



Topic: Domestic Abuse: Identifying, caring for and supporting women at risk of/victims of domestic abuse During COVID-19

Domestic abuse is any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. Domestic abuse can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse:

- Psychological abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Financial abuse
- Emotional abuse¹

Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.²

Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.³

Domestic abuse is a gendered issue - women are much more likely to be victims than men and are far more likely to experience repeated and severe forms of abuse. Domestic abuse is one form of violence against women and girls, including so called 'honour'-based abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation.⁴ Pregnancy can be a trigger for domestic abuse and may have negative consequences for the woman and her child.

Potential impact of Covid-19 in this topic area

Measures to control the spread of COVID-19 mean some women will be more vulnerable to domestic abuse. Many victims of domestic abuse may be trapped in abusive households with very little or no opportunity to contact health professionals, speak to them in private, call the police, or escape. Children are equally at risk.

Current key guidance for this topic – clinical care and advice for women

Practical tips

- Be vigilant, especially where in person appointments are reduced. Prioritise women who are vulnerable and known to be at risk of domestic abuse for in person appointments away from the home.
- If a woman about whom you have concerns hasn't been in touch or has failed to attend an appointment, follow up to make contact and arrange another appointment.
- Ensure women can contact maternity services by providing the designated telephone number. Check the woman's preferred contact number and/or email address if sending any information.
- Before asking about domestic abuse during telephone consultations, ensure the woman is not on speaker phone. Introduce any staff who are in the room, but off camera, and ask the woman to do the same.
- If you do not feel confident in identifying domestic abuse and supporting women, approach your supervisor and/or your Trust or health board safeguarding team for support. Your Trust may have specific policies which may be helpful.



Follow the five R's – Recognise, respond, risk assess, refer, record⁵

1. Recognise and ask

If a woman is accompanied to appointments, try to find an opportunity to be with her alone. In some circumstances, it may not be possible to ask routine safety questions, consider other ways to explore safety. For example:

- How are you coping?
- Any money worries?
- How is your partner coping?
- Is there family or social support you can call upon?

Remember, during virtual appointments, before engaging in any discussion about safety or domestic abuse, re-establish that it is safe to do so by asking 'closed' questions which allow them to give 'yes' or 'no' answers. For example:

- 'Am I on speaker phone?'
- 'Are you alone?'
- 'Is it safe to ask you some questions about your relationship with ___?'

If it is safe to do so, here are some ways that you could let a woman know that it is okay to talk to you about domestic abuse:

- 'You've mentioned that you're scared of your partner. Would you like to tell me more about that?'
- 'You've mentioned a few things to me about your son that sounded concerning, for example, he won't let you go on walks or pick up your own prescriptions. Would you like to talk about that?'
- 'I heard your partner shouting in the background, are you feeling safe at the moment?'

Warning signs

A victim of abuse might indicate abuse in a number of ways. For example, they might say:

- 'I don't feel safe right now'
- 'I don't feel safe at home'
- 'I'm scared/frightened of my (ex) partner/family member'
- 'My (ex)/partner/family member won't let me out of the house' (or any other controlling behaviour mentioned, pick up prescriptions, do the shopping, go for a walk, etc.)
- 'My (ex)/partner/family member hurt(s) me'
- 'My (ex) partner/family member controls everything I do'
- 'My (ex) partner/family member is always putting me down/makes me feel worthless.'

You may also be able to identify abuse based on what you see/hear. Some examples include:

- Witnessing abusive behaviour (aggressive, controlling, yelling, demeaning and belittling, bullying)
- Noticing that the person seems fearful of their partner/family member
- Noticing that the person is unable to speak with you alone or in detail about their current circumstances
- Noticing evidence of physical abuse, including bruises and scratches

2. Respond



If a woman does disclose that she is experiencing domestic abuse, listen to her without judgement. Do not blame the woman for the abuse or excuse the perpetrator's behaviour. Do not ask her why she has not left or tell her to leave. Reassure her that she is believed, validate what she is telling you. For example:

- 'I'm really glad you told me'
- 'This isn't your fault'
- 'You are not alone'.

Ask her what she needs and be guided by her.

3. Risk assess

Undertake safeguarding assessments for mother and other children in the household and make a personalised care plan; if appropriate seek advice/support of social services, especially where children are involved. Ensure that you advise the woman if you need to make any referral to other services including social services, to ensure she understands why you are doing this and what support she is then likely to receive.

Where there are serious concerns and to provide for immediate safety, to allow for a full health and social care assessment, consider offering the woman an admission to stay in the maternity unit.

4. Refer

Signpost women to credible sources of specialist or online support (see below).

Let survivors know that it is still ok to call 999 in an emergency and the police are attending calls during lockdown and other COVID restriction levels. Let them know they are allowed to leave home to seek help during lockdowns or COVID restrictions if their homes are not safe places.

