


# What if it was more than just an argument?

Reference points to help differentiate  
conjugal violence from a couple's fight  
or argument



REGROUPEMENT DES MAISONS  
POUR FEMMES VICTIMES  
DE VIOLENCE CONJUGALE



This brochure is inspired by the content of the *Violence conjugale ou chicane de couple: pour y voir plus clair!* conference, which has been widely distributed by the Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale since 2005.

Created in 1979, the Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale deploys an array of strategies to provide a better understanding of conjugal violence and to ensure more effective detection and response with a view of preventing this issue.

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# What if it was more than just an argument?

*Every time I'm with my friend and her husband is present, they inevitably start yelling at each other about anything and everything. Are they simply going through a rough patch, or might there be violence involved? My friend has never said anything to me about it.*

Such situations lead us to wonder: *What happens when they are alone together?* When we witness tension in a relationship, we do not necessarily know how to interpret the situation: Is it an argument, a conflict, a crisis?... Due to ignorance—or maybe even doubt—we rarely ever think of conjugal violence. And since conjugal violence usually occurs behind closed doors, we have very little to go on to determine whether or not violence is involved.

In Québec, conjugal violence has been considered a social problem for several years, and as such, it must be denounced. An increasing number of us feel concerned—even more so when a loved one is a victim or perpetrator. The question, then, is: *How can you tell if it's an argument or violence?*

This publication is intended for people who may witness an argument between a couple, as well as for loved ones who want to know the difference between an altercation and conjugal violence and would like to respond. Your reaction can make a difference!

This brochure offers a series of questions that serve as an aid and can provide tools that may help differentiate conjugal violence from an altercation. There are a few guidelines to help loved ones react to an incident of conjugal violence.

Sometimes, women are the perpetrators of conjugal violence. However, in the vast majority of heterosexual relationships, the man is at fault. That is why we have opted to use a language implying that the victim is female and the perpetrator, male.

The same reference points can also be used in same-sex relationships.

# Scenario

We are having dinner at the restaurant with Sonia and Marc, a couple we met recently. Everything is going great until the conversation turns to politics. As soon as Sonia starts to give her opinion, Marc begins mocking everything she says. This is a sensitive topic for them, because Sonia does not share Marc's political views. Nonetheless, she continues to share her ideas. Marc blows up, telling her to shut up and calling her "useless."

Things are now uncomfortable. *What just happened?* Is Marc, frustrated that Sonia is contradicting him when he thinks he knows more about the issue; is he being aggressive? Or is this simply an (over-exaggerated) response from someone who feels very strongly about politics? Maybe this is how they always talk to each other? Maybe they always have such animated debates when they are together? Or is this a way for Marc to overpower Sonia?

» Four criteria to help us understand this scenario:

the **type of aggression**, the **desired goal**, the **impact** and the **explanation**

There are also two important clues to take into consideration: the **repetitiveness of the aggressive behaviour** and **equal power** in the relationship.

Let's take a closer look.

# » The type of aggression

Marc called Sonia “useless” in front of us and told her to shut up. Was this intentional, impulsive or spontaneous? Did Marc simply lose his temper, or on the contrary, were his actions calculated? Clarifying the type of aggression is the first step to identifying whether you are dealing with a couple’s argument or conjugal violence.

## \* What form of aggression is used?

## \* How does aggression present itself?

Marc’s verbal aggressiveness toward Sonia is a flagrant example of his lack of respect for her. However, Sonia’s response will give us more clues as to whether this aggressive behaviour was intentional or impulsive.

It is therefore too early to tell.

## In a COUPLE’S ARGUMENT

There is mostly arguing, which can be fuelled by anger and conviction.

There may be some aggressiveness, releasing inner tension created by anger and frustration.

**Violence** can present itself in the following ways:

**VERBALLY:** arguing, yelling, talking loudly, expressing anger, being rude to others, sulking, etc.

**PHYSICALLY:** throwing things (in no specific direction), hitting the table, making an impulsive gesture (slapping), slamming the door, etc.

## In a scene of CONJUGAL VIOLENCE

**Aggression can be intentional and strategic** to gain power over the other person.

**Violence** can manifest itself in several ways:

**PHYSICAL:** hitting, shoving, slapping, throwing an object at the other person, restraining, etc.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL:** humiliating, belittling, ridiculing, etc.

