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# *Welcome to the I AM Me Workshop*



## **Goals of the I AM Me Workshop**

To learn about identity after domestic violence.

To identify how domestic violence impacts individuals throughout different ages of life.

This workshop is not a replacement for treatment by a professional, but an opportunity understand identity after domestic violence.

## **Ways to Find Identity**

It is important to remind ourselves that even though our abuser once had control over us, they no longer do and we now have the freedom to make whatever decisions we want and to be whomever we want to be. *How meaningful is identity for you, why or why not?* Identity is the way you or others tend to describe a person or yourself. It is a way to describe who or how a person is with their qualities. Some people choose to describe their identity by their sexual orientation, social class, culture, race, religion, etc. It is important to know your identity so you can feel a sense of self-identity, self-love, and pinpoint positive features about yourself.

Ethnicity is how you view yourself in a cultural perspective. Some ways that you might choose to describe your ethnicity is by describing your nationality, language, religion, gender, or age. Some people get confused with the difference between ethnicity and race. To clarify, race is a way to describe a characteristic of a person. Typically, race can be used to describe skin color, eye color, or maybe even hair type whereas ethnicity can be taught or discovered over time depending on preferences.

## **Picture Activity**

Please take about 5 minutes and draw a quick sketch of yourself. You can be as detailed or general as you like. Once time allowed is up, ask survivors to hold up their drawings. *What is one good thing you can say about this drawing of yourself?*

## **Ways to Find Identity Continuance**

It is common for people to assume that identity has to be physical characteristics or something that you tend to like.

Some ways that you can identify yourself without using appearance, ethnicity, or race would be to describe your career path, financial situation/social class, or your living situation. When it comes to your career, it is important to understand and acknowledge that your career path never has to be permanent, and it can be changed at any time.

Some survivors have found it difficult continuing their line of work because of memories, are no longer provided with reliable transportation by their abuser, have had to move the area and their job is no longer available for them in the new area, or have lost complete interest in their current

field and would like to start fresh with something new. Some domestic violence victims have experienced a toxic work environment or were forced to work in fields that were never in their own interest nor favor. Remember that change is possible, and it is never too late to do something you love.

Financial situations play a huge role when it comes to identity and domestic violence cases. Many victims receive the stereotypical question of “why don’t you just leave?” It is common for people to not want to leave their abuser due to the codependency in finances. It is a lot more difficult than it may seem to start over fresh with hardly any money. Some abusers go as far out to control their victim’s money, how it is used, and sometimes the victim cannot look at the money once they are paid.

Social class and financial situations can really show the likelihood of a successful departure of the abuse and how likely they are to use resources such as a therapist or potentially legal help depending on the needs and wants of the survivor or how bad the abuse was while experiencing it. However, some victims use their financial situation as a motivator and even a starting point for how far they have come. No matter how much or little you make, there are still resources that can help domestic violence victims both in every state and nationally. It is okay to ask for help when in need of it. I can imagine that some emotions or feelings when financially struggling is shame or guilt, but you have to give yourself credit for all that you have been through.

Identity can also correlate with living situations as well. People tend to be the most happy and comfortable when they are living in a safe environment. It is common for the abuser and victim to live together during the time that domestic violence takes place. So initially, a victim of domestic violence may feel like they cannot call their place of living home or may have a difficult time with other physiological needs such as sleep.

Once getting out of an abusive situation, it may take time for a survivor to figure out where they want to live and finally having their own, safe place can allow creativity and true identity to show. Identity can be seen with how you decide to decorate the home, what colors you decide to paint the walls, and overall, how you choose to express yourself. If children are involved, this can also allow the time for children to have toys that they have always wanted or getting a cool comforter for their bed that matches their interests. You are now away from the abuser, so express yourself in every way possible even if it is just a room aesthetic.

## **Domestic Violence through the Years**

As mentioned in the beginning, domestic violence can happen anywhere and to anyone. Unfortunately, this includes ages as young as a toddler all the way up to an elderly adult. It is important to remember that children can also receive trauma by just witnessing domestic violence and it does not have to be towards them directly. Children are oftentimes affected by domestic violence their entire lives once they have experienced it.

### **Infants & Toddlers**

When domestic violence is exposed at an infant or toddler's age, this can cause difficulties in learning and play development. Even at such a young age, they will already start to realize that their parents may not respond or be there for their needs.

### **Pre-School**

When children around the preschool age are exposed to domestic violence, they may start to express their emotions and oftentimes we see negative emotions coming out. Children are very good at mocking what they see at home and if an unhealthy behavior is being represented in the home, it is not unusual for a child to start portraying those same behaviors. At this age, genders are starting to be understood and depending on who the abuser is, they can start to correlate men or women being violent and vice versa being the victim. At this age, it can be very confusing for a child because at home, they are experiencing violence but at school, this type of behavior is not acceptable.

