

A guide to domestic abuse

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1. Introduction

This aim of this guidance is to explain what domestic abuse is, the difficulties and dangers faced by those experiencing domestic abuse, and how churches can respond.

Domestic abuse is alarmingly common. According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, an estimated 2.1 million people aged 16 and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2023. Domestic abuse can affect anyone. It can happen to people who are married; not married; heterosexual; lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender; living together, separated or dating. It occurs within all age ranges, ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic groups.

Evidence shows that children who witness domestic abuse are at risk of both short and long-term physical and mental health problems. Since the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, children who have been exposed to domestic abuse are now recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, rather than just witnesses.

Whether or not you are aware of it, it is likely that you know someone who has been affected by domestic abuse. For example, a survey of churchgoers in Cumbria in 2018 found that one in four reported having experienced at least one abusive act in a current relationship (see www.restored-uk.org/about/our-research/churches-too/). However, only two in seven churchgoers thought their church was adequately equipped to deal with a disclosure of domestic abuse.

Christian homes are not immune to domestic abuse. The responsibility to offer help and be a voice for the prevention of domestic violence is fundamental to core Christian values – those of love, justice, equality, respect and care for one another. A study by the University of Chester in 2021 found that controlling/coercive behaviour and psychological / emotional abuse were the most prevalent types of abuse reported by respondents from Christian faith backgrounds. In cases where abuse occurred, 71% of abusers used Christian teachings to support or excuse their behaviour (see bit.ly/49Y1t1D). In addition, Christian teaching has often been misused in domestic abuse situations by those whose role and duty it is to help. For example, some victims have been told to:

- pray harder
- submit to your husband (this is used in the context of heterosexual relationships)
- try to get your partner to church
- lift up the abuse to the Lord.

These responses could be unsafe and unhelpful and may be seen as an encouragement to stay in an abusive relationship. It is very clear within the Christian tradition that God does not expect anyone to submit to abuse at the hands of another person. The church often has much to say about violent crimes in society, but some have regarded abuse in the home as a 'private matter'. We need to acknowledge that Biblically this is not acceptable and take an active role in challenging domestic abuse as being inconsistent with a Christian life.

2. Defining domestic abuse

England and Wales

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 sets out the statutory definition of domestic abuse: 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. This can encompass but is not limited to the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional.

Controlling behaviour is defined as:

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.

Coercive behaviour is defined as:

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.

These definitions highlight the importance of recognising a pattern of overlapping and repeated abuse perpetrated within a context of power and control.

Scotland

The definition of domestic abuse used by Police Scotland is focused on partners or ex-partners and does not include other family members:

'Any form of physical, verbal, sexual, psychological or financial abuse which might amount to criminal conduct and which takes place within the context of a relationship. The relationship will be between partners (married, co-habiting, civil partnership or otherwise) or ex-partners. The abuse can be committed in the home or elsewhere, including online.'

Channel Islands and the Isle of Man

Definitions used in Jersey and Guernsey and the Isle of Man are broadly similar to the definition for England and Wales.¹

3. Understanding domestic abuse

How does domestic abuse happen?

It is of course difficult to understand what motivates one human being to abuse another and

¹ Jersey: <https://jersey.police.uk/be-safe/domestic-abuse/>; Guernsey: <https://bit.ly/3PxbkDw>; Isle of Man: www.gov.im/domesticabuse

why someone stays in a relationship that causes them, and those around them, particularly children, so much suffering. Many ask why the victim stays. Nikki Dhillon Keane in her book *Domestic Abuse in Church Communities* (2018), highlights that this is the wrong question, and a form of victim blaming. Instead, we should be asking why the perpetrator abuses.

Perpetrators of domestic abuse, like their victims, come from all walks of life. It is not always easy to recognise perpetrators of domestic abuse, as they can be charming and friendly in public, yet abusive and violent behind closed doors.

Domestic abuse is about one person in a relationship using a pattern of behaviours to intimidate and control the other person. Perpetrators of domestic abuse frequently avoid taking responsibility for their behaviour, by blaming their violence on someone or something else, denying it took place at all or minimising their behaviour. It is therefore important to remember that responsibility for the abuse lies with the perpetrator of that abuse.

Many people experience abuse within the so-called cycle of abuse in which periods of comparative calm or peace (known as the 'honeymoon stage') will be followed by a build-up toward an abusive episode. Although it may appear as though these periods of apparent calm are non-abusive, they represent part of a manipulative cycle, in which the abuser feels in control of their partner and situation. They may show repentance for pain caused, or even promise to change. Often it is these periods of apparent calm, which give the victim of abuse the hope that change can be achieved, and that the abuse will stop, which keeps them locked in the abusive relationship.

