

# Family violence and substance use:

## What's the connection?

Substance use and family violence may not cause one another, but they can go hand in hand.

When people are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, their inhibitions are lowered and they can become abusive to their partner or other family members. Though they may blame their actions on the alcohol or other drugs, people choose substance use and they choose to abuse others. Substance use does not cause abuse.

When people are subjected to violence, they sometimes use alcohol or other drugs to deal with the pain. However, the violence does not cause substance use.

When substance use and violence are both present, the risk of injury or death to one or more people is greatly increased.

*“I used to think he hit me because he was drunk. Then I realized, he drinks for an excuse to hit me.” - Shirley<sup>1</sup>*

## Get help.

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911.

Family Violence Info Line  
310-1818\*  
familyviolence.alberta.ca

Alberta Health Services Addictions Helpline  
1-866-332-2322\*  
albertahealthservices.ca/addiction.asp

\*Toll-free 24/7 in Alberta

## Are you in a home where people abuse alcohol or other drugs and are violent?

Here are four things you should know.

### 1. Your environment is dangerous to you and everyone there.

Canadian research<sup>2</sup> tells us that:

- People whose partner was a heavy drinker (defined as someone who consumes five or more drinks on five or more occasions in a month) were **six times more likely** to experience spousal violence than those whose partner never drank more than five drinks.
- People who are violent towards their spouses and/or children and who abuse alcohol or other drugs cause **more serious injuries**.
- Nearly **two-thirds** (62 per cent) of Canadians accused of murdering their spouses had consumed alcohol and/or other drugs at the time.

These statistics do not reflect the emotional injury caused by living in an environment of substance abuse and violence.

### 2. Children are harmed – even if they are not in the room when substance abuse and violence occur.

Children who live in homes where there is violence and substance abuse have more learning and behavioural problems at school, more self-esteem issues and more physical and mental health problems than children who live in substance-free non-violent homes. As adults, children who have lived with substance abuse and violence are more likely to have substance abuse problems and be involved in abusive situations.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. We are each responsible for our words and actions.

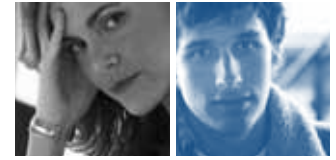
Substance use does not cause violence and it does not excuse violent actions. Even drunk or stoned, people make a choice to be violent.

Substance use does not make the pain or guilt of violence go away. Getting drunk or high might blot out the pain for a while but it will not make the situation better and, in fact, it will likely create more problems.

Drunk or sober; high or clean; angry, scared, upset or happy – each of us has the power to choose our words, actions and reactions.

### 4. There is hope. The cycle can be changed. Help is available.

Changing an addiction or an established pattern of behaviour can be challenging, but there are people who understand, who care, and who can help you. If you need help in understanding and changing abusive behaviours or substance abuse, make the call to restore safety and well-being to your life and loved ones.



*“We use the drugs to try and mask the abuse. And once you stop using them the flashbacks come. It’s just a constant. We just self-medicate, trying to push those memories out.” - Christine<sup>4</sup>*

*“I don’t know how much longer I can take this. I’m afraid if I don’t leave I will lose my mind or my job. I’m afraid if I do leave, she might get custody of the kids and they will not be safe.” - Richard<sup>1</sup>*

*“I think sometimes the abuse comes first for some of us, and then the abuse continues because of the drugs and alcohol... You get some crack in there and some meth in there...you’re a different person.” - Kathy<sup>4</sup>*

**If you live in a home where family members abuse alcohol or other drugs and are violent, OR**

**If a family member has abused you, or you have abused a family member, or both...**

Whatever the reason you or others are drinking or using other drugs, whoever abused whom – what is important now is for you to survive, recover, and get the support you need to live a safe and healthy life.

## *Things to understand*

1. You are not responsible for and you did not cause other family members’ substance abuse or violence, their words or their actions.
2. You are responsible for your own words and actions, and their impact on yourself and others. You are responsible for your own well-being.
3. Even if violent people stop using alcohol or other drugs, they may still be violent. Action is needed to change both types of behaviour.

## *Things to do*

1. **Call 911 if there is violence.**
2. **Talk to someone you trust.** Do not carry this burden alone. If the first person you talk to does not understand, talk to someone else.
3. **Make a safety plan.** Plan where you would go in an emergency, how you would get there, and what you would need to take with you.
4. **Protect yourself and others.** If you are afraid you might hurt someone, harm yourself, or be harmed, get out fast and get help.
5. **Build your own strength.** You are in a difficult situation. Look after yourself and appreciate that you are now taking charge of your life.

**Nobody said it was easy to change a tough situation, but your life is worth it.** Others have been through this and they have gone on to create positive lives. You can too.

## *What is family violence?*

Family violence is any kind of emotional, sexual or physical abuse of family members by another family member. Family violence is happening if someone:

- Threatens, intimidates, insults, puts another person down, or tries to control another person’s time, money or the people they see;
- Kisses or touches, forces another person to watch a sexual act, or has other sexual contact without the person’s consent;
- Shoves, hits, slaps, punches or kicks another person, or uses any other kind of force on purpose and without that person’s consent;
- Breaks things that belong to that person; threatens to or actually hurts or kills pets; forces another person to do degrading things.

## *When is substance use a problem?*

Most adults can drink socially without a problem. However, there are people whose alcohol or other drug use can lead to problems like addictions; family fighting; poor physical or mental health; losing friends; impaired driving, assault, fraud or other charges; spending rent or grocery money on alcohol or other drugs; and missing work.

<sup>1</sup> Shirley and Richard told their stories to the author.

<sup>2</sup> *Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006* (September, 2006). Statistics Canada, Catalogue No. 85-570-XIE, p. 41; and *Family Violence and Substance Use* (2009) Public Health Agency of Canada [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nctv-cnivf](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nctv-cnivf)

<sup>3</sup> “The Destructive Impact of Domestic Violence on Children” (2005). Bruce D. Perry, in *Family Violence: It’s Your Business: Community Resource Guide*, p. 9. Government of Alberta, [www.familyviolence.alberta.ca](http://www.familyviolence.alberta.ca) and “Intimate Partner Violence and Alcohol Fact Sheet” (2006), World Health Organization [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

<sup>4</sup> *Building Bridges: Linking Woman Abuse, Substance Use and Mental Ill Health* (2010). Jill Cory, Louise Godard, Alexxa Abi-Jaoude and Lauren Wallace, BC Women’s Hospital and Health Centre, p. 2.