

It might be nothing, but it could mean everything:

A guide for people who think their
friend, relative, neighbour or colleague
may be in an abusive relationship

Developed by Dr Alison Gregory in partnership with Bristol City Council and Avon
and Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner ([link](#) to the original resource)

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Introduction

This is a guide for people who have a friend, family member, neighbour or colleague who they think may be in a relationship with a partner or an adult family member who has been abusive towards them.

'Domestic abuse' or 'domestic violence' are terms often used to describe abuse from one partner towards another or from one adult family member towards another, but it can be difficult to know exactly what they mean and, for you, as the person outside of the relationship, it can be difficult to know whether or not you should be concerned. This guide will explain what domestic

abuse is, what things you can do to help the situation and how you can look after yourself.

Supporting someone who is going through (or who has been through) an abusive relationship can affect how you feel, how you relate to others, how safe you feel and how you see the world, so it is completely normal to feel a whole range of emotions about the situation.

Within this guide, not every situation described will be similar to yours, but be encouraged that you are not alone in your experiences, that there are things you can do to support the person you know and yourself, and that there are organisations which can offer assistance.

What is domestic abuse?

The term 'domestic abuse' can be very confusing, and people often think that it only refers to a person being physically hurt by their partner. The definition in the UK is actually much bigger than this and includes lots of different types of abuse. Below are some of the types of abuse people experience and some examples of the behaviours they may include:

- 1. Psychological and emotional abuse:** behaviours that damage the person's confidence and sense of wellbeing, for example being told they are ugly, stupid, useless or crazy, being accused of things they haven't done and being told that the abuse is their fault
- 2. Physical abuse:** behaviours that physically hurt or injure the person, for example being punched, slapped, kicked, beaten up, strangled, burned, pinched, bitten or hit with an object
- 3. Sexual abuse:** behaviours that force the person to have sex or to take part in any sexual activities that the person doesn't want to do, hasn't agreed to or isn't comfortable with. These behaviours are still abuse even if the people are in an intimate relationship, are living together or are married
- 4. Harassment:** behaviours that disturb or upset the person, for example being stalked, followed or watched, or receiving unwanted texts, calls and emails
- 5. Control and coercion:** many of the behaviours described above are about trying to control and oppress the person, and there are also behaviours that restrict the freedom the person has, for example being locked in the house or particular rooms at home, being stopped from having money, and being stopped from getting in touch with the people they know

As well as these behaviours,

people experiencing abuse are often threatened, not only about things that the abuser may do to them, but also to family members, friends and pets. Sometimes these forms of abuse only happen once, but usually they happen several times, and many people experiencing domestic abuse will face a variety of harmful behaviours.

People tend to think that women are the people who experience domestic abuse by male partners, and whilst this is the most common situation, men can also experience domestic abuse and it happens in same- sex relationships too. The abuse can continue even when the relationship has ended. The term 'domestic abuse' also covers abuse between adult family members, for example abuse by a grown-up child towards a parent.



Why is important to support someone experiencing domestic abuse?

To live free from violence and abuse is one of our most basic human rights, but people sometimes need support to help them realise that the way they are being treated is not OK, and that it is their right to live without being scared or intimidated, and without having their freedom limited by a partner or family member.

In the past, domestic abuse was seen as a private matter between two people, with other people close to the situation often ignoring what was happening or excusing the abuse. However, abusing, controlling or coercing a partner or family member is against the law, and we have begun to realise that there are positive ways in which those around the person who is experiencing abuse can help the situation.

Even though you may not know the full extent of what is happening, you may have concerns about the relationship and it is important not to ignore these worries. It can be particularly challenging because the relationship is between people you know, but this also creates an opportunity for you to offer help and support.

With your help, the person may be able to keep themselves safer, think about ending the relationship and recover from the impacts of the abuse they have experienced.

Is something going on next door?

How can I tell if a person I know is experiencing abuse?

Each person's experience in an abusive relationship is different, and sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between a relationship that is challenging or unhealthy, and a relationship where one person is abusing another.

Often, domestic abuse is not easy to spot even if you know the person well. Abuse that doesn't leave physical marks or injuries can be especially difficult to recognise, and even if the person is being physically hurt, abusers can be very clever at hurting the person in ways no one else will see, for example by targeting parts of the person's body which their clothes will cover. Also, the abuser may behave very differently with everyone else, and the person being abused may not think of their experiences as abuse.