Not all relationships follow the same cycle, and individual experiences vary, some stages – especially the honeymoon or calm periods, may shorten or be left out completely, especially as the abuse intensifies over a period. Each stage of the cycle can last from a few minutes, to a number of months

There are many myths surrounding domestic abuse. For instance, it has been said that domestic abuse can be attributed to a lack of control. However, perpetrators of abuse are often careful about when, where and to whom they are abusive. They can use violence and tactics of coercion as a way of exercising control and getting what they want. So, rather than being out of control, it can be a method to gain control.

The use (or misuse) of substances such as alcohol or drugs has been suggested to be a contributing factor. However, many people who drink too much or take drugs do not abuse their partners or family members. Likewise, perpetrators of abuse may be violent without the use of alcohol or other drugs. Some suggest that domestic abuse is perpetrated by people who have mental health issues. However, most people with mental health problems do not abuse other people. Mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or suicide attempts, are more likely to be the result of experiencing domestic abuse than the cause of it.

A particularly damaging myth is that perpetrators do it because they were a victim of abuse in the past. Some perpetrators of abuse have witnessed or experienced abuse in the past and have normalised that behaviour. However, most victims and survivors of abuse do not go on to abuse anyone. Survivors of childhood abuse are more likely to become victims than perpetrators of abuse in adulthood.

Barriers to leaving an abusive relationship

There are many practical and psychological barriers to ending a relationship with an abusive

partner or family member, and some victims will never leave. The risk of death is also at its highest at the point of separation or just after leaving an abusive partner.

The reasons why someone experiencing abuse may believe that it is not possible for them to move away from the situation in which they are being abused are complex. Some of these are shown below:

Practical and financial reasons

- Lack of financial resources – no access to money; not able to support themselves and their children independently
- Leaving everything behind – having to leave friends, family, neighbours, job, school, clothes, possessions, pets etc
- Lack of support – doesn't know who to turn to or where to go, particularly if English is not their first language
- Having nowhere to go
- Isolation – if emotionally and financially dependent on their partner, they may be very isolated
- Exhaustion. It is easy to underestimate the amount of energy needed for a victim to keep themselves, and possibly their children, alive and relatively safe
- The victim does not realise it's abuse.

Beliefs, values and perceptions

- A belief that staying is better for the children
- Self-reliance. A belief that they can cope and don't need or want help
- Rescuing – the belief that they can change the abuser
- Expectation – having grown up in an abusive household, the belief that this is what relationships look like
- Guilt – the belief that they deserve the abuse and it is their fault
- A sense of duty
- Denial – convincing themselves that "it's not that bad"
- Lack of self-confidence / self-esteem – the victim's self-esteem has been steadily worn down and they no longer believe that they can manage on their own, or that they have any options.

Community, religious or cultural factors

- Abusers may misuse Scripture to justify their behaviour
- Feelings of guilt and shame at having failed in perceived religious duties
- Cultural context – admitting that there is a problem may bring shame on their family
- Pressure – from family and friends to stay and 'make it work'
- The embarrassment of people finding out.

Fear

- Fear of death, theirs or their children's
- Safety – the victim may be fearful of what the abuser will do to them and the children if they left or attempted to leave
- Intimidation – the abuser threatens to take the children or pets away
- Fear of being alone – being with someone, despite their faults, is better than the fear of being lonely
- Immigration – the fear of being deported.

Emotional attachments

- Remembering good times – particularly those at the start of the relationship. There could for instance be long periods between incidents of abuse when the abuser is charming and caring
- Love – despite the abuse, they still feel that they love the abuser
- Loyalty – devotion to the abuser regardless of their actions

- Attachment issues / co-dependency
- Hope or belief that the abuser will change or that things will get better.

4. Different kinds of domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is rarely a one-off incident and it is the cumulative and interlinked types of abuse that have a particularly damaging effect on the victim. The 'domestic' nature of the offending behaviour is an aggravating factor because of the abuse of trust involved.

Below is a list of the main types of behaviour (listed alphabetically) that make up domestic abuse. However, in most cases more than one form exists.

