



Responding to domestic abuse during COVID-19

How can family and friends support someone experiencing domestic abuse?

Podcast transcript

The current coronavirus situation, and the lockdown measures being taken, are having a worrying impact on people currently living with domestic abuse. In this podcast, SafeLives Practice Advisor, Rachel Ozanne, talks to survivor and SafeLives Pioneer, Ursula, and Dr Alison Gregory, a researcher at Bristol University. Dr Gregory is a leading researcher on domestic abuse, with a particular focus on informal supporters.

Rachel, Ursula and Alison discuss how friends, family and neighbours might be able to help someone who doesn't feel safe at home.

Key:

RA – Rachel Ozanne

AG – Alison Gregory

RA

Thank you Alison and Ursula, for joining with me today for this podcast. We're going to look at the important role of friends and family members for people experiencing domestic abuse, and what some of the challenges and worries there might be for them at the moment, and some things that they could think about doing for loved ones, but also themselves. So, Alison, what do you think are the key issues for friends or family members of someone experiencing domestic abuse right now?

AG

Well, I think we're all in a situation where we've been thrown together, so... many of us are with people in our households 24/7, and on top of that there are the kind of additional pressures, I suppose, of the current situation, such as financial worries, that may increase tension within households, and which may potentially increase the severity of any harming behaviours that are happening. And that can be really difficult for people who are friends, family members, neighbours, colleagues, because they're not *seeing* the people that they love – they're not able to see how people are doing – they're not necessarily able to check out any concerns that they've got, or to see whether there's any indication of harmful behaviours that are potentially escalating, and could be really worrying for people, actually.

And our usual routines have changed – our usual forms of being in touch with other people have altered and shifted – and friends and family members may be concerned about whether it's even *safe* to get in touch with a person who's experiencing harming behaviours. You know, how best to contact them,

whether their communications are being observed or monitored, whether conversations are likely to be interrupted? So, I think one of the key issues, I suppose, is how to be in touch with people at the moment, and how to do that safely.

RA

Ursula, does that... is there anything that you would add to that?

U

Yes, I think this is particularly difficult time for people living with abusive behaviours in the home, and also for others who may be supporting them, as friends or family. I think, at the same time, that people who have been living with abusive behaviours in the home will have felt some of this isolation and lockdown experience already. So, that might mean that they will have some coping strategies that can also be used during this time.

RA

So, do you think... sort of... some of the worries, then, that friends and family members might be having at the moment, about how a situation's made worse, but actually sort of survivors in their situations might be using the coping mechanisms and skills they've got already, to try and manage that – to try and give a bit of reassurance, I suppose, to people?

U

Yes. I think a lot of people have put thought and energy into how they can still connect with trusted people in their lives, who may have already been acting as a... a kind of anchor for them, in what feels often like very rough seas, for people in relationships that perhaps go through tremendous ups and downs under what you'd describe as 'normal' circumstances; I'm not minimising the extra difficulties that people are facing now, because this is a real challenge – as Alison said – to be together 24/7 with all the additional pressures that come with it. But just to think about the fact that the... from the outside, looking in, if you have been living... perhaps, or supporting a person over some time, one thing that a person – a supporter person – can do is to consider what... what coping strategies you might have already used together; what routines or possibilities there might be for keeping in touch. So, keeping that anchor. I was thinking, it's a bit like... erm... the length of time that you might have to... to work through with somebody, and the patience required, can feel like being right at the end of a long tunnel, and it can be quite a frustrating experience. Also... sometimes triggering, because you have been perhaps through some ups and downs with that person in the past – perhaps as a family member – but you are, in some ways, holding a light at the end of the tunnel, so, to keep going, and keep holding the light, it's quite important.

AG

Mm. Thank you. And I think there's... there's another concern that friends and family members are often worried about, and this would be the same in any situation, even if we weren't in lockdown at the moment; I think, when it's somebody that you care about – somebody that you love – you're worried about offending them, if you label the behaviours, particularly if you label them as kind of abusive.

