationship). (ABS, 2017)
- Of women who have experienced violence, over 50% experienced more than one incident of violence by that partner (ABS, 2017)
- One woman is killed every week in Australia by her partner or ex-partner (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2017)
- Between 26% and 57% of family violence victims report that pets were harmed or killed by their abuser (Ascione et al., 1997; Carlisle-Frank, Frank, & Nielsen, 2004; Flynn, 2000).

*"As a source of support, practical assistance and comfort, these animals are at risk of being abused by carers and/or family members who exert power and control over the person they are attached to, and who depends on them."*

Animal Victims of Domestic and Family Violence: Raising Youth Awareness

Coorey, Coorey-Ewings, 2018



## What is the link between family violence and animal cruelty?

Perpetrators of family violence may deliberately harm and threaten to harm animals as a way of exploiting the emotional bonds/attachments between victims and their animals. They do this to silence victims from disclosing the abuse, to instil fear, and exert additional power, control and authority over them (Creevy et al. 2013; Tiplady, 2013; Arkow, 2014; Tong, 2014). Abusers will deliberately target the animal to which the victims are most emotionally attached (Conroy, 2015; Tiplady et al., 2015). Whilst perpetrators of family violence are known to harm or threaten to harm household animals (such as dogs, birds, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs), farm animals can also be targeted.

A study in Victoria reported that 53% of women entering a refuge to escape family violence reported that their pets had been harmed (Volant et al 2008).

Types of Pet Abuse Committed by Partners in the Domestic Violence Group (n = 102)

Act of Abuse	No. of Surveyed Households Where Act Occurred at Least Once
Kicked	33
Punched or hit	15
Threw pet	10
Hit with object	5
Swung/thrown by tail	3
Beheaded/broke neck	3
Choked/strangled/suffocated	3
Hung/held in air with lead	3
Shot	2
Jabbed/stabbed	2

(Volant et al 2008)

## What are the signs of animal cruelty?

A study by Tong (2014) found that “radiographic findings indicated that the following five features should raise the index of suspicion of, and support a diagnosis of, NAI (non-accidental injury in animals) :

1. The presence of multiple fractures;
2. Fractures occurring on more than one region of the body (forelimb, hind limb, or axial);
3. Transverse fractures;
4. Fractures presenting at a later stage of healing (delayed presentation); and
5. Multiple fractures at different stages of healing.”

Injuries may be inconsistent with the explanation given e.g. a road traffic accident may be given as the cause, but injuries don’t “fit”, or a kitten with a fractured skull may be said to have “fallen” although by six to seven weeks kittens are able to turn over in mid-air and land on their feet, not their heads (Munro and Munro, 2008). Classes of injuries (Munro and Thrusfield, 2001) that may be found include:

**Superficial lesions** – bruising, burns and scalds, incised wounds, lacerations, stab wounds, ligatures, avulsed nails, conjunctival haemorrhage, corneal puncture.

**Deeper lesions** – epistaxis, haematoma, strangulation (manual/ligature), testicular injury, abdominal muscle rupture, retinal haemorrhage.

**Fractures/locomotor injuries** – fractures (including old fractures), stifle ligament injury, amputation, lameness.

**Internal thoracoabdominal lesions** – collapsed lung, diaphragmatic hernia rupture, liver rupture, intestinal rupture, intestinal strangulation.

**Intracranial/spinal conditions** – brain trauma, paraplegia. (VCNZ, 2013)

## Why not leave or protect pets?

There are many reasons a person does not leave a violent relationship. Some women think the abuse is their fault, some stay for the sake of the children, some love the abuser, some have nowhere to go, some hope the abuser will change, some are threatened with harm (to herself, her relatives, pets, friends) if she leaves. (Domestic Violence Prevention Council, n.d.)

Controlling people are adept at creating confusion, fear, and self-doubt in the targeted person. They are experts at blaming others, and self-blame can develop as a result, causing painful shame, guilt, and even self-hatred in extreme situations.

Family violence involves a process of intimidation and control which over time isolates the woman and erodes her independence to make her reliant on her abuser. She may be forced to lose touch with friends and family and have no control over family finances. On a daily basis she may feel alone, isolated, afraid, anxious, confused or deflated. (Putting to Rest "Why Doesn't She Just Leave?", n.d.)

While family members do try to protect family pets, they are living in a state of fear and up against a violent abuser who is often bigger and stronger. The best way to protect pets is to remove them from the situation but sadly, most family violence shelters do not offer accommodation for pets. 35% of women delayed leaving because of concerns about the safety of pets left behind.

Violence towards animals is used as a form of control and power to intimidate, retaliate against, and manipulate family members during the relationship, and after separation as punishment for leaving (Tiplady et al., 2015).

## What can you do?

The duty of care the veterinarian has for the animal should extend beyond the immediate injury and include prevention of further abuse.


There is similarity in the way perpetrators of violence minimise their abusive behaviour towards family members and animals. They may provide explanations for the injuries which may not be plausible; suggest they were accidental; delay visits to veterinarian clinics; be reluctant to answer questions; and demonstrate a lack of concern for the animal for example asking for an animal be put down rather than treated. (Coorey and Coorey-Ewings. 2018)

### Case study 1

Helen brings her dog to the vet with a burn. The vet asks how the injury was sustained. Helen explains, however the injuries are inconsistent with the explanation provided to the vet. The vet says that her explanation is not consistent with the injury and asks what actually happened. Helen reluctantly admits that her husband injured the dog. The vet tells Helen that he is concerned for her welfare and that of her animal as the deliberate abuse of an animal is an indicator of family violence towards human members of the family. The vet offers Helen the number for 1800 RESPECT and strongly recommends that Helen have a conversation with them about her situation at home.