Emotional abuse

- Mocking, coercing, threatening or controlling behaviour
- Bullying, intimidation, harassment or humiliation
- Shouting, swearing, frightening or blaming behaviour
- Ridiculing, being obsessively and irrationally jealous
- The lack of privacy or choice, denial of dignity, deprivation of social contact or deliberate isolation
- A lack of love or affection, or ignoring the person leading to feelings of worthlessness
- Constantly checking where someone is
- Telling them they are too fat / thin, stupid / useless
- Telling them they are a bad mother / father, wife / husband / partner.

Financial abuse

- Prevent or discourage the victim from working
- Keeping the victim in poverty, controlling all of the money, refusing to allow the victim access to their own money
- Expect the victim to account for every penny they spend
- Theft, fraud or embezzlement of monies, benefits or goods
- Applying pressure in connection with wills, property or inheritance
- Force the victim to take out a loan or withhold money so that they cannot buy essentials like food for the children
- Force the victim to earn money so that the perpetrator does not have to work.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female genital mutilation (FGM), sometimes known as 'female circumcision' or 'female genital cutting', is recognised internationally as a gross violation of the human rights of girls and women, often taking place whilst girls are still in their childhood or early teenage years. It is illegal in the UK. It is also illegal to take abroad a British national or permanent resident for FGM, or to help someone trying to do this. Performing FGM or helping it to take place, which would include taking girls/women to countries where FGM is still legal, carries a penalty of up to 14 years in prison.

Forced marriage

A forced marriage is when one or both of the spouses do not, or cannot, consent to the marriage. There may be physical, psychological, financial, sexual or emotional pressure exerted in order to make the marriage go ahead. Forced marriage is illegal in England and Wales. This includes:

- taking someone overseas to force them to marry (whether or not the forced marriage takes place)
- marrying someone who lacks the mental capacity to consent to the marriage (whether they're pressured to or not).

Forcing someone to marry can result in a sentence of up to seven years in prison.

Honour based violence

There is no specific offence of “honour based crime”. It is an umbrella term to encompass various offences covered by existing legislation. Honour based violence (HBV) can be described as a collection of practices, which are used to control behaviour within families or other social groups to protect perceived cultural and religious beliefs and/or honour. Such violence can occur when perpetrators perceive that a relative has shamed the family and / or community by breaking their honour code.

Isolation

This is a very powerful form of psychological abuse as it is of course much harder to exert power and control over someone who is surrounded by a support network of family and / or friends. Perpetrators might insist on moving to an area far away from their family and friends, sow seeds of doubt about close supportive relationships in a way that damages those relationships or become so aggressive when the victim tries to see family or friends that it is simply easier to stop seeing them. A perpetrator can also prevent someone from working and can monitor and / or block their use of phones, the internet, email or social media.

Neglect

Adults can be the victim of neglect as one adult might rely on another individual for example if they are elderly or frail, have a learning disability, a physical disability or an illness. They might also have a mental health issue or English might not be their first language.

Neglect is when a person’s wellbeing is impaired, and their care needs are not met.

It might include:

- failing to provide access to appropriate health, social care or education services
- ignoring medical or physical care needs, including not giving someone proper food, or assistance with eating or drinking
- failing to provide a warm, safe and comfortable environment
- deliberately withholding aids, such as walking sticks or hearing aids
- denying social, religious or cultural contacts
- leaving someone alone or unsupervised.

Physical abuse

This can include any of the following:

- hitting, biting, slapping and beating
- shaking, pinching and pushing
- kicking, burning and hair pulling
- squeezing, suffocating, poisoning and using inappropriate restraint
- imprisoning, assault with implements and destroying possessions.

Perpetrators of physical abuse often carefully cause injuries only where they will not be visible to others. They do not abuse because of losing control of their temper but use physical abuse to gain and then maintain control over their victim.

Psychological abuse

This can include threats, gaslighting (making someone doubt their own reality) and mental torture. It can be used to groom victims for other types of abuse, although by itself it can cause devastating and lasting damage to a victim. It is a way of wearing down the victim to make them easier to control and therefore have power over them.

Sexual abuse

There are a range of abusive acts that are included within this definition:

- any behaviour which uses sex or sexual activity in order to gain power and control

over another person

- rape, sexual assault or sexual acts that the person has not consented to, could not consent to or was pressurised into consenting to
- punishment for not having sex
- forcing the victim / survivor to agree to have sex in order to avoid other abusive behaviour
- sexual name calling or shaming
- being forced to watch pornographic material or sexual acts
- imposition of dress codes upon a partner, enforced or coerced nakedness or inappropriate photography of a person in sexually explicit ways
- involvement in the sex trade or pornography
- knowingly passing on sexually transmitted infections.