I think domestic abuse is *still* thought of as something private, as no-one else's business, as something that's sensitive, that's taboo, and friends and family members can be really concerned that if they kind of raise this, or if they talk to the person, will that person cut off contact with them? And at this time when contact is limited *anyway*, people are worried that ... you know... if they try to kind of talk about this topic ... you know... will that make things worse for the person? And it can feel really *challenging*, as a friend or family member, to feel empowered within this situation – to kind of know what to do for the best, to know how to have that conversation. Certainly, when I've spoken to friends and family members during my research, they almost don't feel like they have any... 'right' in the situation to *be* affected by it, that if they're feeling something about the situation themselves, as a third party, that that's somehow 'wrong' but you don't have to be the person who is being directly affected by it – who's directly experiencing it – to... I'll take another run-up at that...

Most of the friends and family members I've spoken to during my research almost don't feel like they have a 'right' to feel anything about the situation – that it shouldn't be affecting them – but you don't have to be the person who's directly experiencing the harming behaviours to be affected by it. People may be feeling helpless – they may be feeling frustrated, confused, scared, angry – just really unsure about what to do about the situation at the moment. And it's really ok for friends and family members in this position to reach out for some help – and that has a *double* benefit; if you reach out for help as a friend or family member, you can be supported and you can get advice yourself. And alongside this

podcast, there will be some of the agencies – the details of the agencies – that you can contact to get this advice and support. But it also means that you're then in the position to *be* that light at the end of the tunnel that Ursula has mentioned, because you may be better informed. So, whether you can communicate the information and the advice that you get now, or whether you can do that at a later stage when we've kind of moved beyond lockdown, you may know information, then, and be able to offer advice, that person who's directly experiencing the abuse may find it hard to access either now or in the future.

RA

Hmm. So, benefit to yourself for understanding and kind of getting that information about services, and about what's out there, but then being able to provide that. And I suppose, at the moment, if a survivor's got less opportunity to search kind of what help would be out there, or understand what that help might look like, then ... you know... having a kind of friend or family member neighbour – like you say – just to be able to say 'Actually, there's this service, and this is what they do' or 'There's this helpline', but that could be a really important opportunity for them, right now.

AG

Absolutely.

RA

So, Ursula, from the survivor perspective, what's the most helpful thing a friend or family member can do right now; what are the things that have the biggest impact for them?

U

I think signalling that you are available, that you're not going away, that regardless of the difficulties of being in touch that you are there for the person. And, obviously, for children, this can be a grandparent of children living in a household where abusive behaviours are being used. I think, just from personal experience, it can be incredibly difficult to burden – particularly family – with what's going on. There is just an instinctive feeling to want to shield your loved ones from any... any burden of information. So, it can be very hard to share.

So, I think – to put it the other way round – for the family members just to be aware of that difficulty... not only to feel that the person they're supporting is maybe minimising or denying what's happening, but to realise that there may be reasons why they're doing that. So, not giving up, listening, just signalling in whatever way is possible. If, for example, it's still possible to be seeing each other, through Skype or Facetime or any of the other options that there are at the moment, just to be signalling with body language and... not necessarily referring directly to things, but in the way that you talk, just to show that you are available.

So, there are all kinds of ways of doing that without directly naming abuse, for example. As Alison said, that can be a very difficult issue to broach, and it can feel quite judgemental, but there can be other ways of talking about... opening... leaving a space open, I think, for conversation or for the possibility to signal that a person needs help, or wants to have help at this point. It can be a long road. I mean, I had help from friends – old friends, new friends who were neighbours – but it doesn't mean that you can *take* the help straightaway, necessarily, or act on it, even under less difficult circumstances than the present time. But it doesn't mean that it wasn't useful, or that it *didn't* make a difference. So, it's a step-by-step approach and, as Alison said, I think if people are aware that they have the choice to get additional help – maybe even to ask a local service for support about how to help a person. The first thing is having the awareness, and being curious about what's going on. It doesn't mean you have to know what to do – you can get help with that and ask for advice.