### **Elementary School**

Once a child hits the elementary school age, emotions are more concrete and understood in their mind. This age is crucial for learning and development. This period should be heavily focused on social skills and academics, but when domestic violence is involved; the child may be distracted, distanced, emotionally, etc.

Something to consider is that professionals working with children and people under the age of 18 have the legal obligation to keep children safe. If any teacher, counselor, caregiver, etc. sees or thinks a child is in an unsafe environment, by law they must report the situation appropriately. Even though domestic violence can drastically affect a child's development, some steps to take can be beneficial. You can take the child to a child trauma specialist, family counselor, maintain contact with family members that were healthy, and try to keep the child involved in positive community groups like 4-H, religious groups, play programs, etc.

## **Adults**

All age groups react differently to domestic violence and nonetheless can portray trauma differently. However, the biggest impact that we see with adults are more long-term in comparison to what we see within children. Adults tend to take a while to adjust back to “normal” and have a hard time with processing their emotions in a healthy manner. Domestic violence in adults can also affect physical health depending on how severe the abuse was. Although, besides the common health issues like broken bones, infertility, cuts, etc. there can be more longtime physical health problems like migraines, asthma, hypertension, or even epilepsy.

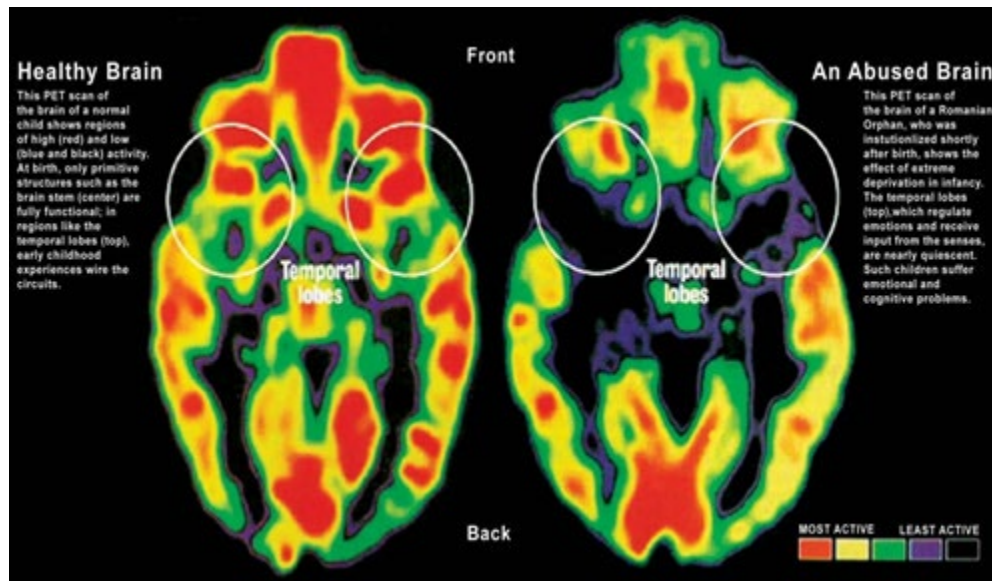
Adults may also have a difficult time in future relationships to find ways to trust, love, communicate, and loyalty. Understandably, so after experiencing such a traumatic event and having to relearn what a healthy relationship is with the type of love and affection that is deserved. You deserved to be loved and treated how you want to be even if the past did not think so! Adults can also feel shameful or guilty for what has happened to them, and it is never the victims’ fault. With the stereotype of victims always having the ability to leave, sometimes adults feel isolated or embarrassed to disclose. Try to remember that those people have not been in your shoes, they do not need to hear an explanation of your experience, and how you got through it.

## **Older Adults**

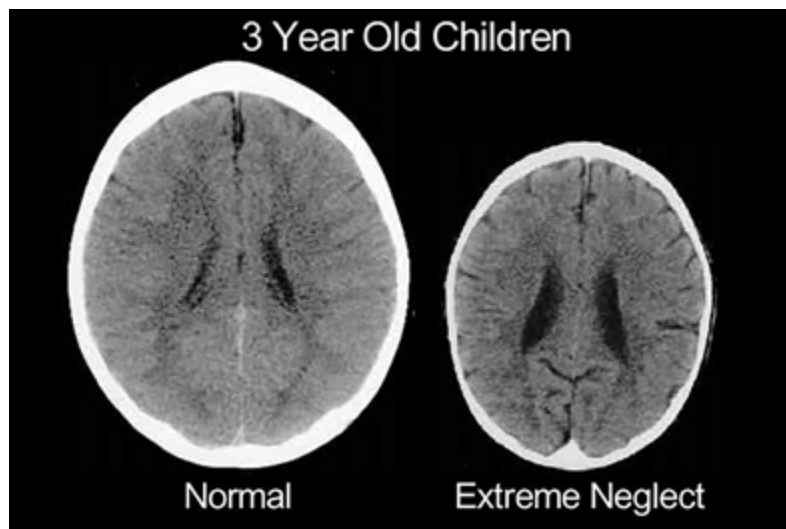
Some people tend to forget that even the older generations can experience domestic violence as well. Unfortunately, age does not define or prevent a person from being mistreated. For elderly people though, it is more common to see abuse such as neglect, emotional abuse, and financial abuse. There are countless of horrific stories relating to mistreatment in nursing homes or family members not helping their loved ones receive proper care.