Spiritual abuse

Spiritual abuse is the inappropriate use of religious belief or practices, or the coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. In a domestic abuse context, it might include:

- forcing religious ideas or practices onto people, particularly those who may be vulnerable to such practices
- the misuse of scripture to control behaviour and pressure to conform
- the requirement of obedience to the abuser, or the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position
- the denial of the right to practice their faith
- intrusive healing and deliverance ministries, which may result in emotional, physical or sexual harm.

Stalking, harassment and digital abuse

This is a more common type of abuse once a relationship has ended. With the availability of social media, abuse by digital means has become an increasing problem. Stalking and harassment can be a sign that a perpetrator could be extremely dangerous, even if they have not so far been physically violent.

Threatening behaviour

- Making angry gestures
- Using physical size to intimidate
- Shouting you down
- Destroying your possessions
- Breaking things
- Punching walls
- Wielding a knife or a gun
- Threatening to kill or harm you, the children and / or pets.

5. Children and domestic abuse

Statistics from the NSPCC show that one in five children in the UK have been exposed to domestic abuse. Children are often called the ‘hidden victims’ of domestic abuse – their voices are not heard, and they have no choice whether or not to stay in the abusive environment. Children may witness domestic abuse directly, but they can also witness it indirectly by hearing the abuse from another room, seeing a parent’s injuries or distress afterwards, finding disarray like broken furniture or being hurt from being nearby or trying to stop the abuse. Since the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, children who have been exposed to domestic abuse are now recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, rather than just witnesses.

Impact of domestic abuse on children

Living in a home where domestic abuse is taking place can be hugely distressing and confusing

for children. It undermines a child's basic need for safety and security and can have a negative impact on their development, educational outcomes and mental health.

Domestic abuse can cause confusing relationships with parents. Children may:

- not be able to develop a strong bond with their parents / carers (poor attachment)
- worry their parents will divorce
- hope an abused parent will leave for safety reasons
- be afraid of their parents.

Psychological effects can include:

- aggression and challenging behaviour
- depression
- anxiety – including worrying about a parent's safety
- withdrawal and/or difficulty interacting with others
- suicidal thoughts or feelings
- low self-esteem
- nightmares and flashbacks.

Physical effects can include:

- a risk of injury when they try to intervene or stop the abuse
- self-harming
- higher rates of illness and fatigue
- impact on nervous and hormonal systems
- bedwetting
- eating disorders.

Emotional effects can include:

- guilt that they didn't try to intervene or stop the abuse
- feeling responsible for everything happening in the family
- attempts to be perfect and anxious to please
- fear of the abuser and other people who are similar to the abuser
- distressed and/or frightened by seeing arguments or violence
- afraid of their own emotions, such as anger
- feelings of powerlessness, insecurity and loneliness.

Teenage relationships

The definitions of domestic abuse used in the UK recognise that those in the 16-17 age groups can experience abuse within their relationships and need access to domestic abuse support services. Research from the NSPCC, however, indicates that younger teenagers (aged 13-15) were as likely as older adolescents to experience some types of abuse²

There is often stigma surrounding domestic abuse in teenage relationships, and young people can feel that adults trivialise the abuse experienced. Research from SafeLives indicates that the abuse young people experience may also look different to the abuse that adults experience. For example, young people commonly experience abuse through new technologies and social media, which can be used as a monitoring or harassment tool by the perpetrator. Young people may not see themselves as a 'victim', especially when they too are demonstrating some forms of abusive behaviour (bit.ly/3PBKmmum).

6. Domestic abuse in different groups

For any victim of domestic abuse, whatever their age, gender, sexuality or culture, the effects of the abuse are likely to be deeply significant. It will also impact friends, family, colleagues

² Barter et al (2009) Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships, NSPCC

and neighbours – in fact whole communities can be affected by abuse that takes place behind closed doors. This is not an exhaustive list but examples of how some groups are affected are given below.

Older people

Elder abuse can happen in any family, or in institutions. In domestic situations the perpetrator can be the person's main carer, such as a spouse or daughter / son or other relative. For some the abuse may have started earlier in life and persisted into old age. For others they may have entered into a new relationship later in life, only to find that their new spouse is abusive.

There may be a late onset of domestic abuse that begins or is exacerbated at a significant point in life, such as retirement, ill health and frailty, disability or changes in family roles. For people who are limited to their own homes owing to frailty or disability, the abuse may go on for many years without anyone to see what is happening, particularly if the abuser is the victim's key carer.