AG

Yeah, and I think I would add to that; it isn't the job of a friend or family member to rescue the person, or to challenge the person who's using harming behaviours, or to attempt to bring about the end of the relationship – even though you may feel that those are things that you *want* to do – actually, it's *only* the person who's experiencing the harming behaviours who can decide for themselves whether or not they wish to remain in the relationship or to... if they *do* decide to leave, only *they* can decide the safest way and the timing to do that. So, even though you might feel kind of... quite a strong burden around it, as Ursula said the best thing you can do is kind of to... to have gained the information that you can, to be equipped to be able to offer support and advice, but... you can't jump in there and do it *for* somebody else. You can let them know you believe them – you can reassure them that it's not their fault that the abuse is happening, you can tell them that you're concerned or worried about them, and let them know

that you want to help – those are your kind of main jobs and main roles within that situation. But you can't bring about an end to the relationship – that's not your responsibility as a friend or family member.

RA

So, I suppose there's a kind of responsibility that ... you know... not... that... sort of inadvertently, I guess, where... to know that something's happening for someone, or to sort of heavily suspect that, that... the sort of weight of responsibility – particularly if you *are* the only person that knows what's going on, to want to do something about it, isn't it? I think that's totally natural to... there's a sort of instinct, isn't there, to protect, and to want to kind of go in and sort it out? And it's... domestic abuse, unfortunately, is not as straightforward as that, is it? So, it's kind of like you say, just staying with what that person wants to do, when they want to do it. And I think, from what you're both saying, it's that can... take a long time, that can be short, there's like it's not a... sort of straight path, is it? There's lots of things that might happen along the way, that might change, but just being that consistent person that's open and listening is the thing that can make a massive difference.

U

I think, also, if this is a new... or newish situation – a new awareness, perhaps, about a family member, I think it is possible that, with this changed situation, that some people who perhaps may have had some vague worries about a family member or a friend, may be beginning to feel that actually there is more to this, because things may be becoming starker, or there might be more obvious signs that a person is... either very hard to reach, or is really struggling. And we know, that it can be a particularly difficult and isolating time if the person has... is pregnant, or has... a new baby in the household. So, there are some... some times that are particularly concerning, where it would be important to get support around that concern...

AG

Mm.

U

...from... via helplines, or from a local specialist organisation.

AG

Mm.

U

And also, to... to... I think one of the difficulties when it's a new situation is... is having confidence that... confidence that you are seeing what you're seeing – so, trusting your perception – and having some idea of what to do next. There are other problems when a situation's been going on for quite a long time, that a person who's been supporting someone over time may really struggle with... with the ongoing difficulties, and the fact that things perhaps *don't* seem to be progressing.

RA

So, I suppose it's a... kind of like the situations where... as much as you can then, it's staying with that person and doing things... supporting them in the way in which they're asking you to, but then situations where actually that might... you might not be able to do that, and you might need to reach out and get... services or intervention for someone if you're really worried, and I guess it's important that we're clear on that, as well, isn't it?

U

I think so. I think, also, just looking back to this issue about feeling... not only a sense of shame, but trying to manage the situation by not... by presenting, for example, quite a sort of 'smiling' face to the outside world. That obviously can make it difficult for people outside the situation to judge what's going on, but realising that that's not uncommon, can help, I think, to see that there might be a disconnect between what you *feel* is going on – or some of the signs that you're seeing, or perhaps things you're hearing – in a neighbouring household, and what you see when the family perhaps are outside the house, or ... you know... if you meet in other circumstances. So, to realise that it is ok to consider what might be behind smiling faces, or neat gardens, and... routine... routines that look normal. So, to be curious is not a bad thing, as long as – as Alison said – that you don't feel you have to... erm... to act on... act rashly, in ways that aren't safe to do so.

