

Guidance for staff supporting victims of domestic abuse during the coronavirus pandemic

This guidance has been created to provide you with things to consider when supporting victims of domestic abuse during the coronavirus pandemic. Please also pay attention to Government guidelines as they are changing day to day and we will need to adapt accordingly.

REMEMBER TO ALWAYS ADVISE THE VICTIM TO CALL 999 IF THEY FEEL THEY ARE IN IMMINENT DANGER OF HARM.

Domestic abuse

- Is **abuse** of a person by another person with whom the victim is living, has lived, or with whom a significant relationship exists.
- The **abuse** may take many forms and includes a range of behaviours such as: physical, emotional, psychological & mental, sexual, financial, verbal, religious and spiritual, stalking & harassment.
- Domestic abuse also includes Honour Based Violence; Forced marriage; Female genital mutilation (FGM)

Managing the time the victim spends with the abusive person if they **live together**:

- What would be a typical day be and is there a routine? Can the person you are supporting find ways to spend time away from the family home – such as going to the supermarket, exercising, going to the pharmacy? This may provide them with an opportunity to access support services.
- Is there someone who could be told to raise the alarm if they don't see the victim for a certain amount of time?
- Is there a way that the victim can physically distance themselves from the abuser in the property – such as doing jobs in the garden, going for a long shower? These may provide the space to send a message, listening to a podcast with headphones in could enable someone to take a call. Listening to calming music or meditating may help to alleviate anxiety.
- Does the victim know the safest rooms in the house? Where can they go if the abuser turns violent? Which rooms should they avoid (rooms that may have weapons such as knives or are closed off from escaping)?
- How will they raise the alarm in the house if they are in danger? Is there a room they can get to with a phone? Or somewhere they have access to a mobile?
- If the victims (and their children) need to leave the property how will they do this?

If the victim and the abuser **do not live together**:

- Is the property safe? Does the abuser have keys to the locks? Is there a security system in place?
- Is the abuser maintaining contact with the victim? If so what can the victim do to minimise this? Can the victim use caller ID to monitor who is calling?
- Is the abuser maintaining contact with children at the property?
- Try and reduce the isolation the victim may be experiencing – this can be done through social media, phone conversations, etc.

Networking with **other agencies** to keep the victim safe:

- Is there good communication with other agencies involved in the support of the victim? Do you know who all the points of contact are? Does everyone know what the plan to keep the victim safe is?
- Does there need to be a watch set up around the house? Are the police involved with this?
- Can neighbours or friends be involved in the support plan? Can a safe word or signal be used to let them know if the victim needs help? Has that word or signal been established?
- Are there people who can keep in touch with the victim, and raise the alarm if they don't hear from them? If this isn't possible is there someone involved in the safety planning who can do this?

In an **emergency**:

- Have you told the victim to call 999 if there is an emergency? Have you come up with what to do if there is a response in them attending the property?
- Can you establish a plan to flee in the event of an emergency? Have you also got a backup plan in place (in case the victim becomes ill or other situations that may arise)?
- Does the victim have a safe and secure way to keep in contact during this time?
- Have you planned with the victim for them to have a bag with everything they might need? Important documents? Medications? Passport? Emergency money? Can they hide this somewhere until they might need it? With a neighbour, friend or family member?
- **ALWAYS ADVISE THE VICTIM TO LEAVE THE PROPERTY IF THEY ARE IN DANGER REGARDLESS OF ANY ISOLATION REGULATIONS**

Behavioural escalations of abusers in isolation:

- Is there a pattern to the times when the abuser becomes violent? Are there any opportunities here for the situation to de-escalate or be avoided?
- Does alcohol play a part in the abuse? Is there a way that this can be avoided?
- Does the victim think the abuser would be willing to engage in a service which addresses their behaviour?

Increased anxiety for victims and **financial circumstances**:

- Is the victim coping with the change from face to face support to remote support? Is there anything that can be done to decrease this anxiety?
- Is the victim able to support themselves (and their children) financially during this period of isolation? If not have they contacted a relevant service? Citizen's Advice? DWP?
- In the cases of Child Maintenance payments, it has been advised that where someone has registered for financial difficulties, that missed or not in full payments will not be chased at this moment in time. More information can be found about this on Citizen's Advice.

In the event of **illness**:

- Do you have an escape plan in case that the victim (or their children) becomes ill? Do you have a plan for ongoing support for the victim if they become ill?
- If the victim becomes ill is there someone who can look after any children?

- Does the victim know what to do in the event that they think they need medical assistance? 111 for non-urgent or 999 for emergencies?

Regarding children:

- Is there routine in place for any children in the home? Is there a structure for their school learning?
- Are the children getting any support? And if so has that support been adapted around the present circumstances to ensure it is ongoing?
- Are the children aware of any safety plans? Do they know any code words or signals? Do they know what to do in the event that they need to flee the property?
- Do children know what to do in the event that a domestic abuse incident occurs? Do they know who to go to if they have to flee on their own (neighbour?)?
- Is there a safety plan in place for the children?

Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Isolation is going to affect everyone's mental health and wellbeing, and it will be particularly affected for people who are also suffering from Domestic abuse. Try and offer the following guidance to help with this:

- Ensure that victims who take medication or attend regular appointments have made plans to ensure that medications can be accessed on time and that these appointments are either maintained. It may be that appointments are moved onto a remote support system.
- Encourage victims to make sure they are looking after their nutrition and sleep patterns. It's easy for both of these to be affected in a time such as isolation, but this can have further detrimental effects.
- If possible create a routine for victims to follow which incorporates Mindful practices into it in order to decrease stress. Many times this can be in the form of a hobby, such as reading, doing something artistic like drawing or gardening, yoga or baking. They could also listen to music or podcasts.
- Encourage victims to take their daily exercise allowance if they can, as this may also mean they can get some distance from the property for a short amount of time.
- Signpost victims to relevant mental health resources online if appropriate:

Samaritans - www.samaritans.org / Call 116 123

Mind - www.mind.org.uk / Call 0300 123 3393

The Mental Health Foundation - www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Obtaining Civil Orders during Lockdown:

You can still obtain Civil Orders during the lockdown, such as non-molestation or occupation orders. The Government has issued the following guidance:

"During this unprecedented public health emergency, it's essential that our courts and tribunals continue to administer justice. We're adjusting practices and taking steps to minimise any risk to the judiciary, staff, professional and public users, including justice partners. Any changes to individual hearings will be communicated directly to those affected, usually by email and/or phone."

“We have put in place arrangements to use telephone, video and other technology to continue as many hearings as possible remotely. We will make best possible use of the equipment currently available; and are working nonstop to update and add to that. Some hearings, the most obvious being jury trials, cannot be conducted remotely.”

Advise the victim to contact a solicitor first to see if they are able to get legal support. Victims can also access the forms on the GOV website if they feel capable of completing them themselves.

Courts during lockdown:

Courts are having to adapt the way they work – but there are still cases they are moving forward with. Guidance on how each court is operating is being sent out as changes are made. These changes include the use of telephone and video trials, as well as other measures where possible. Jury cases have been suspended until the lockdown has been lifted in line with the following guidance:

“We have put in place arrangements to use telephone, video and other technology to continue as many hearings as possible remotely. We will make best possible use of the equipment currently available; HMCTS is working round the clock to update and add to that. Some hearings, the most obvious being jury trials, cannot be conducted remotely. Clients will be made aware of changes to their cases via notification.

Shared Custody Agreements of children under 18 years old:

Despite the Stay at Home guidance children who spend time at different properties due to shared custody are able to move between the two homes if there is a formal agreement in place. The “Stay at Home Guidance given on the 23rd of March states the following:

“Where parents do not live in the same household, children under 18 can be moved between their parents’ homes...This establishes an exception to the mandatory ‘stay at home’ requirement; it does not, however, mean that children must be moved between homes. The decision whether a child is to move between parental homes is for the child’s parents to make after a sensible assessment of the circumstances, including the child’s present health, the risk of infection and the presence of any recognised vulnerable individuals in one household or the other.”

As per Government guidelines if someone in a household starts showing symptoms of Coronavirus the whole house must isolate. Each case must be assessed individually and safeguarding policies must be followed to ensure the safety of the child, and where the best place for isolation to take place is.

How to manage disclosures of domestic abuse

- Do Listen, allow the person time and space to talk,
Believe, reflect back, offer reassurance
- Don't Show shock/ surprise, express anger at what you're hearing
Share personal experiences,
Make promises you can't keep

- **First Contact**

- Check if it's safe/convenient to talk- if not agree a time when is
- Explain confidentiality/ safeguarding
- Ask something along the lines of 'Just wanted to check how things are- are you still in a relationship with?'

- **If 'yes':**

- Do you feel everything is ok now?
- Are you worried about anything/ about it happening again?
- **Do you feel safe?**
- Do you have any support from family/friends?
- Would you like to talk to someone about your options? Mention housing, solicitor, benefits etc
- Explain about MASH process and that someone may be in touch again, however would you like us to call back in a week's time to see how things are?

- **If 'no':**

- So have you separated?
- Did it go smoothly? Are there ongoing issues?
- **Do you feel safe?**
- What do you think will happen now, do you think there will be further problems? What do you think he/she will do?
- Consider completing a risk indicator checklist (RIC) (if trained to do so) at this point if the victim is talking openly/ what they tell is giving cause for concern ([dash risk checklist](#))
- Do you have any protective measures in place? (Bail conditions etc.) *Signpost to solicitors for civil injunctions, children matters*

- **Housing**

- Consider refuge
- Consider sanctuary (locks changed , extra security on the property)
- Do you get on with your neighbours? Do they know about your situation? Would it be an idea to ask them to keep an eye out in case he comes round? Maybe call the police if they're worried

- **Practical safety measures**

- Access to phone? Keep it charged and accessible
- Keeping doors, windows locked
- Changing routes to school/work
- Contact arrangements?
- Encourage to call police if feeling unsafe
- Keep a log of incidents (text messages, phone calls, showing up at work/ friend's house etc)

- **Discuss next steps**

- Follow up call(s)
- Do they need ongoing support?
- Do they need referring to other services- children's services, local support
- If in doubt, check out with a manager and agree next steps (MARAC, safeguarding alert etc.) or ring a domestic abuse service for advice.