It may be more difficult for older victims to seek help, and when they do, the services available are not always suited to their needs. Dementia can cause the victim extreme difficulties in understanding and reporting the abuse, and in being believed if they do report it.

People living with a chronic illness or disability

People with either disabilities or suffering with chronic illnesses are likely to have higher dependency upon family / carers meaning that if they are being abused, they could be less able to report it. This is compounded if the person has difficulty communicating owing to a speech impairment or hearing difficulties.

The perpetrator could be the person's main carer and withhold or threaten to withhold medication as a form of coercion and control. They may also withhold aids such as a wheelchair or refuse to assist with essential tasks such as washing or eating. They may also always accompany the victim to medical appointments which would severely limit their opportunity to report abuse. People who have a learning disability are particularly vulnerable to abuse, are less likely to report it and even when they do so are less likely to be believed.

Women

Statistics show that women are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse. The Crime Survey for England and Wales records that an estimated 1.4 million women experienced domestic abuse in the year to March 2023 (a prevalence rate of 6 in every 100 women). One in four women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime and, on average, two women are killed each week by a partner or ex-partner.³ Pregnancy is a particularly vulnerable time for women. Domestic abuse often begins or escalates during pregnancy and it is estimated that one in three pregnant women experience domestic abuse.

Increasingly perpetrators of domestic abuse also use technology and social media to control and instil fear in those they victimise.

In findings by Women's Aid 46.2% of women in refuges had spent between two and ten years in the abusive relationship, with 17% of women enduring a violent relationship for more than ten years. Evidence indicates that women from black and minority ethnic communities continue to live in abusive situations for longer and potentially face additional barriers to reporting (for example because of language difficulties, feeling distrustful of statutory services, concerns about the impact or stigma on their wider family or community).⁴

³ <https://refuge.org.uk/what-is-domestic-abuse/the-facts/>

⁴ bit.ly/3TR2BOR

Men

The Crime Survey for England and Wales records that an estimated 751,000 men experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2023. This is a prevalence rate of 3 in 100 men. In 2022/23, 13 men died at the hands of their partner or ex-partner.⁵

On average one in seven men experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives. However, male victims of domestic abuse are less likely to report their abuse as female victims. Shame and embarrassment are common feelings amongst male victims, and unfortunately, there are fewer support services for them, particularly regarding emergency accommodation like refuges and shelters.

Men can be abused by women or men. It can become complicated when the man tries to ward off or defend himself against an attack by a female perpetrator and some male victims report facing arrest when the police assumed that the female was the victim.

LGBT+

Domestic abuse can happen in lesbian and gay relationships, and between people who are transgender or have non-binary gender identities. Evidence suggests that LGBT+ victims are more likely to have experienced historic abuse by a family member, more likely to be abused by multiple perpetrators and more than twice as likely to have self-harmed.⁶ LGBT+ people may experience unique forms of coercive control targeted at their sexual orientation or gender identity. For victims who are not 'out' the perpetrator may threaten to expose the victim's sexual or gender identity to friends, family, church or employer. The concept of 'outing' can also apply to HIV status.

There is limited research on how many trans people experience domestic abuse in the UK, and studies tend to have small group samples. However, these figures suggest it is a significant issue. A report by the Scottish Transgender Alliance indicates that 80% of trans people had experienced emotional, sexual, or physical abuse from a partner or ex-partner. Other forms of abuse unique to transgender people include, for example, a partner forcing someone to perform a gender that they do not feel comfortable with or preventing them from medically transitioning (eg by hiding hormones or controlling finances to accessing surgery).⁷

The discrimination often faced by LGBT+ people in their everyday lives can create additional barriers to accessing support, for example, they may have to 'out' themselves in order to report the abuse. A perpetrator of domestic abuse may attempt to increase isolation by saying that no-one would believe or help them because the police and support services are homophobic. People may feel unable to turn to their church community for support because they don't know what sort of response they will get, or they fear rejection.

Child to parent / carer abuse

Child to parent / carer abuse is an aspect of domestic abuse where the child in the relationship seeks to control and coerce the parent, grandparent, foster parent or carer. There can be a number of reasons why a child is violent and / or abusive towards their parent or carer. It can include if they have seen a parent / carer be on the receiving end of abuse and they may believe it is normal behaviour to treat them in that manner.

