



SafeLives Domestic Abuse Training for Family Lawyers: Full evaluation

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Introduction

This full evaluation should be read alongside the policy report which explains the background of the training and our recommendations for taking the success of the course forward. If you have yet to read the report, you can access it at safelives.org.uk/DA-Family-Lawyers-Training-Programme.

According to learners' self-evaluations, our domestic abuse training for family layers appears to have had a substantial positive impact across all outcome areas. Learners reported considerable increases in perceptions of knowledge, and the majority said the training will have a 'very large' or 'extremely large' impact on their interaction with clients and response to victims of domestic abuse, moving forward. This positive impact can be seen across all the learning objectives, in particular around learners' understandings of the trauma caused by domestic abuse, and how to practise a trauma-informed approach with victims and survivors of domestic abuse. This was evidenced in both the substantial increase in reported levels of knowledge around the topic, and the number of open-text responses which refer to having finished the course with an increased understanding of trauma. Encouragingly, several respondents detailed how they would work to take a trauma-informed approach with clients moving forward.

Feedback from the specialist session on engaging with perpetrators of domestic abuse suggests the most impactful element of the session was on learners' perceptions of specialist knowledge, including knowing specialist services to signpost and refer clients to. Feedback does suggest the session had less of an impact on learners' understandings of how to safely engage with a domestic abuse

perpetrator to avoid collusion. This is reflected in both the lower level of change in perception of learners' knowledge around this outcome, as well as learners' lower levels of confidence in the session changing the way they interact with clients who use abusive behaviours, versus with clients who are victims of domestic abuse. However, while confidence levels around the former were lower, the majority of learners still thought the training would have a 'very large' or 'extremely large' impact on the way they interact with clients who use harmful behaviour.

Learners who attended the specialist session on so-called 'honour'-based abuse again reported the biggest impact on their specialist knowledge, including why victims may not want to report the abuse or leave the abusive relationship. In contrast, feedback suggests the session had less of an impact on learners' understandings of how to practise a trauma-informed approach with victims of so-called honour-based violence and abuse. Despite this, learners still said the training would have a significant impact on their interactions with clients and their response to victims moving forward.

Evaluation findings from the three training products show the training led to an increase in reported levels of knowledge across *all* outcome areas, with the majority of learners willing to strongly recommend the training and feeling the learning would have a significant impact on their practice moving forward. For learners attending the core domestic abuse awareness training, an increased understanding of trauma and how to implement a trauma-informed approach to practise came through as the most significant take-away. For learners attending the specialist sessions, both appeared successful in improving specialist knowledge around their area of focus. While feedback from the specialist sessions suggests there is a need for further training around these topics (particularly in improving confidence around safely engaging with domestic abuse perpetrators to avoid collusion, and practicing a trauma-informed approach with victims of so-called honour-based violence and abuse), the findings still show improved perceptions of knowledge and awareness in these areas.

Overall, the training for family lawyers appears to have had a substantial positive impact and learners feel it will make a difference to their practice moving forward.

Core training

Methodology

The core domestic abuse training was delivered in three pilots, which took place between 19th January 2022 and 23rd January 2023. Feedback was gathered through a combination of paper forms and a survey link shared at the end of the training days. 217 learners completed feedback forms. Respondents were asked a variety of questions to gauge their level of understanding, both before and after the training, relating to the key objectives and outcomes of the programme.

Learner profile

The majority of learners identified as female (82%), with the remainder identifying as male (18%). Two-thirds described themselves as White British (65.6%); a further 9.6% described themselves as Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African, 8.1% as Asian or Asian British, 7.7% as from another White background, 2.4% as dual or multiple ethnic groups, and 1.9% as Arab.

The average age was 39.1 years, and over half (58%) of the learners described their role as either a Solicitor or Senior Solicitor. The other roles most commonly described were Associate solicitor/Senior associate solicitor (13%), Barrister (12%) and Partner (8%).

