

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



ESTHER L. BUSH

IPV

This month's Take Charge of Your Health topic affects people in every walk of life, at every age. Hopefully, when we are young, we learn what it means to have healthy relationships. We learn from those who care for us as children. As adults, we model the behavior that was demonstrated to us. If we witness, or are a victim of, emotional, physical, verbal or psychological abuse, it can affect our physical, mental and spiritual health.

While intimate partner violence (IPV) varies by community (as other articles on this page point out), studies show that rates of IPV are highest in the most socially and economically disadvantaged communities for both white and Black men and women. However, especially in Pittsburgh, we know it is our African American brothers and sisters who reside in these neighborhoods who have historically been—and continue to be—cut off from services. As the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many service providers to create virtual access points, access to the internet helped reduce barriers to services.

Within Pittsburgh and the surrounding communities, there is help available. Many of these resources can be tapped into from your smart phone or landline.

The Women's Center and Shelter of Pittsburgh developed an app called RUSafe. The app (available for Android and Apple users) is based on the Danger Assessment system (created at The Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing and draws on the lives and experiences of hundreds of survivors of domestic abuse). The assessment helps determine the level of danger faced by a person being abused. By answering a few questions about the relationship, RUSafe helps people understand the possible threats they or loved ones may face and connects them using GPS technology with nearby emergency shelters and domestic violence hotlines.

For additional information about the app, visit the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's website and type "RUSafe" in the search box on the upper right-hand corner. This tool alone can save your life or the life of a loved one. Anyone who might be in danger or in an escalating IPV situation can benefit from having the app on their phone.

Additionally, the City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police has a list of 24/7 hotlines that are available to call if you need to escape or report an abusive situation (<https://pittsburghpa.gov/police/domestic-violence-resource-guide>).

The best thing you can do for yourself is to do what you can to build a strong support system. Likewise, the best you can do for others is to be the strong support system that they may desperately need. Taking charge of your health begins with empowering yourself with knowledge and tools.

Esther L. Bush, President and CEO
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VICTIM OF IPV—In this Aug. 18, 2010, file photo, a victim of intimate partner violence (IPV), who calls herself, "Sierra" sits at a safe house in Nevada County, Calif. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Not everyone's relationships are positive

Healthy relationships are based on communication, love and respect. They feel good. But not everyone's relationships are positive. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four women and one in 10 men have experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime and reported some form of effect related to intimate partner violence (IPV). More than 43 million women and 38 million men have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime.

IPV is most often thought of as physical, social, emotional or sexual violence. However, IPV is rooted in power or control over another person; therefore, it can mean any behavior used to exert power. For example, IPV can also be financial (like ruining someone's credit) or immigration-related (like threatening to call Immigration and Customs Enforcement), as well as many other things. IPV can occur in any very close relationship (the word "intimate" does not mean it is limited to sexual relationships), and it can happen to anyone.

"IPV is a public health epidemic, and there are many different ways people experience it," says Maya Ragavan, MD, MPH, MS, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "Data are still being reported,

but, overall, it looks as if IPV severity and frequency has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data have been mostly based on police reports, which may not capture the actual number of incidents as survivors may

the pandemic and what structural issues they have encountered, like racism, unsafe housing, environmental concerns or a lack of child care and other social support. Even before the pandemic, IPV survivors faced

to wear masks. Abusive partners used Children and Youth Services as well as threats to custody and immigration status to exert power and control.

"What's important to mention is the interweaving between the structural inequities that marginalized groups of survivors face and IPV," says Dr. Ragavan. "When we think of IPV, we think of it on a personal level. But there are so many structural factors that affect not only the way that abusive partners use power and control but also the way that survivors can engage with different resources."

Despite the difficulties faced by IPV survivors, Dr. Ragavan says that another compelling part of the study interviews was the incredible amount of resilience IPV survivors and their families have shown during the pandemic. Advocates report that survivors showed enormous strength while working to keep themselves and their families safe. Also noteworthy is how IPV advocates and agencies supported people experiencing IPV, especially during pandemic shutdowns.