Child to parent/carers abuse is largely under-reported and parents are often unable to identify or define what they are experiencing as abuse. Instead, they may talk about 'struggling with their child', 'having relationship difficulties with their child' or 'living in fear of their child'. They may not realise that there is specific help available for them, or they may feel ashamed and embarrassed

⁵ For further data on male victims of domestic abuse, see for example bit.ly/496JFQN.

⁶ bit.ly/3VzP5R5

⁷ bit.ly/3ITz0hr

that they cannot control their child, and that they are afraid of them. Additional barriers in seeking help may arise if the parents or carers responsible for the child cannot reach a consensus on the best course of action.

7. Developing a supportive church culture

Respondents in the 'Turn the Tide' research from the University of Chester ⁸ reported very different experiences of disclosing their abuse to someone in their Christian faith community:

- 18% said the response helped to positively change the situation
- 29% said the response did not change the situation but made them feel supported
- 36% said the response made the situation worse.

Section 8 below looks at how to respond to an individual when there is a disclosure of abuse. This section looks at creating a culture to help your church be a place of compassion and caring for those who have experienced, or are currently experiencing, domestic abuse.

Believe it

For many people in church domestic abuse is a taboo subject, with many believing that it does not happen.

Preaching / teaching

Speak out against domestic abuse in preaching, teaching, study groups and prayers within the context of regular worship. Make it clear that domestic abuse is wrong and against Christian teaching. Pray for victims and perpetrators of abuse and for the work of specialised agencies that can help both victims and perpetrators. It is common for the Christian faith to put emphasis on the family structure and a positive family image, which may not be helpful for those from an abusive family setting.

Have information available in your church building

Have brochures and posters in places where a victim can take the information without fear of discovery. Telephone numbers of local and national domestic abuse helplines should also be included. Some of this information could be placed in a private location such as the toilets (male and female) to avoid scrutiny by others. The URC Feel Safe poster can be downloaded here: urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/feel-safe-poster-FINAL.pdf

Have a safe space to talk if possible. Ensure that there is space within the church building for people to talk in confidence and that conversations that warrant privacy are not held over coffee where sensitive information may be overheard.

Youth groups

By allowing young people to discuss and work through how they think and feel about their relationships, you are demonstrating that your church is a place of safety and somewhere where it is possible to be honest about abuse. If you can tackle these important issues within the safety of a youth group, youth fellowship or similar, you are creating a space for young people to talk about what might be happening in their families. It will be useful to be mindful of the fact that the definition of domestic abuse was widened to include the age range 16 to 18. Being mindful will ensure that you do not miss possible signs of domestic abuse between this age range.

Training

It is recommended that particularly relevant people in the church, eg ministers, elders, pastoral leaders, church safeguarding coordinators and Synod Safeguarding Officers receive training about domestic abuse. This training will help individuals within the church to reflect on the damage caused by domestic abuse, and how best to support victims and perpetrators. It is also

⁸ bit.ly/49Y1t1D

important to make such training available to anyone who wishes to attend, confirming that it is everyone's responsibility to respond well to domestic abuse. Details of training provided by the URC national safeguarding team can be found at: urc.org.uk/safeguarding/.

Build relationships with local organisations

Churches can also develop good relationships with local charities or voluntary groups to draw on their expertise and refer victims to them. You may want to invite someone from a local support agency to talk about their work and to find out more about domestic abuse. Holding a well-publicised event and opening it up to other local churches and the local community, highlights your desire to stop domestic abuse being a taboo subject. Refuges and domestic abuse charities are always in need of extra resources. You could hold a fundraising event for them or agree to regularly offer financial support.

Be aware of the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme

This is sometimes known as Clare's Law. Under this scheme an individual can ask the police to check whether a new or existing partner has a violent past. This is called 'right to ask'. If records show that they may be at risk of domestic abuse from a partner, the police will consider disclosing the information. A disclosure can be made if it is legal, proportionate and necessary to do so.

The 'right to ask' also enables a third party, such as a friend, family member or church worker, to apply for a disclosure on behalf of someone they know. Again, the police can release information if it is lawful, necessary and proportionate to do so (clares-law.com/). A request can be made in person at a police station or online: www.police.uk/pu/contact-us/domestic-abuse/

Marriage preparation

Marriage preparation is an ideal time to talk with couples who are planning to marry about issues surrounding domestic abuse, such as equality, conflict, communication, control and violence. It will be very important to explain a Biblical view of marriage, and to be clear that violence and abuse play no part in the marriage relationship. Those who lead marriage preparation should have received training on the issues of domestic abuse beforehand.

