



# HOW TO SUPPORT STAFF AFFECTED BY DOMESTIC ABUSE

Think Business, Think Equality

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# INTRODUCTION

This guidance is part of a suite of resources for small and medium businesses who want to understand and support employees experiencing domestic abuse. You can use this alongside our other *Think Business, Think Equality* resources on domestic abuse and gender equality at work to make a positive change in your business.

This resource provides information on how to recognise signs of domestic abuse and outlines best practice for responding to, and supporting, employees disclosing experience of abuse. The guidance also gives examples of the simple steps you can take to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff and minimise the impact on the employee and the business.

There are two further key areas that will help you to address and support employees experiencing domestic abuse. These are [\*\*What you need to know about domestic abuse\*\*](#) and [\*\*How to develop a domestic abuse policy\*\*](#). There's also a [\*\*best practice checklist\*\*](#) and a [\*\*glossary\*\*](#) that will support you to take action.

The resources are designed to be used together to enable you to deal with disclosures and support employees who are experiencing domestic abuse. The action you take in each area will reinforce action in the others.



# KEY MESSAGES

You can use these messages in training, internal communications, or as prompts to reflect on how your business can better support staff affected by domestic abuse.

## **1. Domestic abuse is a workplace issue.**

It affects staff wellbeing, performance, and attendance, even if the abuse doesn't take place at work.

## **2. You have a duty of care to your staff.**

Fulfilling your duty of care means recognising domestic abuse as a workplace issue and taking action to support employees who are affected.

## **3. Supportive workplaces can be a lifeline.**

For many women, work may be the only space where they feel safe or have any independence from the perpetrator.

## **4. Women don't always disclose abuse.**

Stigma, fear of consequences, or not knowing where to turn can prevent victim-survivors from speaking out. Creating a safe, supportive workplace can help women to feel able to come forward.



**5. Being able to recognise the signs matters.**

Domestic abuse can affect how someone behaves, communicates, and copes at work. Understanding the signs helps ensure women are supported, not penalised.

**6. How you respond makes a difference.**

You may be the first person they've told. A non-judgemental, supportive response to disclosure helps staff feel believed, valued, and safe.

**7. Trauma can have long-lasting effects.**

Domestic abuse can impact women's health, relationships, and working life even after the abuse has ended. Ongoing support is often needed.

**8. Simple changes can make staff safer.**

Small steps like changing working hours or limiting access to personal information can help to mitigate risk.

**9. You don't need to be an expert – small, considered actions can make a big difference.**

Providing support doesn't require specialist knowledge. By listening with empathy, knowing the signs, and signposting to appropriate services, you can create a safer and more supportive workplace.

**10. Having a policy in place builds confidence.**

A clear, well-communicated domestic abuse policy helps managers respond consistently and compassionately.



## WHY THIS RESOURCE FOCUSES ON WOMEN

We recognise that both women and men experience domestic abuse and there are some similarities and differences in the effects in the workplace. However, the important difference between men and women who experience domestic abuse is the prevalence, severity, and impact of the abuse. Women experiencing domestic abuse are more likely to encounter repeated forms of abuse, for longer periods of time, and are more likely to be severely injured or killed than men who experience domestic abuse.

The focus of this guidance is women's experiences of domestic abuse, as the vast majority of victim-survivors are women, while the vast majority of perpetrators are men.

It's important to recognise and understand that domestic abuse is rooted in women's unequal status in society, and this makes domestic abuse a gendered problem.

This doesn't mean you will be treating staff differently because of their gender. When you take action to address domestic abuse and create a supportive workplace, you'll improve things for all your employees.

In this resource, the term **victim-survivor** is used to reflect that individuals experiencing domestic abuse can be both victim and survivor. Victims are often portrayed as helpless, powerless, or passive, in contrast to survivors who are active, heroic, and resourceful. However, the terms used separately don't capture the experience of violence against women or the external factors that affect women's ability to leave.