If they have recognised that they are experiencing domestic abuse, they may not tell anyone for a variety of reasons: the abuser may have threatened

to harm the person, or others, if they tell anyone, they may worry about getting other people involved or they may feel ashamed that they have experienced domestic abuse.

Sometimes, friends, relatives, neighbours and colleagues feel that something is wrong but are not sure what the problem is. Below are things you may notice that could indicate that the person you know is experiencing domestic abuse:

- The person has injuries which do not match with the account they give about how they hurt themselves, or they start to wear clothes that cover up more of their body.
- You witness or hear about the abuser saying or doing things that belittle the person, for example insulting them, criticising them, making fun of their opinions and beliefs, or undermining the way the person parents their children.

- The person withdraws, seeing less of you and of other people they know, often cancelling plans and making excuses about not being able to meet up. When you do see the person, they are sometimes quieter than they used to be, and if the abuser is there too, the person may seem nervous or anxious.
- When you see the person alone, they receive lots of texts or calls from the abuser asking them what they are doing, where they are, who they are with and when they will be finished. Your friend, relative, neighbour or colleague may seem embarrassed by these interruptions, but may not feel able to stop answering the calls or the texts.
- The abuser is making lots of rules that the person has to follow, which can include: who they can see, what they can wear, what they can spend money on and how their home needs to be kept.
- The person you know seems to give up their own life plans, including their education, their job and their own friendships because the abuser has made it difficult for them to continue doing the things they'd like to.
- The person asks you to keep things secret from the abuser, for example who they have seen, plans they have made or things they have bought, because they are scared about what will happen if the abuser finds out.

Even if the person you know has ended the relationship with the abuser, it is possible that abuse may continue especially if the abuser still has the person's contact details or has access to the person, for example if they have children together.

What can I do to support the person I know?

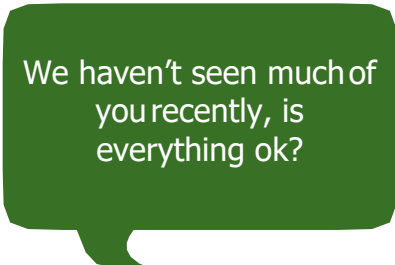
It can be hard, as someone close to the person experiencing abuse, not to try to 'rescue' the person, challenge the abuser or attempt to bring about the end of the relationship. This is because you care about the person and the situation does not feel within your control. However, the person who is experiencing abuse must decide for themselves whether or not they wish to remain in the relationship and, if they do decide to leave, only they can decide the safest way to do so.

Having said this, there are a number of different things that you can do which will provide emotional and practical support to your friend, relative, neighbour or colleague. It's important to remember that you will need to be patient because helping someone who is in, or who has been in, an abusive relationship can be a gradual process.

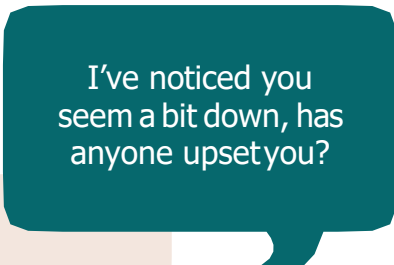
Talking about the situation with them

If your friend, relative, neighbour or colleague is experiencing abuse, they may struggle to talk about it. Most people will not start to talk about difficult experiences unless encouraged to do so and, for this to happen, they will need to be with someone they trust, in a place they feel safe (making sure that the abuser is not around).

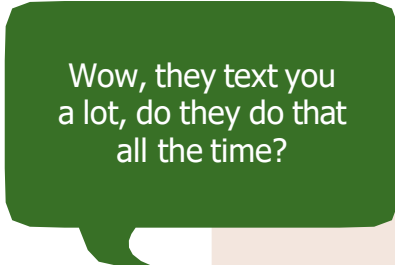
It is easier for the person who has experienced abuse to talk about what is happening if questions are asked in a way that shows your kindness and concern. Many people struggle to identify with the labels of 'domestic abuse' or 'domestic violence' so it is best to avoid describing their experience in this way. To start a conversation you could ask the person how things are in their relationship, or mention things you have noticed in the behaviour of the person or the behaviour of the abuser. For example:



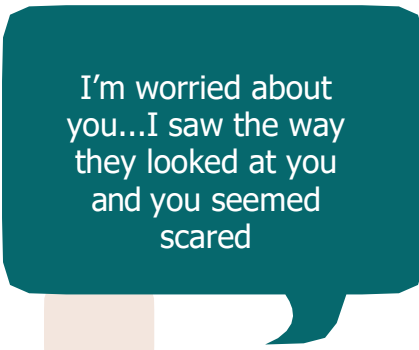
We haven't seen much of you recently, is everything ok?



