

# Fact Sheet

## Emotional and Psychological Abuse and its Impact

**AVERT**  
FAMILY VIOLENCE



**Collaborative Responses in  
the Family Law System**



An Australian Government Initiative

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## Fact Sheet – Emotional and Psychological Abuse and its Impact

- There is greater recognition of the impact that emotional and psychological abuse can have on victims
- The ABS, for the first time in 2012, collected information on the prevalence of emotional abuse by a partner - this includes things like psychological and financial abuse. The ABS found that since the age of 15, women were more likely than men to have experienced emotional abuse by a partner: 25 per cent of women compared to 14 per cent of men.
- The impact of cumulative violence can sometimes translate into seemingly 'incoherent' or 'inconsistent' evidence
- Women understand all of their partner's actions in the context of their prior violence and controlling behaviours. They become experts in 'reading the signals' – cues that signify danger that may not be evident to anyone else. Their perceptions of danger are accurate. Many women describe a certain "look in the eye" that signals extreme danger, and that may precipitate an extreme response, such as killing the abuser
- Women may not initially identify their partner's behaviour as 'violence', or may initially deny it is happening to them. They may then seek to rationalise or excuse the violence, blame themselves, and/or attempt to modify their behaviour so as not to provoke their partner
- In addition to modifying their behaviour, women's strategies for coping with violence include dissociating themselves from the violence, 'forgetting' about abuse, retaining vague and sketchy memories of violent incidents, minimising the seriousness of the violence, vigilance, help seeking, and attempting to leave
- Cases where the violence can be categorised as abusive controlling violence, (often emotional and psychological), research suggests that there is a risk that the intensity and lethality of violence actually escalates.

### Additional Resources/Support Material

#### ***Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC) 2006 Family Violence Report:***

The VLRC report highlights that giving evidence of family violence can be a traumatic experience for victims of family violence:



*Giving evidence can be one of the most intimidating and distressing aspects of the legal system for people who have been subject to family violence. Their evidence may include testimony about their experiences of sexual abuse, physical assault or other ways they have been humiliated, verbally abused or controlled. The dynamics of family violence, and the way it is seen by many in the community, mean that people who have been subjected to it often feel ashamed about, and responsible for, the abuse they have endured.<sup>1</sup>*

The Report also identifies that trauma is heightened if a victim is involved in multiple proceedings, which take place in different courts, subject to distinct evidentiary and procedural requirements—for example, evidence by affidavit or produced orally to the court—and may involve different, or no, legal representation.

**Klettke, Bianca, Graesser, Arthur C. and Powell, Martine B. 2010-05, Expert testimony in child sexual abuse cases : the effects of evidence, coherence and credentials on juror decision making, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 481-494.**

Psychological experts have been used increasingly to testify in child sexual abuse cases, yet little research has investigated what specific factors make experts effective.

This study examined the potential effects that credentials, evidence strength and coherence may have on juror decision making. Sixty-four mock jurors read cases of child sexual abuse, followed by experts' testimony and rated guilt of the defendant, effectiveness of the expert testimony and credibility of the victim.

Evidence strength and coherence of the testimony affected all dependent variables, and the interaction was significant. Guilt ratings of the defendant were lower and the victim was rated as less credible when both evidence strength and coherence were low.

The credentials of the expert, however, had negligible impact. These findings indicate that experts can be effective and impact jurors when testimony is either high in coherence or high in evidence.

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1 Victorian Law Reform Commission, *Review of Family Violence Laws: Report* (2006), [11.1].