AG

Yeah. And I'd reiterate what Ursula has said about trusting your instincts; I think your gut reaction is there for a reason, and if you feel that something unhealthy or something harmful is going on in a relationship of someone you know, it probably is. And if you're feeling that something's not right, but you're not quite sure, it's ok to gently check in with people. And I don't mean asking them kind of directly 'Are you experiencing domestic abuse?' because most of us have quite a fixed idea of what that means, and people may not relate their experiences to that term.

But it's giving people an easy opening to a conversation – and I recognise our conversations are a little bit different at the moment, given the current circumstances – but it's about building trust, and asking questions in a way that shows... I suppose, your kindness, your concern... so, asking if people are ok, asking if anyone has upset them, whether anything is worrying them – those kind of very gentle... ways in, I suppose, that if somebody *wants* to tell you something is happening, that they can. It gives the person a kind of a signal that you're open to hearing about their experiences.

So, you don't have to delve deeply – you don't have to ask the kind of in-depth questions – you can simply show interest, show that you care, open up the possibility for the person to speak in future. Maybe not even now, but maybe at some point in the future. And you don't have to have all the answers if somebody does open up; by listening, that can just be *really* helpful to somebody, to kind of *admit* what's happening, and it breaks the silence around the situation.

But, as I've said, of course, communicating at the moment, in a safe way, might be a little bit more difficult to do just now. So, people who are in the position of a friend or family member maybe need to think about whether communication by phone, or by online means, is private, whether it's secure, whether it's perhaps being monitored by the person who's using harming behaviours. So, if you're having perhaps a Skype conversation or a telephone conversation with someone who you're concerned about, you maybe need to think about whether there are other people in the background to that conversation, who are listening, or people who are checking texts. So, actually maybe using the more gentle questions at the moment is perhaps appropriate, because it looks... if somebody is monitoring what's happening, it looks less like you're trying to get involved, maybe.

RA

Yeah, and I guess that's conversations that are quite common at the moment, isn't it, because I guess ... you know... regardless of people's situations, everyone is going to be struggling a little bit, aren't they, with the current situation? So, it's sort of... I would imagine it would be quite a common kind of conversation, where it's like 'Are you alright? How are you doing?' and kind of... like you say, having those sort of gentle questions that... someone might not pick up on as being kind of directed around concerns about domestic abuse.

And I was just thinking about children within households, as well, that a friend or family member could have quite an important role to play on checking in with the kids in that family, if they've got a good relationship with them, and that could be another way of just offering support, couldn't it, to the family, or potentially knowing if things are getting worse, and if things aren't alright? Do you think that's a... harder thing for friends and family members to do, or just depends on the situation?

U

I think that that's a really important thing. I think, sometimes, we forget just how much children are a part of the picture, and also capable of... of being reached in to [laughs wryly] ... or reaching out for help. And I think they will... they will... benefit from any signal from trusted adults that... that then they can be listened to – that they're noticed – and also being aware, again, of the... we may see... see neighbouring children – we may see children from our families on Skype, or whatever – to be aware of all the *little* signals, again, in body language and behaviour. And just showing that we're there for them. It can be really important.

AG

Yeah.

RA

We recorded a podcast yesterday – I don't know if that will go out before or after this one – but with two of our pioneers who experienced domestic abuse growing up in the family, and one of the things they were talking about was that it's so hard to tell somebody; but if somebody asks you, the difference that that can make. And like you were saying, the same thing with survivors – you might not choose to disclose anything at that moment, but just knowing that there's someone that's kind of... noticed, or has

an interest, or could be able to talk about how you are, is so vital. So, I think that's... it's easy to forget, sometimes, isn't it, around like when we're thinking about kind of survivors, but thinking about that kind of whole household, and support they might need?