**CONTROL:** isolating, keeping track of the other person’s comings and goings, belittling her loved ones and forbidding her from seeing them, etc.

**SEXUAL:** calling the other person a “slut” or a “whore,” making reference to her sexual capabilities, forcing her to perform sexual acts, etc.

**FINANCIAL:** controlling money, making it a point to show that he’s the one with the money, belittling the other person’s income, taking her money, forbidding her to work, etc.

**VERBAL:** uttering threats, yelling at the other person, instilling fear, giving the silent treatment, etc.

# » The desired goal

Without knowing all of the details of the aggressive behaviour, we may wonder whether or not it was intentional and what the intended goal was. Why did Marc say Sonia was “useless”? Couldn’t he have made an argument specific to Sonia’s point of view? Did he have anything to gain by calling her names, or was he just being impulsive? If he was seeking to win the argument at all costs, we could believe that his actions were intentional. However, if he acted on impulse, we would focus more on the question of aggressiveness.

The second step is considering the desired goal.

**\* Who is seeking to win over the other?**

**\* What is the desired goal?**

## In a COUPLE’S ARGUMENT

Whether the argument is started by one or the other, generally, both members are involved and want to win.

Both are seeking to win the debate, but not at all costs; not to the point where they want to destroy one another.

The issue at hand is the topic of the argument.

## In a scene of CONJUGAL VIOLENCE

He wants to overpower his victim. The perpetrator is the instigator and seeks to dominate.

The victim wants the violence to end. She has nothing to gain.

The perpetrator wants to win at all costs, at his victim’s expense, and is willing to hurt and destroy her into submission. He is therefore seeking control and power over his victim, using different pretexts.

The issue at hand is control over the other person—not the topic of the argument itself.

Marc and Sonia are having an “animated” discussion about politics—the controversial issue. Sonia continues to defend her position, and Marc responds in an aggressive manner.

**IN THE CASE OF A COUPLE’S ARGUMENT**, both will seek to win the political debate, and the topic of the argument will remain the central point.

However, **IN THE CASE OF CONJUGAL VIOLENCE**, Marc’s behaviour will aim to quiet Sonia and overpower her; the political position will be less important to him than dominating her. The pretexts, which aim to dominate his victim, are endless.

## » The impact

It is often difficult to determine the impact of aggressive behaviour. Did Marc's words incite Sonia to be submissive? To be quiet? For instance, if Sonia told Marc to "calm down," we would think that she is not afraid and that she is comfortable speaking up. However, if she stopped talking, tried changing the subject or to lighten the mood, we would have to wonder if she was afraid that the situation would get out of hand.

**\* What impact does the abuse have on the victim?**

### In a COUPLE'S ARGUMENT

Both members are on equal footing—neither one fears the other. Each feels free and spontaneous in what they say and how they react.

Reactions remain focused on the goal of winning the argument: responding, arguing, negotiating, raising their voice, outplaying the other, etc.

### In a scene of CONJUGAL VIOLENCE

She doesn't feel free to say what she thinks and to react, fearing the consequences and violence. Humiliated, hurt, constrained and ashamed in front of others, she is usually submissive in order to end the humiliation or because she simply has no other choice. She will respond so as to calm the argument and avoid more damage.

IN A COUPLE'S ARGUMENT, Sonia would no doubt feel hurt by the attack, but because she does not fear Marc, she would respond freely and let Marc know that she does not appreciate his attitude.

IN THE CASE OF CONJUGAL VIOLENCE, Sonia would avoid responding in a defensive manner to avoid angering Marc further. She would already know what to expect later, at home.

## » The explanation

Even after answering the previous questions, we may be missing some elements to establish whether we are witnessing a couple's argument or conjugal violence.

The way in which the aggressive behaviour is explained indicates the goal of the behaviour and the distribution of power within the relationship. If the goal of the aggressiveness was to gain control, Marc would not let go easily and would explain himself strategically. Feeling his actions were legitimate, he would attempt to justify them by blaming Sonia for what happened, for instance. Sonia might even defend him, showing that violence is already very much a part of their relationship. However, if Marc was just unloading his aggressiveness, he would probably continue to argue and explain his point of view without attacking Sonia or blaming her.

The explanation behind the aggressive behaviour helps us better understand the perpetrator's intentions and the type of violence used.