Personal reflection

It is important for all to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes as these can impact how we respond to a victim or a perpetrator of domestic abuse. Consider whether your views need challenging and find either books or someone you trust to explore your views. There are many helpful resources online also.

8. Responding to disclosures of domestic abuse

It takes tremendous courage for someone who is being abused to come forward and disclose that this is happening. They are most likely to tell someone they trust. Pastoral support can make a huge difference to those who are victims of domestic abuse. It is important, however, to highlight that it is crucial for victims of domestic abuse to be signposted to relevant agencies so that they can receive appropriate specialist support from the various organisations who are trained and experienced in these matters. Below are guidelines for talking to someone who is a victim or survivor of domestic abuse:

Listen and believe what they say

Take time to listen and ensure that you talk in a safe place. It is worth remembering that it is much more likely that a victim will minimise what they are experiencing rather than dramatising it. What they tell you might therefore be the tip of the iceberg. Give them time to talk, but don't push them to talk if they don't want to.

Take care not to trivialise, judge, criticise or dismiss what they tell you. Acknowledge that they're in a difficult and frightening situation.

Take care of your reactions

It can be difficult to hear a victim's account of domestic abuse. Think constantly of what a victim might need and be mindful of your body language as well as what you say.

Make sure they are safe

If possible, have a prepared plan of action in place within the church, to protect anyone disclosing abuse and to prevent church workers or yourself being put at risk. If you are concerned about someone's immediate safety, contact the police.

Reassure and support them. It is important that you tell them that it is not their fault and that nothing justifies the abuse that they have suffered. If they have suffered physical injury offer to go with them to a hospital or GP. You can also offer to support them in reporting to the Police; are there different ways to do this, including online: www.police.uk/ro/report/domestic-abuse/a1/report-domestic-abuse/

Do not investigate. It is not your job to go and speak to the perpetrator about the abuse, even if you know them. By doing so you place the victim, any children involved, and possibly yourself, in danger.

Gently question / explore

Do not ask direct questions such as "Does your partner beat you?" or "Are you a victim of domestic abuse?" Instead, ask gentle questions such as "How are things at home?" or "What's troubling you?"

Keeping confidentiality

What has been disclosed to you should not become common knowledge within the church community, not even for prayer purposes, unless the victim chooses to share that information themselves. Any records or notes of what has been said should also be kept confidential. However, complete confidentiality cannot be promised, as it may be necessary to contact the safeguarding designated persons of the Church, the police or other statutory authorities, especially if there are children involved.

Record and report appropriately

Fill in the safeguarding concern form (*Resource F1*) and pass it to the Church Safeguarding Coordinator or Synod Safeguarding Officer (with the victim's consent wherever possible). A record can be the first step to enable people affected by domestic abuse to seek appropriate support and access other services.

Talk to an expert

The Church can, and should, work in partnership with other agencies and professionals as appropriate, to provide the best possible support for the individual or family. External support should always be sought in situations beyond your experience and expertise.

Empower people to make their own decision

As far as possible it is vitally important to ensure that a victim / survivor makes the decisions and that you support and respect their choices. However, in situations where the victim decides to return to the perpetrator and children could be placed at risk it will be necessary to involve Children's Services. In this situation, you should explain your intention to contact the statutory services and make every attempt to involve the victim in the decision-making process, unless that would mean placing them and/or the children at increased risk.

Do not:

Suggest or offer couples counselling to those where their partner is the alleged abuser.

This is not a helpful or appropriate response to domestic abuse and creates more fear and strain for the person being abused, whilst offering the abuser another opportunity to exercise control.

Church response to the perpetrator

Perpetrators of abuse need support and pastoral care. However, caution should be exercised as many perpetrators are highly skilled at manipulating people into colluding with abuse. If a perpetrator asks for help to change their abusive behaviour the most appropriate course of action is to recommend a perpetrator programme. As detailed above it would be completely inappropriate for anyone from the church to engage in couples counselling or reconciliation/mediation. The first priority must be for the perpetrator to address their violent behaviour and the church can help find an appropriate treatment programme. Do not agree to advocate for the perpetrator or to provide a character witness for them as this could be misinterpreted as the Church condoning domestic abuse.

Sometimes a perpetrator may claim a conversion experience and use this as justification as to why they do not need treatment. It would be dangerous to accept this, on its own, even if the person appears repentant. A person who is genuinely repentant will understand and accept that they need help to address their problems. Anyone who has been supporting a victim should never meet a perpetrator on their own or confront them with anything the victim has told them. Not only is this a breach of confidentiality but it may also place the victim, and yourselves, at risk.