## Case study 2

Anna brings her cat to the vet for its annual vaccinations. She tells the vet that she and the cat have left an abusive relationship. She asks that her ex-partner not be sent any information about her or the cat. When Anna leaves, the vet reviews the cat's records and finds that the cat's microchip and other notification details are usually sent to the ex-partner. The vet makes an entry in the records and changes the notification details to protect Anna and the cat.



*... reporting of suspected or known family violence is not mandatory. However, like any other adult members of our society, veterinarians have a responsibility to act when violence against the vulnerable is recognised or suspected.*

Veterinary Council of New Zealand 2013

## What to do if someone discloses family violence?

- Listen without judging the person
- Ask if they need help from a support service to discuss their options
- It is important that someone making a disclosure is not forced into taking action. It is also important to think about the 'one chance rule': don't dismiss the opportunity for a person to share their story as they may not share it again. When talking about their options, safety must be the main priority and they must feel in control of the situation and what happens next.

(White Ribbon Australia, n.d.)

## Anti-cruelty laws: who enforces them?

Jurisdiction	Title	People authorised to enforce Animal Welfare laws		
		Police officers	RSPCA/Approved Charitable Organisations	Ministerial Appointment/Other
ACT	Inspector	✓	✓	✓
New South Wales	Inspector	✓	✓	✓
NT	Inspector	✓	✗	✓
Queensland	Inspector	✗	✓	✓
South Australia	Inspector	✓	~	✓
Tasmania	Officers	✓	~	✓
Victoria	POCTA Inspector	✓	✓	✓
Western Australia	General Inspector	✓	✓	✓

From: Animal Defenders Office

## The law

It may be possible for veterinarians to seize animals if allowed to do so under animal cruelty legislation. The relevant authorities should be contacted so that they deal with the suspected perpetrator directly to protect the animal and the veterinarian. (Australian Veterinary Association, n.d.)

If veterinarians do not have any seizure powers, they do have the power to euthanize an animal if the vet reasonably believes that the animal's condition is such that it would continue to suffer if it remained alive. (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (Victoria). 1986) Only people authorised to enforce animal welfare laws (see table) have the power to seize animals if they reasonably believe that the animal's welfare is at risk.

If you have witnessed animal cruelty, including neglect or abandonment, you should report it via phone or via the online form for the RSPCA Inspectorate team in the state or territory it took place. Northern Territory reports should be made through the NT Government.

More information see: [www.rspca.org.au/report-cruelty](http://www.rspca.org.au/report-cruelty)

## Step by step for vets

### Preparing your practice

Find out where your local family violence services or networks are, start by ringing 1800 RESPECT and ask for services in your area.

### Contact a service and ask them

- Ask if someone could come and do a presentation to your staff
- Ask if there is a foster network of carers for animals in danger and how to contact this network
- Ask if, in the event of an animal victim, are they are able to offer your practice support, advice and debriefing?

### Contact your local council and ask

- About local laws and regulations regarding family violence and pets
- About their powers to seize animals in danger from family violence
- If they have space set aside in their shelters to house animals in danger
- Ask who to contact and what procedure to follow in the event of an animal victim being brought to your practice
- For any printed material they have for staff

### Prepare your procedures

- Decide what your procedures are if the animal is microchipped or registered to the alleged perpetrator
- Have a way to discreetly flag the files of suspected victims



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- Have clearly written procedures of what to do if an animal is suspected of being a victim of animal cruelty as a result of family violence
- House these procedures in an easy to access place

## Your clinic

- Encourage a culture where family violence is unacceptable
- Conduct staff training about family violence and animal abuse
- Give them written material and contacts for local services
- Discuss the process to follow

## Handling of the consultation

Only discuss your concerns if the perpetrator is not present.

- Take a non-judgemental stance
- Express your concerns about the animal
- Listen if they choose to disclose family violence
- Advise them to phone the police (000) if their safety is at risk, or 1800 RESPECT if they would like to discuss their options
- Do not offer them print materials
- Offer to find alternative accommodation for the pet if the person is wanting to leave. Keep the pet overnight to keep it safe while they leave
- Make a connection with them so they feel they can come back
- Flag the pet's file

## What services are available?

If you suspect animal abuse due to family violence, the following States have temporary shelters with the aim of reuniting the pets with their families once safe from abuse:

Australia wide, peak organisation for information and support. Does not offer case management or direct support. Contact Lucy's Project:

[lucysproject.com](http://lucysproject.com)

### For pets

<b>Victoria</b>	Victorian Dog Rescue & Resource Group: <a href="http://www.victoriandogrescue.org.au">www.victoriandogrescue.org.au</a>
<b>New South Wales</b>	Safe Beds for Pets: (02) 9782 4408
<b>Queensland</b>	Pets in Crisis: 1800 811 811
<b>South Australia</b>	Safe Pets – Safe Families 0435 805 867
<b>Tasmania</b>	S.H.E Pets Awareness program: (03) 6278 9090
<b>Western Australia</b>	Safe Families Safe Pets: (08) 9300 0340

### For people

**Police 000** (Immediate safety concerns)

**1800 RESPECT** (1800 737 732) (Australia wide) National sexual assault, family violence counselling and information referral service. 24 hours, 7 days a week.

**Safe Steps** 1800 015188 (Victoria only) Victoria's 24/7 family violence support service.

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