This violence can also occur with overprotection of their child. Some children want to become their parents' full-time caregivers but do not realize how much responsibility it actually takes to take care of someone who is ill. Another example that can happen is a parent’s child becoming POA for their parent and taking over their finances. Sometimes they will spend money without permission, take it, or withhold it for their own selfish reasons. There is a very fine line between domestic violence and elderly abuse, but the deciding factor is that usually it is domestic violence when it is from someone personal.

## Photos to Provide and Demonstrate Domestic Violence Brain

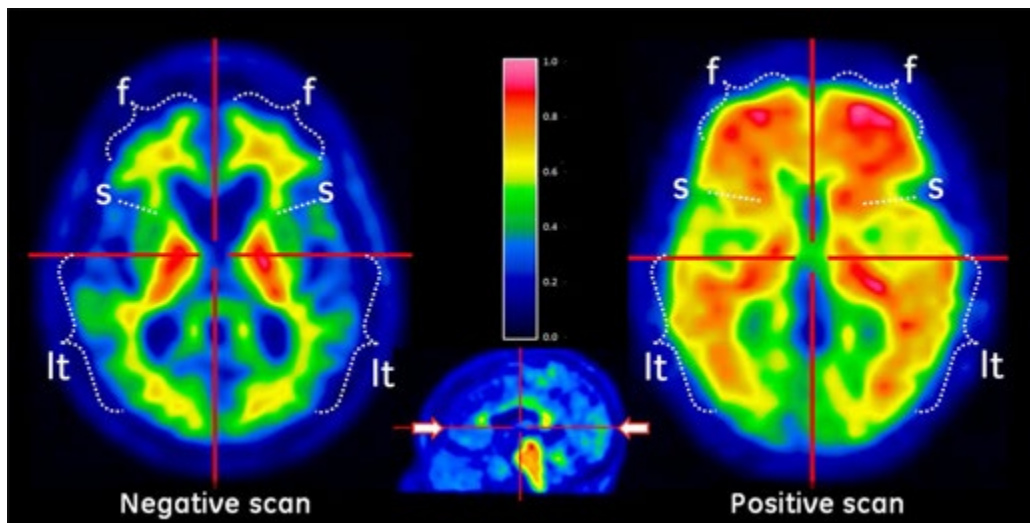


*Child Abuse vs Normal Child Brain focusing on temporal lobes*



*Comparing Brain size of 3-year child who was neglected vs Normal Brain*





*Adult Brain from someone who has experience DV vs adult who has not*

### **Beneficial Tips and Resources**

While most of us may have general knowledge about domestic violence or have resources available to us, you never know what you might hear for the first time. It is extremely common for survivors of domestic violence to also be diagnosed with other mental illnesses like PTSD, Dissociative Identity Disorder, or Dissociation. PTSD is when a person develops flashbacks, paranoia, or intense fear from a traumatic event. Dissociative Identity Disorder is when a person has memory gaps and develops multiple personalities within the brain. This is caused by a traumatic experience, especially if it happened during childhood. However, this is one of the most least diagnosed disorders in the mental health field. Dissociation is when someone disconnects from their own personal thoughts, emotions, feelings, identity, presence, etc. Licensed professionals that can be beneficial towards domestic violence are a psychiatrist, family counselor, trauma therapist, or the Domestic Violence Resource Network (DVRN). It is important to emphasize that some states even help out with medical costs, funeral costs, therapy costs, and so much more. As always, you can call the Domestic Violence hotline or visit the department of justice website.

### **Conclusion**

You are here for a reason, you are so beautiful inside and out, and take as long as you need to heal. Identity is not something that will be discovered and portrayed immediately; it takes time to find yourself. You have been through much as is, give yourself some credit!



We have learned: the different types of identities, how domestic violence can affect different ages, other disorders can tie together with domestic violence, and some resourceful information!

Domestic violence does not describe your identity and who you are because of it, you do.

### **Resources:**

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