

WHAT IS POST-SEPARATION ABUSE?

Domestic violence (DV) is more than just physical abuse. During the relationship, domestic violence can be physical abuse, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and financial abuse. When the relationship ends, the abuse does not stop, it just transitions to a new form of abuse referred to as post-separation abuse.

Post-separation abuse continues to escalate and often, far surpasses the DV that victims are subjected to while under the same roof as their abuser. After the relationship ends, the perpetrator sets their sights on the child(ren) to exert control and, to terrorize the healthy parent. Every high-conflict custody battle has three basic narratives: the abuser's need for control, the abuser's need to "win" and, the abuser's desire to hurt or punish the healthy parent.

While there are many resources available to victims of DV during the relationship, the only resource available to victims of post-separation abuse is the Family Court System itself (judges, mediators, minor's counsel, custody evaluators, therapists, co-parenting counselors, parenting coordinators and attorneys). It is so important for those in the family court system to be educated on post-separation abuse and to recognize it in high-conflict divorces, custody battles and paternity cases.

Post-separation abuse does not just affect the victim, it has both immediate and long-lasting effects on children resulting in high adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACE's, a term used to describe any traumatic event during childhood such as divorce, violence, emotional abuse, neglect, substance abuse or even an environment that undermines a child's sense of bonding or stability. The ACE Study (The Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente) should be the courtroom bible for judges and other family court professionals who are tasked with the responsibility of acting in the best interest of children.



POST-SEPARATION ABUSE EXPLAINED

Counter-Parenting: When the unhealthy parent has so much hatred for the other parent that their judgment center is compromised, and their actions are driven by revenge and anger. This person is unable to act in the best interest of their child and is unable to move forward in a healthy direction. They use every opportunity to berate, chastise or make digs at the healthy parent. They undermine the healthy parent by disrupting the child's sleep schedule, diet and routines. They contradict established rules and withhold information. Ignoring school responsibilities, projects and homework to create chaos for the healthy parent. It's also using the parenting time schedule as a weapon and, forcing custody schedules that are not in the best interest of the child. The abuser is so focused on hurting and controlling the other parent that their actions directly affect the children.

DV by Proxy: When the unhealthy parent continues to exert control and is intent on tormenting the other parent post-separation by weaponizing the children and using them as pawns, or as "spies." This person is known to manipulate the children to choose sides, or to feel responsible for the unhealthy parent's emotions. The unhealthy parent will often accuse the healthy parent of transferring their own anxiety or fears onto the children. Often, it's the abuser's own actions and behaviors that is affecting their bond and relationship with the children and, causing the children to feel anxious and afraid. They strategically attempt to turn the children against the healthy parent and if their attempts are unsuccessful, they will often claim enmeshment, alienation or gate keeping. Sadly, their attempts to turn the children against the healthy parent are sometimes successful.

Neglectful or Abusive Parenting: Exposing children to unsafe situations or people, the unhealthy parent's motivation is to cause concern and fear for the other parent. Their parenting style is neglectful and includes varying degrees of abuse. The unhealthy parent is known to use violence, intimidation, threats, manipulation, and ridicule to gain compliance from the children. The unhealthy parent manipulates the children using their wants, needs, fears, and feelings. These behaviors often fly under the radar and are difficult to prove. Children are often unable to articulate their experiences properly to trusted adults and are often punished for speaking out, so they are further forced into submission and silenced. The unhealthy parent is known to expose the children to age-inappropriate and harmful television shows, experiences, movies or video games.

Discarding: The unhealthy parent will wage a child custody war for 50% parenting time however, their conveyed interest in the children is not honorable. Their motivation is to hurt the healthy parent who was typically the primary parent during the relationship. Once they have a perceived win, which is what this is all about for them, they typically discard the children in a variety of ways. The abuser will leave the children with significant others, nannies or other childcare providers or, pawn them off on grandparents or other family members. They will also enroll very young children in daycare, even if the other parent is home and available. Parenting duties are viewed as tedious and the abuser would rather pay someone to care for the children than to allow them to be with the healthy parent. The abuser knows that keeping the children away from the healthy parent will inflict great pain and this is another area of weaponizing the children and, the legal system.

Isolation: The unhealthy parent sets out to destroy the targeted parent's social capital such as family, friends, business associates, teachers and other community relationships by spreading lies and rumors with the goal of compromising the existing (or potential) support system. They try to portray the targeted parent to be mentally unbalanced, unstable or addicted to illegal substances. Many times, the smear campaign starts well before the relationship ends and is very strategic in nature. The abuser's goal is to isolate and publicly damage the person's reputation so that they are alone and without social resources. The abuser attempts to paint a false portrait or narrative of the healthy parent by manipulating people to believe stories ranging from mental illness to promiscuous behavior. In family court situations, the unhealthy parent then goes on to paint a false narrative using projection of their own issues to muddy the waters. The abuser will go to great lengths to isolate the targeted parent.

Harassment & Stalking: Typically, very covert in nature, this type of stalking and harassment usually flies under the radar of most law enforcement officers and family court professionals. The unhealthy parent bombards the healthy parent with an overwhelming number of emails, phone calls and messages, most of which are manipulative, threatening and abusive. While some rise to the level of blatant threats, most are veiled and go right up to the legal line in a taunting manner, without crossing over the legal threshold. The abuser is known to craft long, exhausting emails with the sole purpose of inflicting pain, consuming the other parent or, creating a false narrative for the court. The abuser's goal is to engage, intimidate and trigger the healthy parent in a covert manner, with the goal of showcasing her to be the unstable one. The abuser will engage in subtle stalking tactics that do not rise to the level of involving law enforcement but nonetheless, cause panic and fear.

Legal Abuse: The abuser wears a mask in the courtroom, fooling the top family court professionals such as custody evaluators, therapists, GAL's and judges. Behind the courtroom mask is malicious intent. A divorce or child custody battle is sport to the high-conflict individual and the courtroom becomes the domain in which he/she inflicts punishment and terror. Typically, very conflict avoidant, the targeted parent is at a huge disadvantage and becomes triggered (PTSD) by this new platform of abuse. This can be paralyzing and debilitating. The unhealthy parent utilizes the court system as a weapon in what is best described as a sick and twisted game. The goal is to destroy the targeted parent financially and emotionally. The abuser's words and actions are never in alignment when it comes to what they say in court versus how they really behave outside of the courtroom. Uneven playing fields in this arena often results in financial and emotional devastation for the targeted parent.

Financial Abuse: Financial games, ploys and deception is rampant with the sole intention of hurting and controlling the healthy parent. The abuser will purposefully withhold or mismanage support payments (child support/spousal support) as well as court-ordered reimbursements for medical bills, tuition, childcare and extracurricular activities, even if withholding the support has a direct impact on the children. The abuser will deliberately create financial discord for the healthy parent by blocking access to bank accounts and other financial resources. The abuser will interfere with the healthy parent's ability to prosper on their own, going so far as to jeopardize their job interviews or their secured employment, by not picking the children up as scheduled or court ordered. This type of person will intentionally obstruct the targeted parent's opportunities to advance in their career, in school, or in life, all the while forcing them into vocational assessments and accusing them of purposefully not working.