When we talk about a **perpetrator**, we are describing an individual who chooses to use abusive behaviours in order to assert power and control, usually to gain authority over their partner. It is someone who is currently committing, or has previously committed violence against women, which includes domestic abuse.

You can find definitions of all key terms used in our [Glossary of Terms](#).



## SUPPORTING STAFF AFFECTED BY DOMESTIC ABUSE

**Employers have a vital role to play in tackling domestic abuse.** While the most important reason to take action is because it's the right thing to do, it also makes good business sense. Domestic abuse can have a profound impact on a staff member's wellbeing, safety and ability to do their job, and can also affect colleagues, team dynamics, and service delivery. By providing the right support at work, employers can make a real difference in someone's life while also helping to reduce absence, improve staff retention, and foster a safer, more inclusive workplace. Taking action on domestic abuse is part of building a fairer, more equal society - and every employer has a part to play.



# RECOGNISING THE SIGNS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Victim-survivors of domestic abuse usually don't disclose their experience to anyone at work out of fear of not being believed, being judged, being treated as a 'victim', or believing that it won't make a difference. They may feel embarrassed or humiliated and not want to share such personal details with their colleagues or their employer. This is due to the stigma of domestic abuse.

Where a line manager is unaware of, or unsympathetic to, the reasons for persistent lateness, unexplained absences or poor performance, the staff member may be disciplined or in some cases dismissed. Knowing the signs of domestic abuse is therefore important to ensure that you know how to effectively manage and support your member of staff.

## Signs around a staff member's productivity may include:

- Changes in the quality of their work for unexplained reasons, despite a previously strong record, such as suddenly starting to miss deadlines;
- Receiving repeated upsetting calls, texts, or emails; and
- Constantly checking their mobile phone.

## Signs around a staff member's attendance may include:

- Being persistently late without explanation, or needing to leave work early;
- Having more frequent, sporadic absences without explanation;



- Increased hours being worked for no apparent reason, for example very early arrival at work and/or working late;
- Needing regular time off for appointments; and
- Their partner exerting an unusual amount of control and demand over their work schedule, for example, they may be dropped off and picked up from work and/or unable to attend business trips or events.

### **Signs around a staff member's behaviour include:**

- Avoiding lunch breaks or socialising at the end of the working day;
- Changes in their behaviour such as becoming quiet, avoiding speaking to colleagues, or withdrawing from social interactions;
- Isolating themselves from friends and family;
- Feeling depressed, anxious, distracted, or having problems with concentration;
- Obsessing about time;
- Exhibiting fearful behaviour such as being easily startled;
- Expressing a fear of their partner;
- Expressing fears about leaving children with their partner; and
- Being secretive about their home life.



## Signs around a staff member's physical state include:

- Having repeated injuries and/or an explanation for injuries that does not fit the injuries they have;
- Sickness absences or unexpected medical issues that are frequent, sudden and/or unexpected;
- A change in the way they dress such as excessive clothing in summer, or being unkempt or dishevelled;
- A change in the amount of make-up worn;
- Fatigue;
- Sleeping and/or eating disorders;
- Substance use and/or dependence; and
- Depression and/or suicide attempts.

## Other signs that a staff member could be experiencing domestic abuse include:

- Flowers or gifts sent to them by their partner for no apparent reason;
- Seeming to have less money than they did previously; and
- Being a victim of vandalism or threats.



This isn't an exhaustive checklist and there may be other indications that a staff member is experiencing domestic abuse. It's important to recognise that a change in productivity or behaviour can be as a result of challenging external factors. You should therefore speak with your staff member to determine how best to support them.

Having a comprehensive workplace policy on domestic abuse will enable line managers to feel more confident and supported in initiating discussions with staff. You can find out more about what a good domestic abuse policy looks like in our guidance [How to develop a domestic abuse policy](#).



