

## Responding to victims/survivors of Domestic Abuse

### 1 Introduction

It is sometimes tempting to minimize the survivor's experiences. After all (we might wrongly reason), we've all been in arguments, so if they can't cope, then it's their problem.

Yet an abusive relationship is not about an ordinary, everyday argument in which both people have a bit of a yell and then make up. It is very different indeed and often involves repeated behaviour. We must guard against deciding which abusive behaviour is worth bothering with, and which is not. We must offer help and support to all who ask for and need it.

Responding to Domestic Abuse: Guidelines for Those with Pastoral Responsibilities, 2006 (p24) Church of England. Archbishops' Council.

**2 The guidance** below aims to assist you in responding to people disclosing abuse. If you feel ill-equipped to deal with the situation please contact the DSA for advice and guidance.

**The safety of children and victims is paramount.** All actions should carefully consider the risk to their, and your, safety. Telephone calls, holding information about support services for domestic abuse, the use of texts and e-mails and accessing relevant websites all create potential risks for those experiencing abuse.

For information on the statutory definition of abuse, its prevalence and effects, and how to recognise both victims/survivors and alleged perpetrators please see [Domestic Abuse fact Sheet](#). This also includes information on specialist types of domestic abuse.

### 3 Initial disclosure

If a victim discloses abuse, the following factors are important:

- Most victims/survivors want to be asked. If you are able to broach the subject, your offer of help could be the first step in enabling them to seek help; e.g. 'How are things at home?' and if it becomes appropriate, 'Is anyone hurting you?'
- Do try wherever possible to talk in a safe, private place where you will not be interrupted, or arrange to talk again (but someone in distress may start talking anywhere).
- Do try to make it clear that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, depending on the nature of what is disclosed. Whilst you might respect an individual's right to confidentiality this cannot be guaranteed i.e. when someone is being hurt and a criminal offence has been committed, someone is in danger, or when children are involved.
- Do take plenty of time to listen and believe what they say. If they sense disbelief they may be discouraged from speaking again.

#### 4 Immediate action

- Do dial 999 (112 in Europe) if you are witnessing a violent incident or if the person needs medical care. If the victim is in immediate danger, the Police should be called. Be aware that intervention may heighten risk, but it is important to explore how to ensure people are safe.
- The safety of children is paramount. If children are involved, a referral to children's service needs to be made in addition to calling the Police, if possible, encourage the victim to make the referral themselves, perhaps supporting them through the process. The DSA will also need to be informed.

#### 5 Your response to the disclosure

- Do be sensitive to people's backgrounds and cultures and check your own and their understanding of how the cultural issues affect them. Ask them about what support is available to them from friends and family.
- Do affirm the strength and courage it takes to have survived the abuse and even more to talk about it.
- Do encourage them to seek professional help from a local domestic abuse service who will be able to offer practical safety planning advice, even if they do not want to leave their home. In addition give information about national specialist helplines and websites, as required ([Domestic abuse Useful resources](#))
- Do express concern for their safety and immediate welfare. Do they have somewhere to stay?
- Do ask about the children and their safety and welfare. You may need to persuade them to report any concerns to children's social care. You have no option but to do so if you have received information that a child is at risk.
- Do encourage them to focus on their own needs, something they may not have been able to do since the abuse began but which is critical in helping them to change their situation.
- Do reassure them that, whatever the circumstances, abuse is not justified and not their fault.
- Do ask them what they want from you and the parish. Offer help which is in response to their needs and preferences and which lets them keep in control.

#### 6 Record keeping and follow up

Summary guidance is as follows:

- Do check if it is all right to contact them at home before doing so. Ask them what their preferred means of contact is and confirm that this is safe.
- Do keep information confidential and as a general rule only share with informed consent where appropriate and if possible, respect the wishes of those who do not give consent to share confidential information. You should note that it may still be possible to share confidential information without consent if, in your judgement, it is necessary and proportionate to do so (i.e. there is a good reason), such as where the safety of the victim or (an) other(s) may be at risk. Always keep a record of your decision and the reasons why you decided to share (or not). If in doubt contact the DSA and the Diocesan

- Registrar.
- Do make a brief objective note of date, facts and context of what you have been told but keep your opinions separate. This should be kept in strict confidence but could be useful in any future prosecution (see [Safeguarding Records: Joint Practice Guidance for the Church of England and the Methodist Church \(2015\)](#)).
  - You must **share the incident with someone who is qualified within 24 hours** and can support you to help you to think through the issues and action. This may be the DSA or local safeguarding officer/lead.
  - Do seek advice from the DSA or local safeguarding officer/lead to review the safety and risk issues in relation to the alleged perpetrator if they are in the same Church. There may need to be a risk assessment and 'safeguarding agreement' put in place in line with House of Bishops practice guidance<sup>1</sup>. This work needs to be undertaken in consultation with the DSA.
  - Victim safety planning should be conducted by a professional, ideally from a domestic abuse service or a statutory agency. There may be an occasion when a victim wishes to discuss their safety with you. It is essential that you seek advice from a DSA before entering into detailed safety planning discussions. This planning would normally be guided by a safety planning format (see Safety Planning Format) and careful consideration should be given to where and how such information is provided and kept by the victim, to avoid being accessed by the perpetrator.
  - If the **alleged perpetrator is a church officer** you must talk to the DSA and follow the House of Bishops practice guidance on responding to serious safeguarding concerns in related to Church Officers.<sup>2</sup>
  - **Do not give information about the victim's whereabouts to the perpetrator or to others who might pass information on to the perpetrator.** Do not discuss with the parish council/other members of a congregation who might inadvertently pass information on to the perpetrator.
  - When victims are leaving a controlling perpetrator, they often have to leave with nothing and have access to very limited financial support. Consider how your church can provide practical support to survivors.

## 7 Additional guidance for clergy and licensed lay ministers

### Responding to victims

- Do help the victim/survivor with any religious concerns.
- Do emphasize that the marriage covenant is broken by the violence from their partner.
- **Do not pursue couples' counseling/mediation with them and their partner if you are aware that there is violence in the relationship.**
- Do assure them of God's love and presence.
- Do pray with them.
- Don't encourage them to forgive the alleged perpetrator and/or take them back.

#### Key telephone numbers for sources of help

- National Domestic Violence Helpline: 0808 2000 247
- Legal support (National Centre for Domestic Violence): 0844 8044 999 – provides a free, fast, emergency injunction service for victims of domestic abuse
- Male victims (Respect): 0808 801 0327
- Helpline for domestic abuse in same sex relationships: 0800 999 5428

- 1 [Safeguarding Policy Statements & Practice Guidance](#)
- 2 [Safeguarding Policy Statements & Practice Guidance](#)

Adapted from “[Responding well to Domestic Abuse 2017](#)” (Church of England)

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