U

I know that my children felt very much they were always asked about *me*, and how *I* was, and got the feeling they were just being asked to look after me, and that they really wanted people to ask about *their* experience – which is very different to being the adult in the... you're living with perhaps the same behaviours, but the experience is quite specific. So, feeling that people are actually interested in 'How are things going for *you?*', as a child, or as a teenager, not as the son or daughter of an adult in the house.

AG

And I think we really underestimate how much children *are* aware of what's happening, and how much they're impacted by it. We maybe think 'Well, they were asleep whilst it was happening' or 'they were in the next door room', but children see and hear, and experience directly, so much more than we realise, when they're in a home where there's harming behaviours, abusive behaviours, happening.

RA

Yeah. And it kind of feeds into sort of people being focused on an incident, rather than the kind of patterns of behaviour that are going on all the time.

U

Particularly the coercive control aspects around being able to have choices in the home. I think that that's something that affects everybody living in that household, without a doubt.

RA

Mm.

AG

Yeah.

U

So, I think one of the really important things that a friend or family member, or a work colleague, or a neighbour can do is to remember that people need to feel they have choices, and that if they're living with abuse they may feel that they don't have any choices at this time.

RA

Yeah, and I know that we've... and that reminds me, because I know that we kind of – and I do this a lot when we're talking about friends and families, talk about friends and family, and we're sort of mentioning neighbours – but work colleagues, and I know when the three of us have discussed this before, that you both view kind of colleagues as having such an important role, potentially, to notice how somebody is, or to kind of reach out and offer support. And like it's... again, it's a different situation at the moment, isn't it, sort of depending on what role people do – whether they're key workers – but a lot of us working from home, but there still might be things that they could pick up on, or ways in which they could reach out, I think.

AG

Definitely. Certainly with my own work, and the shift that's happened, I'm actually seeing probably far *more* of my colleagues [laughter] albeit via Skype or Zoom at the moment, and... actually, you may notice things when you're in conversation with your colleagues, at the moment, when you're having online calls and that kind of thing; you may notice something about their home environment, if they're working from home. You may notice something about their kind of behaviour or their demeanour – how they look, how they respond, how they react – so, it may even be that in the current circumstances work colleagues are having *more* contact – or more regular contact – albeit via online and telephone means, with people who are experiencing abuse.

RA

So, what advice would you give to friends and family – what are the sort of key things for them to think about?

AG

Well, I guess, for me, first and foremost, I'd like to reassure friends and family members, neighbours and colleagues, that they're an *incredibly* valuable resource. And because of that, they really need to look after themselves. If people look after themselves, and feel less overwhelmed by the situation that they're worried about, then they'll be in a better position to support the person who's actually directly experiencing the harming behaviours. And there's a guide that sits alongside this podcast, and there are some things in there about kind of taking time out, about sleep routines, exercise, creating opportunities for yourself to reach out to get advice and support, and to talk about what's happening. And those are just some pointers, really, for people to think about how they can... how they can make sure *they* are doing ok. Because if they're doing ok, they'll be able to support somebody else better. I think part of this is also thinking about your own safety – it can be risky to confront someone who is using harming behaviours – and it can be risky both for you and also for the person you're trying to support. So, *do* be careful about how you approach this issue. And also, particularly at the moment, how you check in with people; it's good to check in with people, but just to think about how you can do that safely.

RA

Ursula, what advice would you give?

U

I think I would echo what Alison said. I think it's incredibly helpful, just to go back to my own experience, it *would* have been incredibly helpful to have some of that advice at that time, and to have the guide to go back to; just to acknowledge that it is... abuse affects much more than the family where it's taking place, so it *is* an issue for wider family and for the wider community. So... I would really echo that, that you... you have the right to... also, to get help, as a helper. So, not to give up, but if things are... if you're struggling with some aspect of it, to think it *is* ok to ask for help.

