



Supporting friends, family members, neighbours and colleagues experiencing domestic abuse

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Alison has written this blog exploring how we can support our loved ones, neighbours and colleagues during the covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Not being able to see family members and friends is difficult for many of us at this time, but what if you're worried about someone you care about? Worried that they might not be safe at home?

These might be new concerns based on something that's happening now, or they could be worries you've had before prompted by something your friend or relative has said, or something you've noticed.

During this pandemic, there have been many news reports and discussions about potential increases in violence and abuse within relationships which may have highlighted this issue for you and added to your existing concerns.

So, what do you say in this situation? Should you do something? What if you get it wrong and make things worse?

You're probably reading this hoping not to find yourself in this situation, but most of us will already know someone experiencing domestic abuse. In the UK one out of every four women and one out of every six men will experience domestic abuse during their lifetime. This is something that can happen to anyone – of any age and from any background.

Research shows that if someone is experiencing abuse, they are most likely to turn to someone they know - friends, family members, neighbours and colleagues. Occasionally, someone experiencing domestic abuse may tell their doctor or another professional, but usually, it is only the people around them who suspect that something is wrong.

It can be hard to know what to say when someone tells you they are experiencing abuse. Indeed, it is often common for people not to be believed, or even to be blamed for the situation – along with being asked “why don't you just leave?”. This is a question which people find particularly unhelpful because it underestimates both the complexity of domestic abuse situations and the increased risk of serious harm when trying to leave.

In the current circumstances, it's probably even harder for someone to reach out to a loved one, so perhaps, instead, we need to think about how we can **reach in** in order to offer support. We're not suggesting that this is always straightforward, and it's important to recognise that worrying about the situation a loved one is facing, also has an impact on us.

Particular challenges during this pandemic

Currently, opportunities for people living with abuse to reach out and access support are more limited than ever. When it's hard for someone on the inside to reach out, we need those on the outside to reach in.

Contact at the moment with the people we love is different if we're used to seeing people face-to-face. There may be other ways to stay in touch such as video calls, texting or phone calls. These can be a good way to check-in with someone, but if you are going to ask them about their relationship, make sure they are able to communicate with you safely - their calls and messages may be monitored and there may be people you can't see who are watching or listening to the conversation. Even if your friend or family member says it's ok to talk, do not raise these issues if you are aware that they are not alone.

If it's difficult to get time alone with them by phone or internet, or it doesn't feel safe to check on them in that way, think about whether there are other options, such as offering to do shopping for them, and finding out if their partner will be out of the house at certain times.

What to say

A common concern is feeling like you don't know enough to respond well, but simply listening can help someone to break the silence around their situation.

People who've experienced domestic abuse say that opportunities to talk, along with emotional and practical support are most helpful, particularly when offered by someone they trust.

"Domestic abuse" and "domestic violence" are labels that many people struggle to identify with because they feel these terms don't represent their experiences – particularly the control and coercion, and the psychological, emotional, sexual and financial abuse they have experienced.

So, start conversations gently, conveying your concern. You could ask about things you have noticed, something like: "You haven't been in touch much lately. Is everything OK?" or "I've noticed you seem a bit down. Has anyone upset you?" or even "I'm worried about you, you seem scared."

How you then respond to any disclosure really matters. It can be hard not to be critical or blaming, or to offer strong opinions about the relationship or the person behaving abusively, but these responses tend to close conversations down.

Instead, try to listen with a supportive attitude and an open mind. The important things to convey are that you believe the person, they are not to blame for the abuse, that you are concerned and worried about them and that you want to help.

Safety planning

Deciding to end an abusive relationship can be extremely difficult and may take time to work out how to do this safely, particularly given the current circumstances

Domestic abuse services are continuing to provide support, so do get in touch with them for advice, and to find out what they offer, so that you have information you can give to the person you know.

Ideally, ending an abusive relationship is done in a planned way with support in place, but of course sometimes there can be an emergency situation where the decision is made urgently. It helps to have thought about this beforehand. Professionals who work with people in abusive relationships can provide expert support to create safety plans to reduce the risk of harm when leaving the relationship. There are also tips you can share with the person experiencing abuse:

- Pack an emergency bag to hide in a safe place in case they need to leave quickly, including items like passports, birth certificates, keys to their home or car, money, medications, some clothes and a few of their children's toys.
- Work out a plan for leaving, including who to call, where to go and how to get there. A plan is important because it is difficult to think about these things quickly. Current restrictions on movement do not prevent people from leaving an abusive situation.

- Agree on a code word so they can signal to you if they are in danger and need urgent help.

You can also offer lots of different types of practical support, such as contacting support organisations and helplines on the person's behalf.

If you feel that the person, or their children, are in danger or at risk of immediate harm, please do call the police on 999.

What not to do

As well as not blaming the person experiencing abuse and not being directly critical of the person being abusive, it is important not to pressure the person being abused – they need to make their own decisions in their own time.

You may need to be patient because helping someone in an abusive relationship can be a gradual process. It is also important to make sure that you don't do anything to provoke the person who is being abusive – and to ensure you look after yourself in the process.

Top tips

We asked our SafeLives Pioneers, people with lived experience of domestic abuse, what tips they would give friends and family members during this time;

- Be brave – try and reach out if you're worried.
- Keep communication open. It doesn't mean talking about your concerns. Talk about anything. Be the person they can contact regardless of the reason. As long as communication is open they have options that they can use when they need it most.
- Breathe deep, find some techniques, such as box breathing, it helps me daily & has helped calm and soothe my nervous system in all manner of states. Practicing box breathing is a game changer. We are much less likely to react and instead respond with greater clarity and strength- whilst communicating our needs and having them met. It gives space for us to ground, feel present and safe.

If you are concerned about a woman who you think may be in an abusive relationship, contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline (0808 2000247) or Women's Aid online email and instant messaging services (<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/>).

If you are concerned about a man who you think may be in an abusive relationship, contact Respect Men's Advice Line (0808 8010327)

Further reading and resources

SafeLives covid-19 webpage has further resources and advice, including safety planning and other helplines: <https://safelives.org.uk/news-views/domestic-abuse-and-covid-19>

Alison Gregory wrote this longer [guide to domestic abuse for friends and family members](#).