Outcomes for learners

The domestic abuse awareness training for family lawyers focused on several key outcomes, reflected in the questions asked of learners post-training:

- Knowledge of the different forms of domestic abuse and how to describe and identify them;
- Confidence in being able to respond to domestic abuse and domestic abuse disclosures as a matter of routine practice;
- Understanding the gendered nature of domestic abuse and how intersectionality impacts on experiences of abuse and help seeking;
- Understanding both direct and associated risks of domestic abuse to clients and their children;

- Recognise the impact that domestic abuse has on children and young people, whether they experience it directly or indirectly;
- Understanding of the importance of a multi-agency working, particularly with frontline domestic abuse professionals to support clients' safety;
- Understanding of the impact of new case law and statute on how the court understands and responds to coercive and controlling behaviour;
- Understanding of the impacts of abuse on survivor's mental health and how this can present, including an understanding of trauma coping mechanisms;
- Understanding of trauma and practices that can re-traumatise victims and how to avoid these
- Understanding how to practise a trauma-informed approach to representing victims of domestic abuse.

When completing the questionnaire after the training, learners were asked to consider their level of knowledge regarding these outcomes both prior to and following the training, and to respond on a five-point, Likert scale, ranging from 'not at all' to 'extremely' knowledgeable. The responses from learners were overwhelmingly positive.

"I feel I will be much better placed to support survivors. This course has taught me so much. It is a step back to re-look at how we all work." - Learner

Family lawyers reported greatly enhanced knowledge of domestic abuse and its impacts

Following the training, nearly all (98%) learners said they were 'very' or 'extremely' knowledgeable about the different forms of domestic abuse, and how to describe and identify them. This represents an increase of 115% or 52 percentage points (ppts) compared with reported knowledge levels before the training. Similarly, the vast majority of learners (90%) said they had a strong understanding of the gendered nature of domestic abuse by the end of the training, including how intersectionality impacts on experiences of abuse and help seeking: more than triple the number of learners in comparison with before the training (an increase of 212% or 61ppts). A similar proportion (94%) reported that they had a strong understanding of both direct and associated risks of domestic abuse to clients and their children, an increase of 110% (49ppts) following the training. As a result of the training, the majority (86%) of learners also reported a strong understanding of the impact of new case law and statute on how the court understands and responds to coercive and controlling behaviour, an increase of 147% (51ppts).

Learners also reported increased understanding of the impact of domestic abuse, with nine in ten (90%) feeling they had a strong understanding of the impact that domestic abuse has on children and young people, whether they experience it directly or indirectly, an increase of 95% (44ppts) compared to learners' perceptions of their knowledge before training. In addition, nearly all (95%) learners said they had a strong understanding of the impacts of abuse on survivor's mental health and how this can present, including an understanding of trauma coping mechanisms following training, a 234% increase (66ppts).

Learners thought the training would have a substantial impact moving forward

Beyond improving the knowledge of family lawyers around domestic abuse, the training also sought to provide learners with understanding of how to apply this learning to their practice to better respond to clients experiencing abuse. Following training, most learners (84%) reported strong levels of confidence in being able to respond to domestic abuse and domestic abuse disclosures as a matter of routine practice, an increase of 146% (50ppts). Almost nine in ten learners (89%) reported a strong understanding of the importance of a multi-agency working, particularly with frontline domestic abuse professionals to support clients' safety following training, an increase of 171% (56 ppts).

The most substantial reported increases in knowledge centred around trauma and how to integrate this learning into practise. The majority (92%) of learners reported a strong understanding of trauma and practices that can re-traumatise victims and how to avoid these, an increase of 309% (69ppts) compared to perceptions of knowledge before training. A similar proportion (89%) reported that they had a strong understanding of how to practise a trauma-informed approach to representing victims of domestic abuse following training, a considerable increase of 400% (71ppts).

Evaluation of training and feedback from learners

Nine in ten (90%) learners were willing to strongly recommend the training to a colleague (scoring 8 or higher on a 0-10 scale). Over half (58%) gave the training a score of ten out of ten.

When asked whether they felt the learning would change the way in which they interact with clients, almost four-fifths of learners (78%) stated the training would have a 'very' or 'extremely' large impact. The majority (85%) of learners also said the training would have a 'very' or 'extremely' large impact on their ability to respond to victims of domestic violence or abuse in a more informed way. Learners were asked to elaborate on their answers to these two questions, and the 197 responses were analysed and grouped into three main themes: knowledge of domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour; developing a trauma-informed approach; and improved multi-agency working.

Knowledge of domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB)

Across the responses, many learners talked about gaining a 'holistic' knowledge of domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour from the training, including the different types of abuse, and the impacts on all areas of victim's lives.

