



Saying safe at home during COVID-19

Rachel Williams and Jo Silver

Podcast transcript

In this podcast, Jo Silver talks to Rachel Williams - survivor, campaigner and SafeLives Pioneer, about what people currently living with an abuser may be feeling at this time, and some tips on how people can help to keep themselves and each other safe.

Please note, this podcast was recorded remotely from Jo and Rachel's homes, so the sound quality may vary at times.

Key:

JS – Jo Silver

RW – Rachel Williams

[Start of audio at 00.06](#)

JS

Hi, Rach. I just wanted to have a conversation with you, really, having been a domestic abuse victim for some years yourself. This is a really difficult time for people that are being advised to stay at home, where we know with domestic abuse that's a very different environment, and doesn't feel safe. So, I just wanted to ask you what ... you know... what are *your* thoughts – what would have been going through *your* mind when you were in that situation, if we were in this current climate where all the advice is saying 'stay home'?

RW

Yeah, this is a real tough one for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. I think, for me, looking back, if this would have been me in my position with... with what's going on and having to self-isolate or be quarantined with my perpetrator of abuse, I think because... erm... I would challenge his behaviour – not *all* the time – but I was ... you know... I did... did speak my mind now and again, and have a go back – I think I would be saying to myself 'Right, now is not the time to be questioning him, because you are confined to this space with him', and I think... victims who are living in these environments, it's going to go one of two ways ... you know... they're going to either feel that they cannot manage this, and will be wanting to flee – this will be their chosen time *to* leave, because we know we all sort of choose a time when to go; but if this is not your time to go yet, you know, look at your surroundings and think to yourself 'Right, how am I going to manage this as best I can?' because ... you know... victims and survivors of domestic abuse and violence are the *strongest people* I've ever met. So, let's not underestimate their strength and ability to be able to carry on managing the environment and the perpetrator therein, but I think... for me, I certainly wouldn't... would be reassessing my ways and how

to manage the perpetrator, and be more... erm... pacify him more, until it could be sort of... bowing down to his... his demands and his tantrums and his behaviour, just to keep that family unit... safe, for me and the kids – me and the boys – to keep us safe. So, I would be certainly assessing my reaction to his abuse.

JS

So, I suppose ... you know... when you're living with an abusive partner, you... you do that *all* the time, to some extent, but this environment now means there's probably very little release or escape; so, if we think about those families where there's children home from school, what would have that made you be thinking about how you look after the boys?

RW

So, I think I probably would have spent more time with... so there's three of us because ... you know... Darren wouldn't have been wanting to be involved – he would have been out cleaning the dogs, or doing whatever in the garden – or even taking the dogs for a walk, so I would have used that opportunity then to ... you know... say to the kids 'Right, what can we do?' and asking them what they wanted to do. So, use your back garden ... you know... we're coming up to Easter, just do an Easter egg hunt ... you know... play these games that you probably wouldn't be playing because the kids would have been in school, and they would have been safe in school. But now, you've got to think outside the box, as well ... you know... like I said ... you know... we... we are the toughest, strongest people – the survivors and the victims of domestic abuse – and don't underestimate the ability of what you can do. Just dig that bit deeper; you are very resilient – the kids are resilient, you know, as well – don't beat yourself up if you feel you *cannot* leave now, but just do these games ... you know... watch movies, even if you've got to include the perpetrator, just... pacify him until we get through this – because we *will* get through it – just pacify him and just ... you know... *you* know how that perpetrator ticks, more than anyone.

JS

That's what I was going to say. We have to just be mindful that as much as we would like to be able to control, by pacifying, sometimes those abusive situations just kick off for *absolutely* no reason whatsoever, and I just wanted to say... to *any* victims out there, as an ex-police officer, 'Police are *still* an emergency service' – I think we need to manage our expectations about how quickly they will come, and also thinking about if you are living in a house that *has* coronavirus, the very different scenario that is for police. So, we're used to police officers coming into the house, being able to assess the situation in the environment, looking for clues that there's been some incident, some damage, and also being able to make sure that you take the victim to a safe room where they have an opportunity to talk.

So, when I think about that, now, I think that's a very different situation, because police won't want to be in the middle of families where there is coronavirus, and so we're going to have to adapt our behaviour and speak to people where we can, through intercoms where there's flats; through windows where that's possible, and that's a *very* different dynamic for both victims who have called the Police before, and for police officers who are going to these calls all day. We're going to have to adapt how we do that, and be creative as to how we can ask victims to start thinking about 'What happens in a crisis? What can I do? So, I'll phone the Police and, if they come, how can I communicate to them that feels safe? That I need to be taken away from this environment, or the perpetrator needs to be arrested?' And ... you know... our families – our Mums and children and young people – *are* really creative.

But also, I just wondered about ... you know... just some *simple* things like 'Could I write something, somewhere, and just say 'help me' if I can't verbally shout that through a window, and how will I be able to get that to a police officer or to a neighbour?' And Rachel, I just wondered ... you know... in your situation, there are... abusive relationships and... that you live in, and you tread on eggshells, and they're coercive and... you *can't* get out, and there isn't a safe place for you to go in the house, and I just wondered what you were thinking about how your neighbours, and friends and families, might be able to help you in those situations where you *do* need somebody from the outside world to flag that you're... you and your family are in danger; what would you have been thinking?