### \* How is the aggressive behaviour explained?

#### In a COUPLE'S ARGUMENT

The person who starts the argument has nothing to hide and no power to hold on to. She argues and explains her actions based on the topic of the conflict with relative transparency. It is easier for her to let go and apologize if she feels she went too far.

IN A COUPLE'S ARGUMENT, it is safe to think that Marc would respond to Sonia's comment to "calm down" either by joking about how he is overly passionate about politics, or by apologizing to Sonia and anyone who witnessed the scene. He would try to relieve the tension without feeling like a "loser."

IN THE CASE OF CONJUGAL VIOLENCE, Marc would make sure not to lose the upper hand. He would come up with every possible reason to justify his behaviour. To make himself unaccountable, Marc would use words such as "she does it on purpose to contradict me even though she knows nothing about politics" or "I keep telling her not to interrupt me when I speak and she does it anyway." Marc would never let anyone question his power.

#### In a scene of CONJUGAL VIOLENCE

The perpetrator does not want to get caught and face any repercussions or lose power. He does not provide explanations; **he justifies his behaviour** instead. He uses various strategies:

- » He denies
- » He trivializes his actions
- » He claims to have been provoked
- » He calls it self-defence
- » He mentions mitigating circumstances (*alcohol, stress, difficult childhood, etc.*)

We have just gone over the four criteria that help analyze the case of Marc and Sonia. Now, let's look at the two clues that help analyze the relationship: the repetitiveness of the aggressive behaviour and equal power.



# What is the dynamic? Is there a pattern of violence?

At this point, even though we have a good idea of what happened in the scene we analyzed, further questions will give a more complete portrait of the relationship. Does Marc insult Sonia this way regularly, or was this an isolated case? Is it also possible that Sonia and Marc often argue and take turns starting the argument?

In order to reach more definitive conclusions, it is important to know whether this type of incident is a common occurrence.

**\* Have you witnessed or heard of similar episodes?**

**\* If yes, who started the fight?**

## In a COUPLE'S ARGUMENT

Family and friends may have witnessed more bickering, because the argument is so natural, it seems unlikely that there haven't been others.

A couple's argument can be transparent and public.

The roles are interchangeable—sometimes one starts the argument, sometimes the other does.

## In a scene of CONJUGAL VIOLENCE

It is rare that people will be witness to several episodes of conjugal violence (although they may have heard of others or felt the tension). This type of violence typically happens behind closed doors.

The perpetrator does not want his tactics to be apparent to the rest of the world, because he has better control over his victim when he isolates her.

It is always the same instigator and the same victim.

IN A COUPLE'S ARGUMENT, there is no pattern in place. Arguments may or may not repeat themselves. They may have to do with topics that annoy either individual (such as how chores are divided).

EPISODES OF CONJUGAL VIOLENCE usually follow the four-part cycle described below. The perpetrator repeatedly controls and sets this cycle into motion in order to instill, maintain or regain power over his victim, making sure she does not leave or denounce him.



## 1-TENSION

**Excessive anger, silent treatment, bullying, menacing stares.**

**ANXIETY:** I feel things might go wrong, I feel worried, I put a lot of energy into trying to reduce the tension, I'm scared: I freeze up, I feel like I'm walking on eggshells.

# THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE



## 2- VIOLENCE

**Verbal, psychological, physical, sexual, economical.**

**ANGER AND SHAME:** I feel humiliated and sad, I feel a sense of injustice.

## 4- RECONCILIATION

**He will do anything for forgiveness, ask for help, talk about going to therapy, talk of suicide.**

**HOPE:** I see that he wants to change, I give him another chance, I help him, I can see the person I fell in love with, I change my attitude.

## 3- JUSTIFICATION

**He finds excuses, explains why he lost his temper: the reasons are beyond his control.**

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** I believe and understand his justifications, if I could just help him change, I will adjust to him, I am second-guessing myself (is this really violence), I feel it is my fault, and my anger fades away.

# Is there equal power in the relationship?

One final question can reveal more about the situation between Marc and Sonia. *Were they in an equal relationship? Did they feel free to act, think, etc.?*

In an equal relationship, each partner has a certain amount of freedom—i.e. seeing their own friends, doing their own activities, having their own values. The couple will make important decisions together, such as where to go on vacation, picking out an apartment or neighbourhood to live in, etc. **In an equal relationship**, there is no power struggle. The couple may disagree on a variety of issues: a project, spending, chores, etc., which may create tension or cause conflicts and arguments. If there is a debate over a sensitive topic—even an animated debate—both parties will retain their individual freedom to express themselves and their point of view (without any humiliating personal attacks), to argue and respond as they wish, without fearing repercussions.

