

INFORMATION/EDUCATION PAGE

Understanding Brain Injury in Intimate Partner Violence: A Guide for Frontline Professionals Working With IPV in Shelters



Brain injury (BI) resulting from intimate partner violence (IPV) has been markedly neglected despite its immediate and enduring consequences.^{1,2} While IPV affects all genders and sexual orientations, research has primarily focused on women, with studies documenting a wide range of statistics, spanning from 19% to 100% of women in IPV situations suffering from BI. This large range of statistics reported in literature may be because of the challenges associated with identifying BI in survivors of IPV, lack of consistent screening protocols used to identify BI in survivors of IPV, and lack of consistency in the literature in defining BI. Frequently characterized as the “silent epidemic,” BI in survivors of IPV can lead to challenges in physical, social, neuropsychological, and mental health domains.³ Awareness of the high risk of BI, its symptoms, and its long-term effect are critical for frontline workers, such as those in shelters, to ensure early identification and timely management of affected individuals.

- BI may or may not include loss of consciousness
- Loss of consciousness can range from a few seconds or minutes to prolonged comas lasting several days

Symptoms associated with BI

Symptom Type	Examples
Physical	headache, double vision, nausea, vomiting ⁵
Cognitive/behavioral	change in consciousness, confusion, difficulty with memory or attention
Perception/sensation	dizziness, light or sound sensitivity, fatigue

*The symptoms included above may be present at the initial time of BI (*acute symptoms*), with the potential to quickly resolve or last for a longer period of time (*chronic symptoms*). Symptoms may also reappear or change after the initial BI. These symptoms have the potential to affect daily life, as outlined below.

What is BI?

- Injury may affect how the brain works⁴
- BI, or changes in cognitive, emotional, or physical functioning, may result from any sudden bump or blow to the head, such as falls, car crashes, and assaults
- Injuries can also result from strangulation, impacting the brain or blood flow to the head
- BI can range in severity from mild to severe

Effect of BI in survivors of IPV

Regardless of BI severity, BI may have long-term effects on daily life. For example, even a mild BI may result in cognitive, emotional, and/or functional challenges. However, it is important to highlight that recovery after BI varies greatly. Although BI may result in varying degrees of cognitive, emotional, social, and/or functional challenges, there is also the potential for an individual to make a full recovery and not experience any persistent symptoms. The potential effect of BI is outlined below.

Cognitive and emotional challenges

Brain injuries contribute to cognitive changes such as impairments in:^{6,7,8}

- Decision making
- Judgment
- Abstract thinking
- Overall information processing
- Executive function
- Memory

Emotional challenges such as:⁶

- General distress
- Anxiety
- Posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms
- Depression

Social and secondary consequences of BI

Social and functional challenges:

- Return to work
- Social communication
- Engagement in daily social and community activities

What can I do?

Given the potential for long-term cognitive, emotional, and functional challenges after BI together with the risk of survivors of IPV sustaining multiple BIs, early identification of BI is critical. While there are many ways you can support

individuals who may have sustained a BI because of IPV, we suggest 3 key steps. See the figure below for details.

Key steps:

1. **Educate** about the risk of BI in women exposed to IPV

- *Learning about BI, associated symptoms, and ways these may affect survivors of IPV are a critical first steps in supporting this population*

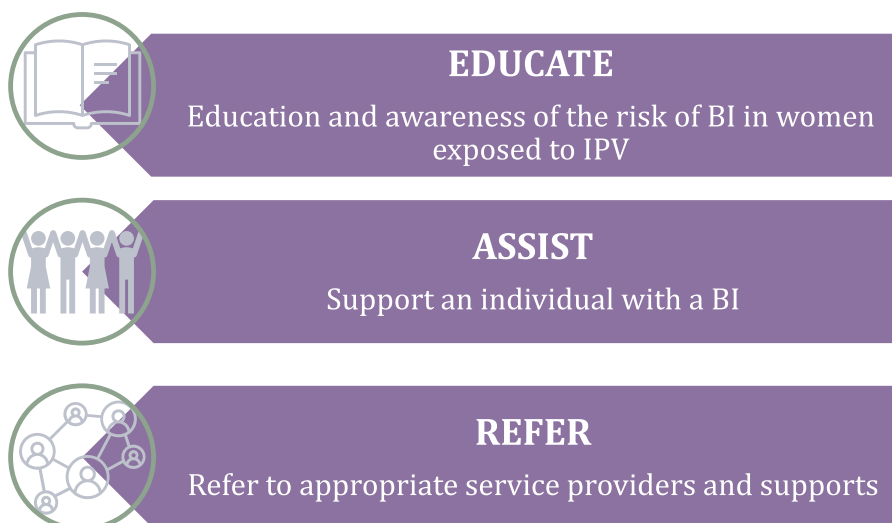
2. **Assist** by supporting individuals who have sustained a BI

- *Provide reader-friendly education materials on BI and accommodations*

3. **Refer** to service providers and support as warranted

- Refer to service providers such as:
 - Neurologists or other medical providers for BI diagnosis
 - Psychologists for trauma therapy and cognitive deficits
 - Speech language pathologists for communication challenges
 - Occupational therapy to support life skills and meaningful engagement
 - Local BI and/or IPV support groups

Note: The list above includes some examples of service providers you may refer to; however, it is not a comprehensive list.



Key steps for supporting individuals who might experience BI in the context of IPV.

Note: It is important to state that the scope of this information page is to serve as an introduction to the risk of BI in survivors of IPV. However, there are many considerations specific to this population you must be mindful of when helping and referring, the largest being the individual's safety.

Information websites to learn more about BI in the context of IPV

- <https://www.abitoolkit.ca>
- <https://www.pinkconcussions.com>
- <https://www.soarproject.ca>
- <https://enigma.ini.usc.edu/ongoing/enigma-tbi/enigma-ipv>
- <https://www.odvn.org/brain-injury/>
- <https://www.braininjuryaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/BRAININJURYAUSTRALIAfamilyviolencebraininjuryFINAL.pdf>
- <https://brainprojectcyprus.org> **Please note: This resource is not in English; it is written in Greek.*

Authorship

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Disclaimer

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