



When home is not a safe place

Advice for employers on supporting their employees at home

For victims of domestic abuse, working from home at this time may be particularly difficult and they may require support from their employer. This briefing paper outlines advice and recommendations around what you, as an employer, can do during the COVID-19 pandemic to support anyone who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

As always, remind people that **if you or someone else is in immediate danger please call 999 and ask for the police.**

We know that this is a difficult and worrying time for everyone – but particularly so for adults and children living with domestic abuse, and those working hard to support them. The Government's shielding measures are necessary but are likely to increase rates and severity of domestic abuse, as has been found in areas where these steps have already been taken (it has been reported that in Hubei province, the heart of the initial coronavirus outbreak, domestic violence reports to police more than tripled in one county alone in February 2020, from 47 last year to 162 this year).¹ Further international evidence has also **been gathered in this report by DfID** and recent UK research² suggests rising call rates and online help seeking.

Advice for employers

It will be important for you to raise awareness of domestic abuse, the support available and how it can be accessed securely. Domestic abuse thrives in secrecy. By creating an environment where it feels safe to talk, people will feel more able to disclose their experiences and seek help.

- Increase visibility of your domestic abuse policy so employees are aware of the support their employer can provide. If you don't currently have a domestic abuse policy, we can help you create one. An example of a model policy can be found in **this resource** for employers, created by Refuge and Respect, or this support document created with the Department of Health, **SafeLives Domestic Abuse Guidance for Employers**.
- Communicate to staff that as an employer you are concerned for their welfare and that if they disclose abuse they will be helped to access support if it is safe to do so. You can do this in lots of ways, for example, by including details about support in your internal comms, such as your staff intranet and regular documents received by employees, such as payslips.
- A lot of staff experiencing domestic abuse will have used their work environment as a safe space to access specialist support and will now need an alternative. For example, they may need information about online support available and tech security tips, such as how to hide your browsing history (further info on our **COVID-19 advice** page).
- Ensure that line managers have sufficient structured contact with all their team members, including any who are subject to sickness leave or furloughing. Contact with an employer may be an opportunity for someone who's still living with their abuser to have a 'legitimate' link to the outside world.
- Line managers may be in the best possible position to check in with someone who's isolated and may be at risk. Offer them support and basic training, so that they feel confident talking to their teams about domestic abuse and know what support is available. They don't have to be experts – they just need to know how to respond appropriately. If you don't have a training package around this, we can help you build one.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

²

<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/SafeLives%20survey%20of%20frontline%20domestic%20abuse%20organisations%20for%20COVID-19%2030.03.20.pdf>

- You may also be working with those who are concerned about their own behaviour. You can find information and signpost employees to the **Respect** helpline. Consider sharing Respect's latest campaign **#noexcuseforabuse** across your workforce and make it clear how your organisation will respond to reports of domestic abuse.
- Check that all employees who are working from home are equipped with everything they may need to work effectively; things that may seem small, like the purchase of a keyboard/mouse/screen or a work mobile.
- Think about the wider role of your organisation. Some big employers are, for example, showing flexibility about people's pay and contract arrangements or making their legal team available for support with disputes around child contact. Support with issues like these may be a huge benefit to someone who doesn't feel they can disclose their situation, but desperately needs help to keep themselves and children safe. These examples may be beyond what your organisation can offer but think creatively about what you could do with the resources you have, at a broader practical level, to support your staff during this crisis.

Advice for line managers and supervisors

- As employees will no longer be seen every day by their colleagues, it is crucial that line managers stay in contact and have regular 1-2-1s and support and supervision sessions with their staff.
- Help support staff wellbeing by sensitively asking how they feel about the changes to their working environment and whether there is any support which could be put in place to make this easier for them.
- Ask your staff to think about their own existing support systems, such as friends, family or neighbours and how these could be strengthened during this time. You may want to help them develop their own bespoke support plan. There is guidance on creating one here: **safety planning**.
- Victims and survivors may want to discuss and review any existing support plans they have agreed with you, in light of their new working/living arrangements. They may need further help, so it is important that you stay in communication with HR, safeguarding leads and senior leadership team to discuss individual cases and sign off any specific support.
- Signs of domestic abuse which may have been spotted by work colleagues will no longer be as obvious as staff work from home, so aim to have sufficient time during video calls to check in with people. This will also help employees to stay connected to their workplace and their peer group, reducing isolation.
- There could be visible injuries or other signs of someone using physical violence and intimidation, such as broken objects or damage to the home, but domestic abuse is so much more than physical abuse. Other things to look out for might include:
 - Changes in behaviour, acting in a way that is unusual or out of character for them
 - Withdrawing from previous sources of support e.g. team chat threads or catch-ups
 - Wariness or anxiety about their partner or a family member coming into the room whilst you are speaking with them
 - Reluctance to talk about their home situation or avoiding answering questions about it
 - Signs of tension, audible conflict in the home, shouting at children or others
 None of these things specifically indicate that your staff member is experiencing domestic abuse but they do suggest that they are struggling with something and may require help with that issue, so it is important that you explore it with them and identify appropriate support.

Recommendations

- Make **helplines** and guidance (including your organisational domestic abuse policy) visible and accessible to all staff
- Ask line managers to create stay-in-touch procedures with their staff and continue to have regular contact, even with staff who are furloughed
- Review any existing support plans with your employees
- Keep safety and wellbeing on the regular agenda for HR, Safeguarding Leads and senior management teams

Resources for victims/survivors

- **SafeLives staying safe at home guidance**
- Chayn **Soul Medicine**
- SafeLives **guide to staying safe online**

- **The Survivors Handbook**, Women's Aid
- **Guidance on Economic Abuse during COVID-19**, Surviving Economic Abuse

Resources for employers

- **Employers Initiative on Domestic Abuse COVID-19 page**
- **SafeLives Domestic Abuse Guidance for Employers and Domestic Abuse Guidance for Employees**
- **Respect/Refuge Toolkit for Employers**
- **Business in the Community/Public Health England DA toolkit**

Telephone and email support

- England: Freephone 24h National Domestic Abuse Helpline: **0808 2000 247**
- Scotland: 247 Scotland's 24h Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline **0800 027 1234**
- Northern Ireland: 24h Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline: **0808 802 1414**
- Wales: 24h Life Fear Free Helpline: **0808 80 10 800**
- Men's Advice Line: **0808 801 0327** info@mensadvice.org.uk
- LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline: **0800 999 5428** help@galop.org.uk
- Karma Nirvana, UK Helpline for 'honour'-based abuse and forced marriage: **0800 5999 247**
- Respect Helpline for those that are worried about their own behaviour: **0808 802 4040**
- Paladin - National Stalking Advocacy Service: **020 3866 4107**
- Citizens Advice National Helpline: **03444 111 444**.

If you would like further information on how to support your staff, please contact info@safelives.org.uk.