

COVID-19 and Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is the use of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between intimate partners or family members. The abuse can be psychological, physical, sexual, financial and/or emotional. Both women and men can be victims of domestic abuse, and both women and men can be the abusers. Children witnessing domestic abuse can be affected by witnessing the abuse as well as being caught up in violent situations.

Isolating with somebody who causes you harm can be incredibly frightening. The need for household isolation and social distancing due to COVID-19 will have a direct impact on individuals and families experiencing domestic abuse and will limit the opportunities to reach out for help. Therefore, it is more important than ever that Berkshire residents experiencing domestic abuse have access to information and support. Offering help and support might save lives, but doing it in a way that is not safe can actually increase the risk.

This is an extremely risky time for victims of abuse.

As well as supporting people with their health and social issues at this incredibly difficult time, you, as professionals/volunteers, are likely to be in touch with people who are experiencing higher levels of domestic abuse including coercive control. Self-isolating and social distancing guidelines mean it could be even more difficult than usual to identify and then support people experiencing abuse. Asking about domestic abuse routinely as part of your phone contact might be their only route to help. However, it is likely that more perpetrators are going to be in the home when we have contact with the victim.

There are things that we, and you, can do to try and minimise the risk to the victim. **Safety is paramount.** It is better to do nothing and just report and record your concerns with your line manager, than to increase the risk faced by somebody trapped at home with a person causing them harm. Consider whether a safeguarding referral is required for any children and/or vulnerable adults at risk and follow your usual safeguarding procedures.

Always assess if it is safe to talk about domestic abuse first. Ensure they are alone, not on speaker phone and that they feel safe to talk. If you do manage to speak to a potential victim, only ask yes/no questions and explain they only need give a yes or no answer, e.g. "Are you ok?", "Do you feel safe?", "Do you need help?".

- If you have telephone contact NEVER leave a voice message alluding to relationships or domestic abuse if you believe the victim and perpetrator share a home.
- If you are calling from a generic support service (not domestic abuse specific) only mention that service. If you are not calling from a generic service, ensure you call from a withheld number so the perpetrator cannot trace it/call you back. When calling from a mobile phone the option to 'show your caller ID' is usually within phone settings.
- If you think the perpetrator has answered the phone and you are making a targeted call to ask about domestic abuse, ask for somebody else - a made up name - and pretend you have dialled the wrong number. Consider that the call may be monitored.
- If difficult to relay telephone numbers verbally, and contact is via video call, a helpline number could be displayed on the back of your hand/on a wall behind you or a mug.

Victims safety is of the utmost importance. If it is safe to talk, or to do so, go through a possible safety plan with the victim which includes:

- Reassuring them they are not alone and there is help and support available. Let them know that you believe them, and the abuse is not their fault. Let them know that relationships are likely to be under increased pressure during this time and domestic abuse might escalate, or people might experience abuse for the first time.
- Agreement on a code word (or emoji if communicating via text or email) for them to use with yourself and/or friends/family if they need to alert someone that they need emergency services contacted on their behalf.
- Establishing the safest means of ongoing contact, e.g. email, text calls, from the perspective of the victim, and if there are specific times of day that are easier for them to talk. Ensure databases are updated accordingly.
- If not from a generic service, asking them who you should pretend to be in case the perpetrator becomes alert to the contact/asks questions/seizes the phone.
- If they are sure their mobile phone is not being monitored, recommending safety phone apps such as [Hollie Guard](#) or [Bright Sky](#).
- Deleting text messages so that perpetrators cannot access texts between workers and the victim.
- If accessing information online, they may need to delete their browser history. Women's Aid offers advice regarding [online safety](#).

- Reminding them of keeping safe whilst in the home if abuse or violence is starting or escalating, e.g. keeping close to exits, staying away from rooms such as the kitchen, or considering rooms with secure locks they can flee to where they can summon help.
- Suggesting they ask friends and family to check up on them if safe to do so and look at ways of safely staying in touch.
- If self-isolating and someone is doing their shopping for them, if safe to do so, they could write a message for help on their shopping list.
- Stalking is likely to persist during COVID-19 lockdown – fixation and obsession of perpetrators are unlikely to be affected by restrictions of lockdown; behaviour may move more online; physical behaviours may include knowing the victims whereabouts and using the excuse of legitimate shopping or exercise to access them; children may be used as an excuse for greater interaction/contact.
- Letting them know that if in immediate danger, they can **call 999** 24/7 and use the silent solution if they cannot talk by pressing 55 when prompted.
- Reassuring them that even under the pandemic lockdown, they can still leave their house to escape domestic abuse. Some places victims may flee to might be closed (e.g. shops/restaurants/pubs) but highlight places that are still open where they can go to e.g. supermarket or pharmacy. They could use the fact that there are no/limited food delivery slots available as an excuse to go to the supermarket to speak to someone. The UKSAYSNOMORE [Safe Spaces scheme](#) facilitates pharmacy consultation rooms (Boots, Superdrug and some independent pharmacies) as a Safe Space for victims to access information on specialist domestic abuse services and make phone calls.
- The Women's Aid [Survivor's Handbook](#) offers practical support and information including [Making a Safety Plan](#).
- Victims (female and male) in Berkshire can seek support from the local domestic abuse support services:
 - **Berkshire Women's Aid** (*Bracknell, Reading*)
0118 950 4003 (24 hours) www.berkshirewomensaid.org.uk
 - **Domestic Abuse Support Service (DASS) Cranstoun** (*Wokingham*)
0118 402 1921 (Mon – Fri, 9am – 5pm) www.cranstoun.org/service/dass
 - **The Dash (Domestic Abuse Stops Here) Charity** (*RBWM*)
01753 549865 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm) www.thedashcharity.org.uk
 - **Hestia** (*Slough*)
01753 477352 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm) www.hestia.org/slough e:contactslough@hestia.org
 - **A2 Domestic Abuse Services (ADAS)** (*West Berkshire*)
0800 731 0055 (Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm) www.a2dominion.co.uk
- Other regional/national support services for victims include:
 - **Thames Valley Police**
999 in an emergency, 101 in a non-emergency www.thamesvalley.police.uk
 - **Victims First** (*Thames Valley*)
Referrals via the website rather than phone during COVID-19, supporting victims and witnesses of crime www.victims-first.org.uk
 - **Galop** – *National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline*
0800 999 5428 (Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm and until 8pm Wed and Thurs) www.galop.org.uk
 - **National Domestic Abuse Helpline** – *National support helpline for women affected by domestic abuse*
0808 2000 247 (24 hours) www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk
 - **Men's Advice Line** – *National support helpline for men affected by domestic abuse*
0808 8010327 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm and until 8pm Mon and Wed) www.mensadvice.org.uk
 - **National Stalking Helpline**
0808 802 0300 (Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri 9.30am-4pm, Wed 1pm-4pm) www.suzylamplugh.org
 - **Forced Marriage Unit**
020 7008 0151 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm) www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage
 - **Karma Nirvana** – *Supporting victims of honour based abuse and forced marriage*
0800 5999 247 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm) www.karmanirvana.org.uk
- For advice for male and female perpetrators of domestic abuse looking to stop, or for victims and friends/family looking for information or help for a perpetrator, or frontline workers working with perpetrators, you can contact the **Respect Phonenumber** 0808 8024040 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm) www.respectphonenumber.org.uk

For more COVID-19 domestic abuse related information and guidance visit the [Gov.uk](#), [SafeLives](#) and/or [Women's Aid](#) (also with information in different languages) websites.