"These groups have always been on the frontlines helping survivors, but they were extremely supportive during the pandemic," says Dr. Ragavan. "In the study interviews, IPV advocates said they came up with creative solutions to continue supporting survivors as the world

switched to mostly virtual interactions. Advocates created texting lines and partnered with stores that remained open to communicate to survivors that IPV agencies were still open and available to help. When we think of who our essential workers are, we need to include victim services agencies."

With most places under shut-down orders for long periods of time, some people relished the time with loved ones and renewed healthy relationships. But people experiencing IPV continue to need support.

If you know people who are experiencing IPV and you want to help but don't know how, Dr. Ragavan recommends listening to them and validating their experiences. Some things to say are "It's not your fault," "I am here to listen," and "I hear you." You can also help them find resources that may be helpful for them. It's important to not take power and control away from survivors by forcing them to make decisions or engage with resources before they are ready.

Many supports and services are available in Pittsburgh and nationally. It is important to remember that victim services agencies include more than shelter (although that is available). They also include support groups, counseling, legal advocacy, help with medical care, child groups and so much more.



MAYA RAGAVAN, MD, MPH, MS

not always engage with law enforcement for a number of reasons."

The COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns caused more people to be isolated with their abusers. However, this is only part of the reason incidences of IPV have increased, according to Dr. Ragavan. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced preexisting difficulties, particularly structural challenges. Starting in July 2020, Dr. Ragavan and Pitt colleagues, in partnership with the American Academy of Pediatrics, Futures Without Violence, and the Centers for Disease Control, have been interviewing IPV advocates about survivors' experiences during

challenges when trying to meet basic needs; the pandemic made those challenges worse. Many survivors from marginalized groups experienced multiple inequities in addition to the pandemic.

In the study interviews, IPV advocates relayed stories of abusive partners using the COVID-19 pandemic to exert power and control. For example, abusers shut off partners' cell phones—something that happened pre-pandemic but was especially isolating when it happened during the pandemic when so many interactions were virtual. There were also reports of abusive partners taking stimulus checks and not allowing survivors

Healthy Relationships Resources

If you or someone you know is experiencing intimate partner violence, the following resources offer help. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

Local/Regional

Alle-Kiski Area Hope Center—24-hour hotline: 888-299-4673

Center for Victims—24-hour crisis hotline/gateway to all services: 1-866-644-2882, <https://www.centerforvictims.org/>

Crisis Center North—24/7 hotline: 412-364-5556, text: 412-444-7660, toll free: 1-866-782-0911, <https://www.crisiscenter-north.org/>

Pittsburgh Action Against Rape—24-hour confidential hotline: 1-866-363-7273 (1-866-END-RAPE), text/chat line accessed through <https://paar.net/>

Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh—24-hour hotline: 412-687-8005, text support (9 a.m.-9 p.m. daily) 412-744-8445, <https://www.wcpittsburgh.org/>

NATIONAL

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline—24/7 phone/text hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453), chat at <https://childhelphotline.org/>, <https://www.childhelp.org/childhelp-hotline/>

Crisis Text Line—24/7 crisis support: text "HOME" to 741741

Futures Without Violence: <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/resources-events/get-help/>

Love Is Respect—1-866-331-9474, TTY 1-866-331-8453, text "loveis" to 22522, chat online: www.loveisrespect.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline—24/7: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), TTY: 1-800-787-3224, text "START" to 1.800.799.SAFE (7233), <https://www.thehotline.org/>

National Parent Helpline: For emotional support from a trained advocate, call 1-855-4A-PARENT (1-855-427-2736) Monday-Friday, 1-10 p.m.

National Sexual Assault Hotline—24/7 hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673), live chat at <https://www.rainn.org/>

RUSafe App (for iOS and Android, available in English, Spanish and Nepali)—free interactive app that assesses the potential for domestic violence and harm in a dangerous relationship. By answering a few simple questions about the relationship, RUSafe helps you understand possible threats you may face, while simultaneously connecting you with nearby emergency shelters and domestic violence hotlines.

Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women—information about violence against women who are immigrants or refugees, including how to get help and further resources provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, <https://www.womenhealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/other-types/immigrant-and-refugee-women>