AG

And in terms of *practical* things to do, I think, *do* reach out to the organisations that are listed on the web page here. But in a crisis, if you think things have got substantially worse, or you fear that the person is in danger, it's ok to take action and to call the Police. That's not for *every* situation, but if you're concerned – if you're becoming worried that there's harm, and risk, and danger, and that they are increasing – *do please* call the Police.

Another thing you can do on a very practical level is to keep a record of what's going on. If you've noticed things, if you've seen things, if you've spotted things, if the person's told you things about what's been happening; if you can keep some kind of log of that, with kind of times and dates, I think that can be valuable for all sorts of reasons. It can be valuable... if the situation ends up going to court at a later date, but I think it can also be really valuable to perhaps provide feedback to the person you're trying to support, later on; that you could check in with them and say 'Well look, these are things I noticed, or these are things that you told me that happened' and it might help the person who had experienced those harming behaviours to perhaps acknowledge what was happening in their relationship, and to perhaps open up that conversation at some point in the future. So, keeping that log could be a really helpful thing to do.

But also using the small windows of opportunity that we *have* got, at the moment, to reach out. There are governmental guidelines, and they're there for a reason, about how we stay in and how we socially distance, but there is also a little bit of creativity within that, perhaps that we could use. Perhaps doing somebody's shopping for them, and using that as an opportunity – when you deliver the shopping to their door – to just checking whether they're ok; perhaps offering to go out and collect a prescription with them, but doing that in a socially-distanced way – that you stay a couple of metres apart – but that you might have an opportunity to talk. I'm certainly not saying we override the guidelines, but we may need to be a little bit creative at this moment in time.

RA

Yeah. I agree. And I think with the... kind of keeping a log of what you notice happening, I think that could be *massively* reassuring for someone experiencing that, because I think... part of one of the impacts of domestic abuse can be really questioning whether things have happened as you think they have, or... the abusive person giving a different narrative to what's going on, and it can be really difficult to trust your own instincts, so that's... could be vital in that part of that understanding around what's going on being believed – being reassured by somebody else seeing that behaviour could be quite important on the step to seeking more help, or making decisions around what's going on.

U

I agree about that. I think one of the big problems when you're in it is that you... in one sense, you're just purely living in the moment, and being quite reactive. Very often, you don't feel that you have much... erm... as I said, many choices to make; so, quite often you are reacting rather than taking the initiative, because it feels less safe to take the initiative. So, it can mean that you get a very scrambled narrative in your own mind about what happened, and also what order things happened in. So, it can be extremely useful to have somebody else keep that narrative for you. So, I definitely agree that keeping a log is something that can be firstly almost impossible for the person themselves to do – it's not unknown that a person will keep a record of some things and then destroy them because they are nervous about keeping such things in the house. So, there definitely are... there definitely is a role for other people around them to do that.

RA

Mm. So, as Alison's mentioned, alongside this podcast there's a blog... erm... kind of describing some of the things that might be going on right now, some tips around what people could do, and a link to bigger guides with lots of detail around domestic abuse and really thinking about that kind of impact on friends and family members themselves. So, that's all kind of linked in that blog, so please do take a look at that.

So, finally, is there... I mean, it's hard, because you've said so much... kind of really important pieces of advice and things to think about, but... is there kind of one thing you'd want people to take away from listening to our podcast? Alison, over to you first.

AG

The one thing I would say is to keep in touch with people that you're worried about. Stay in touch with them, let them know that you care. Find safe ways of checking in with them, and try and find creative ways to be in touch and to be in contact. Let them know that you're still there.

RA

Thank you. And Ursula?

U

Well, I'll just echo what Alison said, but just to use that metaphor again, that you do 'hold the light' for people – you may not realise that you do, but everyone in that circumstance – everyone around a person going through abuse, has the potential to hold the light for them, and provide guidance along the way.

RA

Thank you both, very much, for taking part in this podcast. Thank you.

End of audio at 34.58