"I am now much more aware of the need to understand the totality of the client's experience and impact of DA upon all areas of their lives." - Learner

"The need to focus on coercive control when considering the entire domestic abusive picture." - Learner

"A lot more understanding of the different forms of abuse; how to recognise and evidence different forms of abuse; understanding the importance of coercive and controlling behaviour, and the shift that has occurred from focus on physical abuse." - Learner

Where learners came to the course with existing knowledge of domestic abuse, they described feeling the course had added to this by helping them to understand the experience of abuse from the perspective of the victim.

"I now have a really good understanding of the point of view of the DA victim." - Learner

"It has helped me to see the position more from the victim's point of view and not just from the perspective of having a job to do." - Learner

Some learners reflected on anxieties they held around working with victims and the perceived weight of responsibility, and how the learning would improve their confidence when working with clients who have experienced or are experiencing abuse.

"I was always conscious that I was at a disadvantage because of not being able to predict the outcome. But reassured that I can inform the process and create a positive experience." - Learner

Developing a trauma-informed approach

The most significant theme across responses related to trauma and the development of a trauma-informed approach to supporting clients who have experienced domestic abuse. Most learners described an improved understanding of the impact of the trauma caused by domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour. This understanding appeared to go beyond a recognition of the immediate impacts of domestic abuse, to an awareness of the impact of trauma on how clients may present and how they might experience and engage with the legal process.

"The different way individuals can react to their trauma and the impact it may have on the way they engage." - Learner

"More mindful of difficulties clients face in sharing their story and how their presentation might be misinterpreted by others." - Learner

"Clearly understanding the abuse cycle and how people respond. I have previously been dismissive of some people's testimony because of how they have responded to situations." - Learner

This improved understanding led many learners to discuss changing their approach to working with clients, moving from a legal (or 'evidence-first') approach to a trauma-informed (or 'victim-first') approach. Responses framed the former as focused on gaining as much of the necessary evidence as possible during the first interaction with the client, expecting clients to share their story in a way that is of most use to the legal process: clear, chronological and without missing information. Learners reflected on this approach as being one of 'sticking to the script.'

In contrast, responses described a trauma-informed approach as allowing the client to share their story in the way that is of most value to them and focusing in that first interaction on ensuring they feel heard and supported. Once trust is then built and the client feels more comfortable, client and lawyer can work together to put the information in chronological order and fill in any gaps, the lawyer making every effort to question in a way that avoids retraumatizing the client. While a legal approach involves 'sticking to the script,' learners described a trauma-informed approach as being more flexible and 'human.'

"Try to encourage a client to disclose the history of their relationship in a way that is comfortable for them, rather than asking them to recite things in chronological order. Once detailed information has been taken, can then work with the client to put in chronological order." - Learner

"I will have more empathy and give [clients] more time to provide information if they appear to be struggling. A lot of my clients are very emotional when talking about abuse in any form and the course has given me a greater depth of understanding how they are likely to be feeling when they open up to me. I may be the first person they have opened up to and I must respect that." - Learner

Several responses grouped under this theme also talked about specific strategies the learners had acquired to support them in taking up a trauma-informed approach, including sensory questioning and empowering clients through providing information and offering choices.

"I found the impact on the brain of trauma and the outcomes that can cause for clients cognitive/ behavioural etc to be very interesting and the approach of starting with senses to be a new approach if a client is struggling to give instructions." - Learner

Improved multi-agency working

Several learners described an increased awareness of the external support and services available for victims of domestic abuse, and how this awareness had led to a recognition of the importance of a multi-agency response.

"I will be very aware of other support they may have e.g. [Idvas] and the importance of talking to them." - Learner

"Understanding the need for a multiagency response." - Learner

This increased awareness meant that learners stated they would be more confident in signposting or referring clients to the appropriate services.

"I will have a more client focussed approach in terms of sign posting them for additional support during the proceedings and following the conclusion of the proceedings." - Learner

"I am now more confident regarding signposting and better understanding of MARAC and Idvas." - Learner

A few responses contained reflections on how this increased knowledge of services also meant an increased understanding of the limitations of these services and what could be expected of them.