On the other hand, **when conjugal violence is part of a relationship**, equality in the relationship is broken. The perpetrator overpowers his victim. Under the pretext of jealousy or for any other reason, he will belittle, threaten or forbid her—explicitly or indirectly—to take part in certain activities or to see people she cares about, including her family and friends. The victim becomes submissive and no longer reacts or expresses herself freely, out of fear. He holds the power in their relationship.

In conclusion, we can say that **in the case of a couple's argument**, the relationship remains relatively equal before, during and after the conflict. **In the case of conjugal violence**, the perpetrator will gain control of the relationship, which may seem more-or-less equal during calmer periods, during and after the violence. Inequality settles into their relationship beyond aggressive episodes.

We now have all the clues to differentiate between conjugal violence and a mere couple's argument.

To help detect them more quickly, refer to the following summary table.

# Clues at a glance

## In a COUPLE'S ARGUMENT

## In a scene of CONJUGAL VIOLENCE

**\* What form of aggression is used?**

Arguing, possibly using aggressive words and gestures.

There is a goal behind the aggressive behaviour, which is intentional and strategic.

**\* Who is seeking to win? What is the desired goal?**

Both want to win, but not at all costs. Each will try to convince the other that they are right.

One of them wants to win at any cost. He is seeking control over his victim.

**\* What impact does the violence have on the other victim?**

Because neither one fears the other, both feel free to respond.

The victim does not feel free to respond, fearing the consequences of doing so.

**\* How is the aggressive behaviour explained?**

The partner explains himself based on the conflict.

The perpetrator does not provide any explanations; he justifies his behaviour instead. He uses various strategies, including denial, trivializing his actions, etc.

**\* Have you witnessed or heard of similar episodes? Who started the fight?**

Arguments can be completely transparent. Either one can be the instigator; the roles are interchangeable.

It is rare that people will witness several episodes, as this type of violence typically happens behind closed doors. The instigator is always the same person.

**\* Is there equal power in the relationship?**

The relationship is relatively equal before, during and after the argument.

There is an imbalance in power and there is inequality in the relationship beyond the aggressive episodes.

# Fine tune your knowledge with three more scenarios!

**1** *I've seen an episode where Jean-Sébastien was clearly trying to belittle Marjorie. I would even say that he wanted to humiliate her in front of everyone. But this behaviour seemed to have no impact on Marjorie. She did not seem to care. I've known this couple for five years, and I was shocked by Jean-Sébastien's attitude. Before this, I had never seen anything like this between them, and I was never led to believe that there might be violence in their relationship.*

In this situation, the lack of impact on the victim leads to believe that this may be the first attempt at violence. Because she does not feel like a victim, Marjorie is not afraid to respond spontaneously—she does not fear any consequences or believe the situation will repeat itself. This aggressive behaviour is not likely to be an incident of conjugal violence. The question, however, is whether Jean-Sébastien intends to go down that path. To be monitored.

**2** *I know a couple who fights constantly. Both people rip each other to shreds and hurt each other in a way that is clearly intentional. All forms of violence associated with conjugal violence are present, but both of them take part, so the impact is minimal, with neither one ever afraid of the other.*

In this situation, it seems that both partners are in an endless conflict and will do anything to win. Although one or the other loses now and then, in the end, the power balances itself out. There is no dominant and submissive person. However, there are still safety risks for both parties due to the level of aggressiveness and inability to let go or compromise.

**3** *My neighbour seems to be an impulsive man who gets angry easily. His wife mentions that he has a "short fuse." It's obvious that he doesn't want to hurt her, and yet, sometimes, she gets scared. She does not dare respond, by fear that he might lose control. She never knows how far he will go.*

There are two potential ways to analyze this situation. The first is to wonder whether this man knows his significant other is afraid of him. If he is aware and has not tried to rectify the situation, he may use his impulsivity as a means to justify the control he wants to have over his partner. If this is the case, he is guilty of conjugal violence. If not, we assume the man truly is impulsive. If his partner does not fear him outside these episodes, she should be able to discuss openly and negotiate without worrying that there might be consequences, since the man is not trying to take anything away from her. However, there are still safety risks for the woman, given the man's uncontrolled impulsiveness.