I've noticed you seem a bit down, has anyone upset you?



Wow, they text you a lot, do they do that all the time?



I'm worried about you...I saw the way they looked at you and you seemed scared

If the person starts to talk about the abuse, try to listen with an open mind and a supportive attitude even if you don't agree with what the person is saying. It can be difficult not to offer opinions about the relationship or the abuser, to criticise or to blame, but this is unhelpful because it tends to stop the person talking and they may feel that they can't bring it up at a later time with you. Instead, some of the important things are to let the person know that you believe them, to reassure them that it is not their fault that the abuse is happening, to tell the person that you are concerned and worried about them, and to let them know that you want to help.

You don't need to have all the answers, by listening you will be helping the person to admit what is happening, and this will break the silence around the situation.

If the person chooses not to say anything about the abuse, you need to respect this and let them know that if they ever want to talk to you about the situation they can. Even having opened up the possibility for them to talk to you is really

important, so try not to feel disappointed that they have chosen not to talk about what's happening at this time.

Safety planning

Ending a relationship with an abusive partner or adult family member is an extremely difficult decision to make and it may take the person who is being abused some time to decide to do this and to work out how to do it safely (ending and leaving the relationship can increase the risk that the person will be harmed).

Professionals who work with people who have experienced domestic abuse (contact details at the end of this guide) can provide support to create safety plans both for reducing the risk of harm within the relationship and for leaving the relationship, so it is a good idea to get in touch with these organisations and to share their contact details with the person experiencing domestic abuse.

There are however some general tips that you can share with your friend, relative, neighbour or colleague, especially if they are still in the relationship:

1. Encourage them to pack an emergency bag and to hide this in a safe place in case they need to leave their house quickly. Useful things to put in the bag include important documents such as passports and birth certificates, spare keys to their home or car, money, medications, some clothes and a few of the children's favourite toys.
2. Help them to work out a plan for leaving including who they can call, where they might go, and how they can get there. It can be difficult to think about these things quickly, so helping the person to plan in advance is important.
3. Agree a code word with the person so they can signal to you if they are in danger or distressed and need you to access urgent help on their behalf.

If they have left the relationship, the person may need to change their contact details and think carefully about who they share

them with, because some of the people they know will also know the abuser and may not keep this information secret.

Practical support

People who have been in an abusive relationship often say how helpful it was to get practical support from the people they know. There are lots of different types of practical support but below are some examples of support that you may be able to offer:

- Contacting support organisations or helplines on the person's behalf or letting them use your phone or computer to do so
- Offering to go with the person to appointments
- Helping the person to move to a safe place
- Letting them stay at your home for a short time
- Looking after their children so that the person has time to think, plan and receive

You can contact the organisations listed at the end of this guide anonymously, in other words, you can ask them for advice about the situation without having to tell them who you are or who the person experiencing domestic abuse is. Also, because many abusive behaviours are crimes, you can contact Crimestoppers to report details of the abuse – they are an independent charity who will pass on your concerns to an appropriate organisation without you needing to identify yourself. In an emergency always call the police on 999.

The impacts of domestic abuse can continue for some time after the relationship has ended, and the person you know may find it difficult to say if they are struggling or feeling fragile, so it can be helpful now and again to ask them how they are and whether there is anything you can do to support them.



Ways in which the situation may impact on you

The support you provide to someone who is in an abusive relationship is really valuable and can make all the difference in terms of the person's safety and wellbeing. It is important to also be aware that it can be demanding supporting someone who is close to you. It can be confusing to understand what is happening and what you should do, and you may have lots of feelings and emotions about the situation.

Sometimes you will know the abuser as well as the person experiencing abuse, and they may tell you differing things about what is happening in the relationship which can add to your confusion.

Friends, relatives, neighbours and colleagues of people experiencing domestic abuse have described the impacts they noticed on their own lives, including:

Is your colleague walking on eggshells at home?