"I have a more holistic understanding of the context of DA, the effects on children, the view of the courts, the limits of social workers." - Learner

Other

A small number of responses did not fit within the core themes. The majority of these either related to the impact of the videos used within the training, or focused on the impact of domestic abuse on children and a commitment to ensure the voice of the child is always considered as part of the process. The few responses reflecting on why they said the training may not impact on interactions with clients came from learners who felt it was not directly applicable to their role due to not interacting with victims and survivors of domestic abuse in their practice. Finally, two responses centred on improved knowledge of intersectionality in relation to domestic abuse.

Specialist course: Engaging With Perpetrators

Methodology

Specialist, half-day training sessions took place on 2nd February and 29th March 2023 and feedback forms were completed by 21 respondents. Feedback was gathered through a survey link shared at the end of the training sessions. Learners were asked a variety of questions to gauge their level of understanding, both before and after the training, relating to the key objectives and outcomes of the session.

Learner profile

Most learners identified as female (86%), with the remainder identifying as male (14%). Seven in ten described themselves as White British (71%), with a further 14% describing themselves as from another White background. A further 5% described themselves as Pakistani, 5% as Chinese and 5% from another Asian background (ethnicity options were slightly different than those in the core training feedback forms).

The average age was 41.3 years, and over half (52%) of learners described their role as either a Solicitor or Senior Solicitor. The other roles most commonly described were Associate solicitor/Senior associate solicitor (24%), Barrister (10%) and Partner (10%).

Outcomes for learners

The specialist session on engaging with perpetrators of domestic abuse focused on several key outcomes, reflected in the questions asked of learners post-training:

- Knowledge of diverse types of domestic abuse perpetrators;
- Understanding of the risk factors for intimate partner violence;
- Understanding of red flags and concerning behaviours of perpetrators and how to identify these to assess counter allegations;
- Understanding of how to safely engage with a domestic abuse perpetrator to avoid collusion;
- Awareness of support services available for those who are using harmful behaviour and what this specialist support is.

“Now that I have had the training it provides me with great insight and a better approach to helping and understanding clients.” - Learner

When completing the questionnaire at the end of the session, learners were asked to consider their level of knowledge regarding these concepts both prior to and following training, and to respond on a five-point, Likert scale, ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘extremely’ knowledgeable. Missing and incomplete responses have been removed to provide valid percentages for each question.

Learners reported increased specialist knowledge around perpetrators of domestic abuse

Following training, the majority (84%) of learners said they had a ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ good knowledge of diverse types of domestic abuse perpetrators, an increase of 129% (47 percentage points - ppts). Nearly all (95%) learners reported a strong understanding of the risk factors for intimate partner violence, an increase of 260% (68 ppts) compared to pre-training scores. Around nine in ten (89%) learners reported a strong understanding of red flags and concerning behaviours of perpetrators and how to identify these to assess counter allegations following training, an increase of 167% (56 ppts). At the end of the session, most learners (78%) reported a ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ good awareness of support services available for those who are using harmful behaviour and what this specialist support is (a substantial increase of 1300%, 72 ppts).

However, less than half (47%) thought they had a strong understanding of how to safely engage with a domestic abuse perpetrator to avoid collusion following training. Though this is a considerably lower proportion than the other outcomes, it still represents an increase of 800% (42 ppts), as only 5% of learners said they had a strong understanding in this area before training.

Evaluation of training and feedback from learners

More than four out of five learners (84%) were willing to strongly recommend this specialist session to a colleague (scoring 8 or higher on a 0-10 scale), with the majority (74%) giving the training a score of ten out of ten.

When asked whether they felt the learning would change the way in which they interact with clients who use harmful behaviour, almost two thirds (63%) stated the training would be 'very' or 'extremely' impactful on their practice. Learners were asked to elaborate on this answer, and the 13 responses contained: praise for the training; reflections on increased insight and context; and an anticipated change in approach which would balance accountability with engagement and understanding.

"More compassion – as well as holding them accountable there needs to be a willingness to listen/engage" - Learner

The majority (79%) of learners also reported that the training would be 'very' or 'extremely' impactful on their ability to respond to victims of domestic violence or abuse in a more informed way. As with the previous question, learners were asked to elaborate on this answer; the eight responses reflected how the increased understanding of perpetrators would lead to an improved response to victims.