# How should you respond?

Conjugal violence is a very complex issue, and resolving it requires the involvement of all of society; we all need to do our part. It is therefore important to react and denounce conjugal violence.

If you witness violence and fear for the victim's safety, contacting the police can make a difference, even if you are not sure that this is a case of conjugal violence. If you suspect a friend, sister or colleague might be a victim of conjugal violence, or a colleague or brother-in-law might be controlling his spouse, you need to do your part as a loved one.

**Doing nothing** sends the perpetrator a clear message that you agree with using violence to control someone. Since he does not need to answer for his actions, the perpetrator believes his behaviour is justified.

**Because doing nothing** keeps the victim in a position of powerlessness. She understands that no one supports her, she needs to deal with this on her own and it may be her fault that she is in this predicament!

You therefore need to act cautiously and with tact. Always make sure that your reaction does not weaken the victim, does not put her in harm's way and, most importantly, does not reinforce the perpetrator's legitimacy or his power over her. **Two important things to watch out for.**

**Avoid responding to conjugal violence as though it were a couple's argument**

When it comes to conjugal violence, you should never recommend therapy in hopes of improving the couple's communication or anger management. Encouraging the couple to talk about the source of the conflict is also unhelpful.

This sends the victim the message that she is on equal footing with the perpetrator and that he sincerely wants to change. Encouraging the couple to discuss the situation can give the perpetrator ammunition for future aggressions—i.e. learning the victim's fears. She then finds herself with someone who knows he is stronger than her and has no real desire to negotiate.

## Make sure you don't confuse the victim for the perpetrator

Victims sometimes retaliate to defend themselves. In this case, you need to be careful not to confuse the victim for the perpetrator—this can put her in an even more powerless situation, because she is not seen as the victim and is now being held accountable for her aggressive actions. This reinforces the partner's belief that he is above the law; not only did the violence hold no consequence for him, he is also protected and legitimized, being seen as a victim.

## Responding as a loved one

If you are **close to the victim**, you can help her by:

- » trying to understand her fears, doubts, guilt or shame, along with the impact the cycle has on her rather than blaming or judging her
- » breaking her isolation and maintaining ties with her, even though the perpetrator is doing everything he can to isolate her
- » discussing how she sees the situation and never bad-mouthing the partner
- » keeping the focus on her, without ever making decisions for her
- » informing and helping her find resources, if she asks

If you are **close to the perpetrator**, on the other hand, and you are in a safe enough position, you can:

- » say that violence is unacceptable and that no one deserves to be treated that way, regardless of who she is, what she says or what she did
- » refuse to accept justifications for violence
- » tell him that his behaviour is unacceptable
- » inform him of resources available

In the end, if you do not feel you have the sufficient tools or if you doubt your ways of responding, you can consult a resource specialized in conjugal violence. Getting help from a social worker from a shelter, for instance, will only help the victim, and perhaps other people affected by the conjugal violence, such as children or the victim's loved ones.

# We want to help fight conjugal violence...

- ★ **Let's learn to detect couples' arguments and communication problems, which require different solutions.**
- ★ **Let's learn to recognize power struggles in relationships, even the most subtle ones.**
- ★ **Let's say no to violence, starting with denouncing what we see, making perpetrators accountable and helping victims regain their power.**

In Quebec, there are a variety of resources to help female victims of conjugal violence and their children. There are also resources available for male perpetrators. You can get information on all of these resources by contacting SOS Violence conjugale—a help line available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week—at 1-800-363-9010.

**These resources include a network of support centres and shelters across Quebec.** They offer various services for female victims of conjugal violence and their children. You can reach them directly by phone or through SOS Violence conjugale.

Visit **[www.contrelaviolenceconjugale.ca](http://www.contrelaviolenceconjugale.ca)** to watch videos on the services offered by support centres and shelters.

External support services | Support services following a separation |  
Telephone consultation services | Youth services | Advocacy services

Furthermore, log on to **[www.maisons-femmes.qc.ca](http://www.maisons-femmes.qc.ca)** to learn more about conjugal violence, including the cycle of violence, by reading the French brochure *La violence conjugale, c'est quoi au juste?*