1. **Emotional impacts**
– feeling panic, fear, shock or anger when they find out about the abuse, and feeling low, upset, powerless, worried, anxious, frustrated, or blaming themselves
2. **Health impacts** – trouble sleeping, not wanting to eat, headaches, and feeling churned up inside
3. **Relationship impacts**
– reduced contact and communication with the person who is experiencing abuse, arguments in or concerns about their own relationships, and difficulty trusting or relating to other people
4. **Direct abusive impacts** – the abuser makes threats towards or physically harms the friend, relative, neighbour or colleague, or tries to intimidate or manipulate them

Becoming aware that domestic abuse is happening in the relationship of people you know can also change how you see the world; it can challenge your views and beliefs about how people behave towards one another and it can make you feel less safe.

People who have supported a friend, relative, neighbour or colleague who has experienced abuse, also talk about how lonely the experience can be, because sometimes they are the only person who knows about the situation.

By being aware of these possible impacts, you can think about your own safety as you support your friend, relative, neighbour or colleague, and you can make sure that you are also looking after your own wellbeing.

What can I do to help myself?

It is not easy supporting someone who is experiencing domestic abuse, so you may need to take some time for yourself regularly, to think about how you are doing and how you are coping. Encouraging your friend, relative, neighbour or colleague to get in touch with domestic violence and abuse services can help, because it can take some of the pressure off you. The people who work for these services have specialist knowledge and experience, and you won't then be the only person helping and supporting the person experiencing abuse.

You can also contact these organisations on your own behalf, particularly the National Domestic Violence Helpline, to get advice or to receive some listening support.

There are also other ways you can help yourself including:

- Taking regular 'time-out' so that you don't end up feeling overwhelmed by the situation. You could do this by watching a favourite film or TV programme, doing something creative, or spending time in a park, museum, gallery or café.
- Choose something you know you'll enjoy and that will allow you to be distracted from the situation for a few hours.
- Make sure you have a calming sleep routine. Our sleeping patterns can be affected when we are
- worried, stressed or anxious about a situation. Help your body to wind down by having a relaxing bath, doing quieter activities, not drinking alcohol at bedtime, and slowing down your breathing (count in for 4, out for 7).

- Manage the impacts on yourself by expressing how you are feeling in a safe environment. This could include talking with a trusted friend or with a counsellor, or writing down your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- Exercise often. It is a great way to release stress and it can boost your immune system, improve your mental health, prevent depression and help you to sleep better.

People supporting a friend, relative, neighbour or colleague who is experiencing domestic abuse sometimes feel that they have no right to get support themselves because they are not the person being abused. They are, however, providing really valuable support and, because they care about the people in the situation, they are likely to be impacted too. If you look after yourself, you will be in a better position to support the person who is experiencing the abuse.

Organisations who can help

National organisations

National Domestic Violence Helpline

0808 2000 247

www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

A 24-hour helpline run by Refuge. It is a national service for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf.

Men's Advice Line

0808 801 0327

www.mensadvice.org.uk

A helpline providing advice and support for men experiencing domestic violence and abuse from a partner or ex-partner.

National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline

0800 999 5428 help@galop.org.uk

www.galop.org.uk

Emotional and practical support for LGBT+ people experiencing domestic abuse.

Women's Aid

www.womensaid.org.uk

A national charity for women and children, working to end domestic abuse.

Respect Phonenumber

0808 802 4040

info@respectphonenumber.org.uk

www.respectphonenumber.org.uk

Confidential helpline offering advice, information and support to help you stop being violent and abusive to your partner

Victim Support

0808 16 89 111

www.victimsupport.org.uk

A support service for people who have been a victim of any crime (including domestic abuse) or have been affected by a crime committed against someone they know.

Crimestoppers

0800 555 111 www.crimestoppers-uk.org

An independent charity that you can contact anonymously with information about crimes (including domestic abuse). In an emergency always call the police on 999.

This leaflet was originally produced in July 2015 by Dr Alison Gregory from the University of Bristol, and has been informed by research with friends, relatives, neighbours and colleagues of domestic abuse survivors.

It was produced in collaboration with Bristol City Council and Avon and Somerset's Police Crime Commissioner.

This version has been edited by SafeLives in conjunction with Dr Gregory.