"I can appreciate how a person reacts to a pattern of controlling and coercive behaviour which leads them to adapt their own behaviour so as not to provoke the other party" - Learner

Specialist course: So-Called 'Honour'-Based Abuse

Methodology

These specialist, half-day training sessions took place on the morning and afternoon of 8th February 2023 and feedback forms were completed by 14 respondents. Due to the small number of responses, scores are reported as counts rather than percentages. Feedback was gathered through a survey link shared at the end of the training sessions. Learners were asked a variety of questions to gauge their level of understanding, both before and after the training, relating to the key objectives and outcomes of the session.

Learner profile

Most learners identified as female (12), with the remainder identifying as male (2). Nearly half (6) described themselves as White British, a further 3 described themselves as Asian, 3 described as Black, and 2 as having another White background.

The average age was 41.5 years, and most (10) learners described their role as either a Solicitor or Senior Solicitor. The remaining roles included Barrister (3) and Legal Executive (1).

Outcomes for learners

The specialist session on so-called 'honour'-based abuse focused on several key outcomes, reflected in the questions asked of learners post-training:

- Knowledge and understanding of the definitions and theory of so-called 'honour'-based abuse;
- Understanding of the links between so-called 'honour'-based abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour;
- Understanding of the risk indicators for so-called 'honour'-based abuse;
- Understanding around why victims may not want to report the abuse or leave the abusive relationship or situation;
- Knowledge of national & local services who support victims and survivors of so-called 'honour'-based abuse;
- Understanding of how to practise a trauma-informed approach when representing victims of so-called 'honour'-based abuse.

"The knowledge and understanding of how to approach honour-based victims." – Learner

When completing the questionnaire after the training, learners were asked to consider their level of knowledge regarding these concepts both prior to and post training, and to respond on a five-point, Likert scale ranging from 'not at all' to 'extremely' knowledgeable.

Learners reported increased specialist knowledge of so-called 'honour'-based abuse

Following training, the majority (9) of learners reported 'very' or 'extremely' good knowledge and understanding of the definitions and theory of so-called 'honour'-based abuse, an increase of six. Almost all (11) learners reported a strong understanding of the links between so-called 'honour'-based abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour following training, an increase of seven. The same number (11) of learners said they had a strong understanding of the risk indicators for so-called 'honour'-based abuse, an increase of eight compared with pre-training scores.

"Better understanding of the issues and signs and risk factors." - Learner

Almost all (12) learners reported strong understanding around why victims may not want to report the abuse or leave the abusive relationship or situation following training, an increase of seven. The majority (11) of learners also reported a 'very' or 'extremely' good knowledge of national & local services who support victims and survivors of so-called 'honour'-based abuse, this compares to no learners feeling they had this level of knowledge before training, and therefore a substantial increase of 11.

In contrast to this considerable perceived increase of specialist knowledge around so-called 'honour'-based abuse, less than half (6) of the learners reported a strong understanding of how to practise a trauma-informed approach when representing victims of so-called 'honour'-based abuse following the training. While this still represents a small increase of three learners, it suggests learners felt less confident applying this framework to their practice.

"Feel well equipped to guide client[s] to services who will cater to their needs, especially in the face of police failings." - Learner

"Very informative, learnt a lot including the realisation that there is a lot more to [learn]." - Learner

Evaluation of training and feedback from learners

Nearly all (12/13) learners were willing to strongly recommend this specialist training to a colleague (scoring 8 or higher on a 0-10 scale), with the majority (9) giving the training a score of ten out of ten.

"I would most definitely recommend this training. I think everyone should have it." - Learner

When asked whether they thought the learning would change the way in which they interact with clients, most learners (10) stated the training would be 'very' or 'extremely' impactful. Learners were asked to elaborate on this answer, and the eight responses reflected perceptions of increased specialist knowledge of so-called 'honour'-based abuse, as well as specialist services to signpost clients to.

All (14) learners said the training would be 'very' or 'extremely' impactful on their ability to respond to victims of so-called 'honour'-based violence or abuse in a more informed way. As with the previous question, learners were asked to elaborate on this answer; the six responses again reflected perceptions of increased specialist knowledge, as well as how this might lead to improved responses to victims.

"More confident to raise issues and try and tease information from clients and help them realise that they are in abusive situations" - Learner