RW

So, there's ... you know... there's going to be people that *you* may be wanting to look out for, that are self-isolating, so you might offer to be doing their shopping; that would be a prime opportunity, then, to... to knock the door and offer your services to somebody to do their shopping, but also, then ... you know... pass a note to them in their shopping to say that *you* need help – could *they* phone the Police? – and vice versa, you know. Make use of the opportunity of... of doing somebody's shopping for them,

or them coming to knock *your* door to do *your* shopping for you because *you're* self-isolating. If you're giving a shopping list over, and you've got a real violent abusive perpetrator in the background ... you know... when you want that help there and then, put on the bottom of the shopping list 'Please can you ring the Police, I'm being abused – I need help asap' use these opportunities to get the message out, and to flag this up.

JS

Thanks, Rach – that's really useful. And also, I was thinking about how ... you know... we can be a bit more prepared, and not perhaps wait until those situations have hit those extremes. So, thinking about if you *haven't* access to specialist service, perhaps today might be the day that you start... just finding out how those services operate. And we know that services are open, but they might be working remotely, but there would be a way to access services, and perhaps there's some preparation around thinking about who your... your 'trusted people' are ... you know... you know, in your life, whether that's the woman that you've known all your life, who works in the Co-op, or whether that's your neighbour that has lived next door forever; so, perhaps there's an opportunity to say ... you know... 'We're looking at this isolation – we're going to be at home, probably, for a long time – can I just ask you, neighbour, if you hear anything going on next door, please, *please* ring the Police – I won't be offended – I really would like you to support me, and you can do that anonymously'. And also ... you know... the person at your local shop, saying 'Oh, it's going to be really difficult for me with the kids at home all day – with the whole family – so, is there any way, when I come shopping, if the perpetrator's with me, that I... I can just use a keyword or something, that you know that I need help?' I mean, these are really difficult conversations, and you have to have them with people that you trust. But this is the world that people experiencing domestic abuse live, on a daily basis, so they will have some of those networks set up. I just wondered, in your situation, Rach, would they have felt like... conversations you would have been able to have?

RW

Erm... [exhales]... I think it would have... erm... manifested to that, had I not decided, when I *did* decide to leave, that was it, but ... I mean, this is – as we know – uncharted waters – nobody has experienced anything like this, ever before, so things are going to be new – going to be trial and error for certain things – but I certainly would be saying ... you know... to that neighbour, or that friend, where you think that somebody's going through abuse, and you've had the inkling and wasn't quite sure, *be* brave – use this opportunity, if they're self-isolating – to say 'Oh, I'll do your shopping' ... you know... either way ... you know... on the door ... you know... out of earshot, 'Is everything ok?' ... you know... just *use* that opportunity to be asking those people you might be... that family you're doing a shop for, if you think there's somebody in there that's being abused.

Like I said, survivors and victims of domestic abuse and violence are clever, because we know when it's safe to do something in the house – we know if it's safe to have a conversation on the door – we know whether it's safe to pass a message ... you know... so, yeah. So just... just take that opportunity, and just ask that question as discreetly as possible – whether it be on a shopping note, whether it be on the door, whether it be in the garden while you're pegging some washing out – while it's out in the garden, while you're with the kids and they're doing an egg hunt, or you're playing games out in the garden with the kids or... you see another family walking in the park ... you know... perhaps a Mum and two kids, or a child or whatever ... you know... just... just *use* that opportunity. Obviously, you've got to keep the social distance and everything else, but ... you know... if it's safe enough to do so, *ask* ... you know... 'How are you managing – is everything ok? And ... you know... you don't ask, you don't know!

JS

Yeah. Thanks, Rach – that's real, practical advice. And I suppose the other stuff is, all of this is going on, and we just need to remember that none of us *really* know how this is going to pan out, so... erm... there's... there's some sense that this isn't going to be over in a week, so we need to think about the long-term, and putting these plans in place now, hopefully make you feel that you *have* got a support network, for *however* long we are staying at home. And just the basics, you know; eating well, trying to have some sleep, and balancing all of these things, all day every day, in your house, is going to be a... a *real* challenge for people. But I think you're right – so, *be* brave – reach out when you can, to whoever you can do – and... specialist services and police are *still there* to support you. Don't think you're on your own, because you're really not.

The other thing that I'd just like to mention, before we end, is; because we are in uncharted territory, we're going to be asking people experiencing domestic abuse – or who *have* experienced domestic abuse – to fill in a really short survey, so that we can understand what really practical support looks like

for you, and what you're hoping for in your situation, that would just make... the biggest difference to you. So, that's going to be attached, and it's going to take a few minutes and we would *really* appreciate it if you could fill that in. So, just before we end, Rach, is there anything that you would just like to share with the people who are going to listen to this podcast?

RW

Just to say ... you know... stay safe, stay strong, you're not alone. You might *feel* alone, but there's always somebody at the end of the phone, there's always somebody at the end of a Facebook message on... on domestic violence and abuse sites ... you know... on my Facebook page 'Don't look back' you know, I'm always answering messages. You're not alone ... you know... we *will* get through this. If you feel now is the time to go, the services are there for you. If you're going to ride it through because you're not quite there yet – in that 'leaving' stage – that's fine as well, but just know you're not alone. And when you *do* decide to go ... you know... we're going to be there to help you. So, just stay strong and ... you know... look after yourself – look after the kids – and we *will* get through this.

JS

Thanks, Rachel. It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you, and hopefully we can just keep updating everyone as we find out more information as we go along. So, thanks a lot.

RW

Cheers, Jo – thank you.

End of audio at 15.52