Advise women at risk about the [Silent Solution system](#): the woman should call 999 and remain silent, then dial 55 when prompted. The woman will then be transferred through to a police officer who will assess the situation by asking yes or no questions.

5. Record

If a patient discloses you should record the disclosure using phrases like 'the woman says/describes' and avoiding phrases like 'the woman alleges'. Also record who else was present in the consultation, the victim and perpetrators relationship, who else is in the house including children, a pragmatic assessment of immediate risk, and ongoing risk, actions you have taken or plan to take including referrals or signposting. Even if a woman does not disclose domestic abuse, you should document any concerns you have, as well as enquiries made.

All of the above needs to be documented in a way that will keep this information hidden from a perpetrator and/or any third parties who may attend appointments with the woman. Information on domestic abuse should not be recorded in the hand held notes. If a woman requests printed records, details of domestic abuse should be redacted. If you have concerns about recording or sharing information, contact your safeguarding team for support.

What to do in an emergency



If you believe there is an immediate risk of harm to the victim or anyone else, encourage them to immediately call 999 and refer to the information above regarding the [Silent Solution system](#) or if they are hearing or otherwise impaired, the [emergency text service](#).

If they are unable to call the Police and you are worried about their immediate safety, get as much information as you can regarding their location and call 999. Do not call the police if there is no immediate risk and the survivor has not asked you to, as this may alert the perpetrator to the survivor's disclosure.

You can also report a crime by calling the Police on 101, or anonymously report a crime by calling Crime Stoppers on 0800 555 111 or online.

Support for midwives

Do not confront the perpetrator and ensure you take steps to protect your own safety. Talking to someone about their experience of domestic abuse can be distressing. It's important to care for your mental health. Some ways of doing this include:

- Debriefing with someone you trust in a way that maintains confidentiality.
- If you can, take a break.
- Set boundaries, be clear with the individuals you're supporting about when and how you can support them. Maintain your own privacy and confidentiality.
- Be kind to yourself, talking to someone about their experience while being kind and non-judgemental and informing them of the available support is one of the best ways you can help them.

References and links to online and virtual support and guidance

Getting help

National Domestic Abuse Helpline - 0808 2000 247 or online contact form.

National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline – 0800 999 5428

Rape Crisis services - 0808 802 9999 – or webchat

Safe Lives staying at home guidance <https://safelives.org.uk/staying-safe-during-covid-19-guidance>

Women's Aid webchat <https://chat.womensaid.org.uk/> [Available Monday 10am -12pm]

Getting help - Nation specific

Northern Ireland 24-hour helpline: 0808 802 1414 Northern Ireland <https://www.womensaidni.org/>

Scotland 24-hour helpline: 0800 027 1234; Scottish women's aid <https://womensaid.scot/>

Wales 24-hour helpline 0808 80 10 800: Welsh women's aid <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk>



Resources for midwives and survivors

Brief guidance for safe enquiry about domestic abuse

<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Domestic%20abuse%20guidance%20for%20virtual%20health%20settings-%20C19.pdf>

Institute of Health visiting virtual consultations guidance <https://ihv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VirtualContacts-FINAL-VERSION-27.3.20.pdf>

Karma Nirvana support for victims of honour based abuse <https://karmanirvana.org.uk/help/>

Southall Black Sisters <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/>

Women's Aid COVID resource hub <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-resource-hub/>

Women's Aid safety and support resources (multiple languages and sign language)
<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-coronavirus-safety-and-support-resources/>

Virtual learning for midwives

Refresh your knowledge with the NICE webinar on asking about and responding to domestic violence and abuse
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL5ehPZzMgE&list=PLRbwbc3dfXUNefausjPRrYYDvVkKvFeP&index=21>

Refresh your knowledge with RCM i-learn
<https://www.ilearn.rcm.org.uk/course/info.php?id=633>

You can also visit the TUC domestic abuse and coronavirus learning tool
<https://learning.elucidat.com/course/5e875ae4d0715-5e8c6417dfc28>

¹ Home Office (2013) Information for Local Areas on the change to the Definition of Domestic Violence and Abuse. Available at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142701/guide-on-definition-of-dv.pdf

² Home Office (2013) Information for Local Areas on the change to the Definition of Domestic Violence and Abuse. Available at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142701/guide-on-definition-of-dv.pdf

³ Home Office (2013) Information for Local Areas on the change to the Definition of Domestic Violence and Abuse. Available at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142701/guide-on-definition-of-dv.pdf



⁴ Women's Aid (2020) Domestic abuse is a gendered crime. Available at:
<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-is-a-gendered-crime/>

⁵ This approach is drawn from the Safe Live's joint guidance on the Five R's of asking about domestic abuse. Safe Lives et al. (2020) The Five R's of asking about domestic abuse. Available at:
<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Domestic%20abuse%20guidance%20for%20virtual%20health%20settings-%20C19.pdf>