

Animal abuse

Victims of domestic and family violence may rely on family pets for emotional support while trying to cope with the abusive relationship. A perpetrator may exploit this emotional bond by using overt threats and actual harm to pets in order to further **control** or intimidate the victim [Roguski 2012]. This behaviour has also been described as a form of **emotional abuse** [Faver & Strand 2007]. **Children** may be exposed to animal abuse in the context of domestic and family violence [Ascione et al 2007]. It is recognised that perpetrators may initiate or continue animal abuse post separation; and that threats of abuse to animals may contribute to some victims delaying leaving or returning to the abusive relationship due to concerns for the welfare of family pets, thus increasing the victim's exposure to the possibility of further violence [Ascione et al 2007]. Abuse or threats of abuse have particular implications if the victim has a **disability** or **mental illness** and the animal is a service or assistance animal such as a guide dog [Harpur & Douglas 2015].

Some examples of animal abuse include: being skinned alive; beaten against a tree with a crowbar; punched, beaten, or kicked; shot; fed gunpowder; hung; thrown across the room; or subjected to acts of bestiality. Animals may also suffer in other ways, for example, exposing themselves to physical harm by attempting to protect their guardians during an abusive episode, and suffering severe anxiety and distress at witnessing the abuse of their guardian.

Perpetrators who abuse animals are more likely to have committed violent crimes and property and drug-related offences. Perpetrators may sometimes use animals as weapons against victims; and threats of harm to animals may be used to coerce victims to commit illegal acts [Ascione et al 2007], for example there are reported instances of the victim being forced by the perpetrator to watch animal-related pornography or to engage in **sexual activities with animals**. Victims in these circumstances may feel a great sense of desperation and anguish at having to violate their own value systems [Faver & Strand 2007].

Some victims in the process of leaving an abusive relationship may be unable to make alternative safe arrangements for the care of their pets, for example due to lack of funds or lack of suitable shelter accommodation for animals or for people with animals. In some cases, victims may give away or abandon their pets with the possible consequence of heightening the trauma experienced due to the domestic and family violence. In other cases, the victim may feel they have no choice but to leave the pets in the perpetrator's care, which may result in the perpetrator neglecting, threatening to or actually harming or killing the pets, or otherwise using them to continue **to exercise control over the victim**, including using the ongoing threats or potential for harm as a means of **coercing** the victim to return to the abusive relationship to protect the pets [Faver & Strand 2007].

Animal abuse may be one aspect of a complex pattern of behaviours engaged in by perpetrators in order to control another person, sometimes referred to as **coercive control**. While animal abuse may also be understood as a form of **damage to property** many argue this approach denies the sentience of animals [[Taylor & Fraser 2019](#)].