Domestic Violence/Abuse

The UK government's definition of domestic violence is 'any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional.' It can also be called gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, family violence or couple abuse.

Anyone can be abused, or be an abuser, irrespective of gender. It is important to know that abuse can happen to anyone, and that at first you may be unaware that you are being abused. Abuse occurs when someone is groomed to feel happy and trusting in a relationship before the abuse begins. Abusers hide their true selves until they have built a relationship, sometimes making it difficult for people to believe the abuse is happening.

Myths about domestic abuse

When most people think about abuse, they think of being physically harmed by hitting, slapping, pushing, burning, strangulation, or chemical attack. However, you do not have to be physically hurt to be experiencing abuse. Abuse can be intermittent, with an abuser 'promising' not to abuse again, or giving gifts by way of an apology. Kindness and love can be given in small 'doses' to lure a person back into a relationship, making the abused person feel OK again, albeit briefly. Abuse can gradually build in a relationship, normalising it, making the abused person feel like the behaviour is OK.

Types of domestic violence

Abuse isn't restricted to physical abuse. It can be psychological, emotional, sexual, stalking, financial abuse, abuse online, 'honour based' abuse, FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), or Forced Marriage.

- Psychological Abuse: This can include being put-down or humiliated, or covering up unkind words as a 'joke'. Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse, which is where someone makes you question your own thinking and take on reality. The abuser can make you think that you are being over dramatic about being abused, and threaten to tell others that you are a bad person in some way. Sometimes the abuser will give the 'silent treatment', or brainwash the abused person into thinking that they are at fault, or they are not worthy of better.

  Psychological abuse results in the person feeling isolated, anxious, depressed and exhausted, with a low self esteem.

- Emotional abuse can involve coercive behaviour (where you are left feeling scared, intimidated or threatened), or controlling behaviour,(which involves removing a support network from someone, or reducing their independence). This can be done by withholding money, stopping you from seeing friends or family, reading your phone messages, or controlling where you go and what you do. Under the Serious Crime Act 2015, controlling or coercive behaviour is against the law.

- Sexual Abuse is not only restricted to full rape. It can also involve being forced to watch or take part in any unwanted sexual act, and includes groping or touching. Sometimes people are recorded in a sexual act against their will, with the recording being shared. Abusers can restrict support for the person, including birth control and sexual health support.

- Stalking or harassment can happen alongside other abuse, or on its own. It involves unwanted messages, frequent visits, online contact, being watched or even threatened. Harassment involves any unwanted and persistent behaviour.

- Financial Abuse can take place with other forms of abuse, and is a type of psychological coercive controlling behaviour. A person may have restricted access to funds, have to justify every penny spent, have money stolen from them, or be unable to have a bank account.

- Abuse Online: An abuser can impersonate a person online, causing breakdowns in relationships with family and friends. A personal device can be used to track someone as part of a coercive relationship, or as a form of stalking. An abuser can restrict online time for the abused person, reducing the chance for them to seek help or advice. Often the abuser uses humiliation and threats of publishing sexual content or sending malicious messages.

- 'Honour' based abuse: or 'honour' based violence can involve killings, physical abuse, coercion, sexual abuse, forced marriage and kidnapping. Men can be victims, but it is usually women. Honour based abuse is carried out to defend honour which is perceived , but not genuine, and is committed by family or people in the community.

- FGM: Female Genital Mutilation is illegal in the UK. It is often performed on young girls, and is classed as child abuse. Female genitalia are cut

or changed, often resulting in pain, infection, and problems with fertility. If there is immediate danger of FGM call the police, or the NSPCC in the case of someone under 18.

Support for children in abusive households

If there is a concern around children being exposed to abuse within a household, contact Domestic abuse - Victim Support. The child may be angry, withdrawn, anxious, sleep deprived or struggling to eat properly. The child must be given chance to talk to a safe adult to talk through what has been happening. Victim Support can also help parents and schools.

How to help others being abused

Often people are unaware that they are being abused, particularly if the abuse is emotional or psychological. They may not be ready to tell you, or be ready to address the abuse and change their lives. To be effective, it may be that you just keep in touch with the abused person, and gently ask how things are with their partner. It is useful for you to know about domestic abuse before 'wading in' so that you have an understanding of what they may have gone through. It is important to be aware that the abused person may be frightened to leave the abusive relationship in case the abuse becomes even more severe.

In an emergency, 999 should be called. Otherwise, a supportive friend in need of more professional help can use Worried About Someone's Relationship? | Findaway.

Helplines/useful contacts:

- women can call The Freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge on 0808 2000 247 for free at any time, day or night. The staff will offer confidential, non-judgemental information and support
- talk to a doctor, health visitor or midwife
- men can call Respect Men's Advice Line on 0808 8010 327 (Monday to Friday 10am to 8pm), or visit the webchat at Men's Advice Line (Wednesday 10am to 11:30am and 2pm to 4pm) for non-judgemental information and support
- men can also call ManKind on 0182 3334 244 (Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm)
- if you identify as LGBT+ you can call Galop on 0800 999 5428 for emotional and practical support

- anyone can call Karma Nirvana on 0800 5999 247 (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm) for forced marriage and honour crimes. You can also call 020 7008 0151 to speak to the GOV.UK Forced Marriage Unit
- in an emergency, call 999

You can also email for support. It is important that you specify when and if it is safe to respond and to which email address:

- women can email helpline@womensaid.org.uk. Staff will respond to your email within 5 working days
- men can email info@mensadviceline.org.uk (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm)
- LGBT+ people can email help@galop.org.uk

The Survivor's Handbook from the charity Women's Aid is free and provides information for women on a wide range of issues, such as housing, money, helping your children, and your legal rights.

If you're worried that you are behaving abusively in your relationship, call the free Respect Phoneline on 0808 802 4040.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Getting help for domestic violence and abuse - NHS

What is domestic abuse? - SafeLives

What is domestic abuse? - Women's Aid

Domestic abuse - Victim Support

What is Domestic Abuse & Violence? · Information Guides · NCDV

This information has been written using the above websites, and is believed to be correct on the day of writing. This leaflet is not designed to take the place of specialist advice.

Nikki Fouracre, April 2026