Understanding the Layers of Relational Abuse Chart

Know the Risk Factors

Layers of Relational Abuse

	"I" STATEMENTS	INDIVIDUAL / SELF RISK FACTORS	INTERPERSONAL / PERPETRATOR	COMMUNITY / INSTITUTIONAL	SOCIETAL / CULTURAL
Domestic Violence	☐ "My love has been abused"	☐ Female, children at home, educational status *not* protective	☐ Unrelated male in the home, work problems, unemployment, older, substance use, infidelity	☐ Neighborhood disadvantage, institutional failures, limited service access	☐ Victim blaming, traditional gender norms, sexism, structural inequalities
Workplace Sexual Harassment	☐ "My labor/money has been abused"	☐ Female, younger, educational status *not* protective	☐ Educational disparities, unequal power dynamics	☐ Wage disparities, formal complaints discouraged, institutional racism	☐ Sexism, patriarchal attitudes, structural vulnerability, economic hierarchies
Sexual Abuse	☐ "My body has been abused"	☐ One biological parent, mother unavailable, punitive discipline, stepfather in home, no class or race protected	☐ Sexual aggressiveness, delinquency, disregard for others, alcohol use	☐ Institutional corruption, barriers to disclosure and reporting, lack of transparency	☐ Acceptance of violence, upholding rape myths, sexism, judgment toward victims
Trusted Advisor Abuse	☐ "My trust has been abused"	☐ Spiritual seekers, high performers, members of groups, teams, isolated communities	☐ Secrecy, guru status, strategic boundary testing, engineered favoritism, demands of compliance	☐ Homogeneity, high exclusivity, high isolation, captive audiences, prescribed obedience	☐ Overemphasis on performance and obedience, Us vs. Them, Winners vs. Losers

Instructions: To understand your own risk factors, make a checkmark in each square that is a YES. Any YES is an increased risk of vulnerability.

1. **Count the number of boxes you checked for YES:**
   - **Write the number here: _____**
2. **Divide the number by 20 and multiply by 100:**
   - **Approximate increased risk = _____%**

The layers highlight the four different types of relational abuse, which can all occur together. Knowing your real risks is a clear way to help yourself become safer. By recognizing known risk factors, you can identify and protect yourself via safety and exit planning. Contact the National DV Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 or your local domestic violence agency.

Each YES is an increased risk for vulnerability to being abused.

Prioritizing both physical and emotional safety is essential to reducing relational abuse and violence.

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How does knowing risk factors promote safety?

The **Layers of Relational Abuse** table is based on the public health socio-ecological model; all risk factors have been selected via researched analysis. It provides a visual chart of risk factors, which are variables that, if they are occurring, increase the dangerousness risk level within interpersonal relationships. Through the visual, the aim is to shift the focus from “What did this victim do to cause this?” to “What have society, institutions and perpetrators done to allow this to happen?” Communities and organizations can promote a broader understanding of how environments enable all forms of abuse, how to create protection for those who are vulnerable due to the known risk factors, and how to safeguard future victims from perpetrators who may gain access to them. Resources can then be used to protect the vulnerable, rather than the perpetrators often found hiding behind institutional walls.

Defined by Mausner and Bahn (1974), a "risk factor" is any variable associated with an increased likelihood of developing a disease or condition. Risk factors chronologically precede a disease or condition, but they are not necessarily its cause. They are markers of higher susceptibility to the condition. Consequently, demographic traits like age, sex, and ethnicity may act as risk factors yet do not have a direct causal influence.

“I” STATEMENTS	INDIVIDUAL / SELF RISK FACTORS	INTERPERSONAL/ PERPETRATOR	COMMUNITY / INSTITUTIONAL	SOCIETAL / CULTURAL
“I” statements validate personal experiences. They make it easier to say something out loud. They encourage seeking support. They empower survivors to report the abuse by overcoming confusion and denial.	Knowing who is statistically most vulnerable helps self to proactively protect self. Knowing their own risk factors, people can see the warning signs earlier and make a safety plan to build stronger defenses.	Recognizing factors that increase the risk of someone being an abuser serves as an early warning system. It helps as a guide to establish firm personal boundaries or to exit the situation before abuse escalates.	Holding institutions accountable for any abuse occurring there highlights that improving oversight and reporting channels exposes abuse, rather than waiting for an incident to occur.	Identifying harmful social messages and mindsets reveals attitudes that shield abusers. It shifts the cultural conversation by lowering social barriers against disclosure, making it safer for anyone to speak out and get actual help.

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