

## MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE COERCION

### Safety and Well-Being Tipsheet Series

Intimate partner violence is a pattern of coercive behaviors designed to dominate and control a partner through fear and intimidation. Tactics may include...

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Psychological and emotional abuse
- Economic abuse
- Isolation
- Threats related to children (e.g., to take custody)

Part of the reason why these tactics work is that they rely on discrimination and stigma, such as...

- Racism
- Sexism
- Heterosexism and homophobia
- Discrimination based on physical or psychiatric disability
- Stigma related to HIV status
- Stigma related to mental health
- Stigma related to substance abuse

Understanding how abusive tactics work and how they can affect us can help us to access safety, heal from the traumatic effects of abuse, and support others to do the same.

**Mental health coercion:** Survivors may experience mental health effects of abuse. In addition, individuals who have a psychiatric disability are at a greater risk of being abused, and the abuse may cause mental health symptoms to get worse. Abusers rely on stigma related to mental health to undermine and control their partners. If you answer yes to any of these questions, you might be experiencing mental health coercion:

- Has your partner ever done things that cause your mental health symptoms to get worse?
- Has your partner ever tried to prevent or discourage you from accessing mental health treatment or taking your prescription medication?
- Does your partner restrict or interfere with your ability to speak for yourself with doctors or mental health professionals?
- Has your partner ever tried to control your prescription medication (e.g., by forcing you to take an overdose, giving you too much or too little medication, or preventing you from taking it at all)?
- Has your partner ever threatened to have you committed to an inpatient psychiatric institution?
- Has your partner blamed you for the abuse by saying that you're the one who is "crazy"?
- Does your partner tell you that you are lazy, stupid, "crazy," or a bad parent because of your mental health condition?

- Has your partner ever used your mental health condition to undermine or humiliate you with other people?
- Does your partner tell you that no one will believe what you say because of your mental health condition?
- Has your partner ever threatened that you will lose custody of your children because of your mental health status?

**Substance abuse coercion:** Abusers may coerce or force their partners into using alcohol or other drugs. In addition, survivors of abuse may use or abuse alcohol or other drugs to help them survive and cope with the abuse and its traumatic effects. Abusers rely on stigma associated with substance abuse to undermine and control their partners. If you answer yes to any of these questions, you might be experiencing substance abuse coercion:

- Has your partner ever made you use alcohol or other drugs, made you use more than you wanted, or threatened to harm you if you didn't?
- Do you ever use alcohol or other drugs to numb the effects of abuse?
- Does your partner control your access to alcohol or other drugs?
- Does your partner justify name-calling, criticizing, belittling, and undermining you based on your use of alcohol or other drugs?
- Has your partner told you that *you* are to blame for abuse or sexual assault because of your use of alcohol or other drugs?
- Has your partner ever forced or coerced you into engaging in illegal activities (e.g., dealing, stealing, trading sex for drugs) or other activities that you felt uncomfortable with in order to obtain alcohol or other drugs?
- Have you ever been afraid to call the police for help because your partner said you would be arrested for being high or your partner said you would lose custody of your children because of your alcohol or drug use?
- Has your partner ever tried to manipulate you by making you go into withdrawal?
- Has your partner ever stopped you from cutting down or quitting alcohol or other drugs when you wanted to?
- Has your partner ever prevented you from attending a recovery meeting, interfered with your substance abuse treatment, or sabotaged your recovery in other ways?

**If you are being abused, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE (7233) or (800) 787-3224 (TTY).**

For more information on the intersection of domestic violence, trauma, mental health, and substance abuse, contact the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health at (312) 726-7020, 312-726-4110 (TTY), or [info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org](mailto:info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org).