It is important to liaise with the statutory authorities where an individual is subject to Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) or Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) involvement and the Synod Safeguarding Officer will take the lead / advise on this.

It may be necessary to discuss boundaries or restrictions you would need to place on their attendance at Church, such as safeguarding agreements. The Synod Safeguarding Officer needs to be involved in drawing up any such agreement.

9. Useful links for finding further advice and support

The list below gives details of various organisations that can support people who have experienced domestic abuse. It is not exhaustive and, in addition, there will also be local charities and services that can provide support.

ChildLine

For children wanting to talk to someone.

Telephone: 0800 1111

Forced Marriage Unit

The unit works both inside and outside the UK. It provides help and support to victims of forced marriage / those at risk of a forced marriage.

Website: www.gov.uk/forced-marriage

Telephone: 020 7008 0151

Hourglass (previously Action on Elder Abuse)

Provides information and support to an older person or anyone concerned about an older person who is at risk of, experiencing or recovering from any form of abuse or neglect.

Website: www.wearehourglass.org

Helpline: 0808 808 8141

Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO)

Provides specialist support for Middle Eastern, North African and Afghan women and girls who are at risk of 'honour' based violence, forced marriage and other forms of violence or abuse.

Website: www.ikwro.org.uk

Telephone: 0207 920 6460

Kiran Support Services

Support for Asian women, including provision of safe housing and legal advice.

Website: www.kiranproject.org.uk

Telephone: 020 8558 1986

Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)

Website: www.lawrs.org.uk

Telephone: 0808 145 4909 (Monday to Friday 11am-1pm)

ManKind

Support for men suffering domestic abuse from a current or former partner.

Website: www.mankind.org.uk

Telephone: 01823 334 244

Men's Advice Line

A helpline phone and website service for male victims of domestic abuse.

Website: www.mensadvice.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 801 0327

National Domestic Abuse Helpline (for women)

Website: www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk

Telephone: 0808 2000 247 (lines free and open 24 hours). Also has options for live chat and British Sign Language interpreter service.

National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline

The Galop helpline provides information and emotional support for LGBT+ people experiencing abuse or violence.

Website: www.galop.org.uk/get-help/helplines/

Telephone: 0800 999 5428

NSPCC

Providing support and advice for keeping children safe from harm and abuse.

Website: www.nspcc.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 800 5000

Police

Details of your local police service can be found online.

Website: www.police.uk

Telephone: 999 in an emergency or 101 in a non-emergency

Refuge

Refuge is a national charity which provides a range of specialist domestic abuse services to women and children.

Website: www.refuge.org.uk

24-hour helpline: 0808 2000 247

Refuge Tech Safety

Advice and practical help for women experiencing technology-facilitated abuse.

Website: www.refugetechsafety.org

Respect Phonenumber

A confidential helpline, email and webchat service for domestic abuse perpetrators.

Website: www.respectphonenumber.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 802 4040

Restored

A Christian charity working to raise awareness of domestic abuse, support survivors, and equip the church to do the same. They also provide a Survivor's Handbook.

Website: www.restored-uk.org

Helpline: 020 8943 7706

Safe in Faith

Providing survivors of domestic abuse, who are part of a faith community, with safe, faith-based support and counselling that is tailored to their needs as believers.

Website: www.safeinfaith.org.uk/about/

Signhealth

A charity that supports deaf people's wellbeing, including services for domestic abuse victims.

Website: www.signhealth.org.uk/with-deaf-people/domestic-abuse/

Southall Black Sisters

For Asian, African and African-Caribbean women.

Website: www.southallblacksisters.org.uk

Help Line: 0208 571 0800 (Mon, Wed, Friday 9am-5pm)

The Hideout

Created by Women's Aid, the Hideout is a dedicated website for children and young people to find information and support about relationship abuse and where to get help.

Website: www.thehideout.org.uk

The Mix

Free information and support for under 25s in the UK.

Website: www.themix.org.uk

The Samaritans (24/7 service)

Website: www.samaritans.org

Telephone: 116 123

Victim Support

Independent charity for victims and witnesses of crime in England and Wales.

Website: www.victimsupport.org.uk

Support line: 0808 169 111

Women's Aid

A national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children.

Supports a network of over 500 domestic and sexual violence services across the UK.

Website: www.womensaid.org.uk