



City Mental Health
Alliance UK

Domestic Abuse: A Workplace Issue

How employers can provide
support during the COVID-19
pandemic



Introduction

Domestic abuse is already a major challenge for our society with an enormous human cost. Two million people in the UK suffer some form of domestic abuse every year – 1.3 million female victims and 600,000 male victims¹. One in six men and one in four women will suffer from domestic abuse in their lifetime. Seven women a month are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales¹.

The pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions have led to a devastating increase in levels of domestic abuse. Refuge said that in May 2020, it recorded a 66% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse helpline over a three week period, with a 957% increase in web traffic over a two week period. Male victims of abuse have also been calling for help in greater numbers. 16 people were killed in the first three weeks of lockdown.

Domestic abuse also causes poor mental health. 42% of victims live with mental health problems and 17% have planned or attempted suicide². Given the numbers, it is likely that every major employer has victims of abuse within their workforce. As well as the human cost, UK businesses are estimated to lose £1.9 billion a year due to decreased productivity, time off work, lost wages and sick pay³.

Domestic abuse is not just violence, but is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, financial control, psychological or physical abuse. In the majority of cases the perpetrators of abuse are a partner or ex-partner, but it can also be a family member or carer.

1. ONS (2016), March 2015 Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)
2. SafeLives. (2018). Insights Idva England and Wales dataset 2017-18 Adult independent domestic violence advisor (Idva)
3. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph50/resources/costing-statement-pdf-69194701>



Why have levels of domestic abuse increased in the COVID-19 pandemic?

The lockdown and restrictions itself do not cause domestic abuse, but Refuge said that it can aggravate pre-existing behaviours in an abusive partner.

- Isolation is a key part of domestic abuse and is reinforced by restrictions which limit a victim's ability to leave home to go to the workplace or visit family
- A perpetrator and victim are more likely to spend more time together, so there is an opportunity to take greater control over the victim's life. For example by preventing the victim having virtual contact with others
- Always being home leads to lack of privacy. So victims are more vulnerable as they are less able to use electronic devices to ask for support from family or support lines. Victims feel too scared to file a report with the police or are unable to find a safe way to do so
- There is never any excuse for domestic abuse, but stress and loss of income is associated with higher incidence levels
- COVID-19 is already causing people to feel emotionally drained. For abuse victims it is even harder to take action – breaking free requires extraordinary amounts of emotional and physical energy as well as money

Why should employers help and what can they do?

Domestic abuse can affect all people of all ages, of all income brackets, from all ethnic backgrounds. Forward-thinking businesses have already recognised that domestic abuse is workplace wellbeing issue and are taking positive steps to support employees who may be victims. During this pandemic, employers have an ever more pronounced opportunity to be a support for someone experiencing domestic abuse. For many victims, both those who are remote working or going to the workplace, employers are their main point of contact with the outside world. In some cases, they may be the only contact they are permitted to have.

Safe Lives, a UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, has created guidance for what employers can do to support employees who are not safe at home, please click [here](#). It includes clear advice for both employers and line managers about how to create a culture where people feel comfortable to talk about their abuse, what signs to look out for and what employers can do in response.



Starting a conversation

If you suspect that someone you work with is impacted by domestic abuse, it can be difficult to know how to start a conversation. Don't feel that conversations need to centre on the domestic abuse itself. If you are worried about someone, ask some simple questions and then leave sufficient space for them to answer. For example:

- How are you doing at the moment?
- How is everything at home with you all being together?
- Are you feeling safe at home? Are you feeling comfortable at home?
- Your wellbeing is important to me and I have noticed you seem distracted/upset at the moment – are you okay? Do you feel unsafe or uncomfortable at all?
- You don't need to tell me anything but please know I am there to support you if and when you are ready
- If they tell you something that doesn't feel right, ask questions such as 'How do you experience or feel about this?'
- Follow with questions such as 'Has this happened before?' Or, 'How do you manage when this happens?'

If someone does disclose that they are a victim of domestic abuse then there are simple things you can say to make them feel supported:

- **Validate them and support them.** Acknowledge their courage in talking about it
- **Don't tell them what to do.** Be led by them in terms of what would help them. Many survivors of domestic abuse will have been in their situation for a long time. They will have significant coping strategies. Just listen and acknowledge and signpost to support if they want this. Help to put the person back in control of their life.
- **You can move on to discuss safe ways of communicating** such as code words and police silent calls

A reminder

An employer / colleague's role is not solve the situation for the victim or to personally intervene, but to listen and signpost to support. If you or someone else is in immediate danger **please call 999** and ask for the police.



What have CMHA members been doing to support domestic abuse victims?

CMHA members are committed to supporting the wellbeing and mental health of their people, so many of them already have policies in place to support domestic abuse victims within their organisation. They have clearly communicated, and built on, these policies at this time of crisis. The policies include interventions such as:

10 days paid leave for anyone who is affected to provide flexibility to take time out and seek the support they need

Interest free loans to allow a victim to access resources to make new arrangements or meet particular financial needs at short notice

Offer to have their salary paid in a different way which gives victims control of their money

Provide flexibility in terms of working patterns. Ensure line managers are given permission to act upon those requests

Provide a new phone and number - both personal and work

Provide options for victims to access a range of support whether that's through an EAP, line manager, staff networks or support and advice lines

Provide line manager training on how to spot signs of domestic abuse, have conversations and signpost to support

Provide an emergency assistance programme at no cost to the individual so they can get safe accommodation for themselves and, if relevant, their children

Provide 1-1 counselling support to the victim

Importantly, these businesses regularly communicate policies and support available, and engage senior leaders in communicating these policies to raise awareness and create a culture where people feel they can ask for support. It is important to include a wide range of resources, either internal or external, that speak to different intersectionalities to reflect the demographics within your workforce and bring in any networks e.g. your BAME network, into the conversation.

Finally, as much as possible, individual support should be discussed with the victim. They will have the best understanding of what will be safe and effective for them.



The perpetrators

Any employer could also potentially employ perpetrators of domestic abuse. There are a number of things that you can do to ensure that it is clear that this behaviour is not tolerated. Domestic abuse policies could include:

- Details of specific actions that the employer may take against a perpetrator if found guilty of abuse
- Include signposting to support where perpetrator of abuse can seek help
- Make it clear that misuse of company time and property to harass or send abusive communications to other people will be grounds for disciplinary responses
- Knowledge of violence or threat of violence will be discussed with the police

Resources

For victims

- [Help and advice lines](#)
- [SafeLives: Staying safe during COVID-19, a guide for victims and survivors of domestic abuse](#)
- [Surviving Economic Abuse](#)
- [Women's Aid](#)

For employers

- [SafeLives](#) guide for employer
- [BITC toolkit](#)

For perpetrators

- [Respect](#)
- [Every Man Project](#)