# HOW TO SUPPORT STAFF AFFECTED BY DOMESTIC ABUSE

Ongoing stigma around domestic abuse means that it may be unlikely that a staff member will disclose their experience. It's more likely that line managers become aware of a situation through noticing a change in the number of absences they have, a change in behaviour, or a drop in work performance. Victim-survivors often report that they wish that someone had asked them about it. Therefore, it's important for line managers to understand how to recognise the signs of domestic abuse and have conversations with staff.

In situations where the abuse was not perpetrated at work, for example if someone was sexually assaulted or attacked outwith the workplace, they may think it's inappropriate to discuss it at work, even if it's affecting their work.

If a line manager suspects that one of their team is experiencing domestic abuse, they should facilitate a conversation to be able to discuss this and identify appropriate support. There may be cases where line managers try to facilitate conversations and employees choose not to discuss. If this happens, you should respect their decision. It's important for line managers to build trust and create a safe, confidential environment to start a conversation.



## GOOD PRACTICE: STARTING A CONVERSATION ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE

When facilitating a conversation, it's important to be supportive and non-judgemental. Questions you can ask include:

- How are you doing at the moment? Is there anything you would like to discuss?
- I've noticed that you're not yourself lately, is everything okay?
- Are there any problems or reasons that may be contributing to your frequent sickness absence and why you're missing deadlines?
- Is everything alright at home?
- What support do you think might help?

It's important for line managers to build trust and create a safe, confidential environment to start a conversation.



# WHAT TO DO WHEN A STAFF MEMBER DISCLOSES DOMESTIC ABUSE

It's important for line managers to respond to disclosures in a non-judgemental and sensitive way. There are simple steps that line managers can take:

- Listen to the staff member and take their disclosure seriously;
- Don't be judgemental and make comments about the perpetrator's behaviour, or the staff member's response;
- Reassure them that you understand how domestic abuse may be affecting their work performance and what can be done to support them;
- Reassure them that their disclosure will be treated confidentially;
- Provide information about specialist support services, such as the local Women's Aid group;
- Offer practical support such as risk assessment and/or safety planning and flexible working, as far as possible;
- Respect and accept the staff member's thoughts and ideas; and
- Provide ongoing support to ensure their safety and wellbeing is monitored.



## WHAT NOT TO SAY

No matter what the circumstances are, it's important to support the victim-survivor. Well-meaning comments and opinions intended to be supportive and sympathetic can sometimes have the opposite effect. This can result in a victim-survivor feeling disbelieved, judged, isolated, and reluctant to share further information.

In responding to a disclosure, you should consider the following guidance:

- Don't blame her for what happened;
- Avoid making comments about her emotional response to what happened, such as "You don't seem very upset about it" or "I thought you would've been angrier";
- Don't give advice to the staff member, for example, don't pressure her into leaving or going to the police;
- Don't minimise her experience or try to make her feel better by saying things such as "It's not that bad", "It could be worse", or "At least he didn't hit you";
- Don't make comments such as "You were such a lovely couple" or "You seemed so happy together";
- Don't comment on the woman's behaviour in this or previous relationships; and
- Don't assume that she wants you to take action, she may just want to disclose what is happening and for you to listen.



## RISK ASSESSMENT AND SAFETY PLANNING

Once a disclosure has been made, you should consider doing a workplace risk assessment with the victim-survivor to ensure that the risk to them and colleagues is minimised. A risk assessment should be completed with the input of the victim-survivor, as they will be most aware of their own risks.

Following a risk assessment, it may also be useful to implement a safety plan. A safety plan is a way to ensure the safety of victim-survivors in the workplace and to prevent further abuse from being perpetrated. A safety plan can include making small changes in the workplace to support victim-survivors and prevent further victimisation. You could consider working with a specialist domestic abuse organisation, such as the local Women's Aid group to develop a workplace safety plan, where the staff member is happy for this to be done. However, this should always be agreed first with the staff member.



## CASE STUDY: SAFETY PLANNING

Samira works in the finance department of an organisation and disclosed to her line manager, Mariam, that she is experiencing domestic abuse. She is planning on leaving her partner. He's been unpredictable and violent in the past when she tried to leave. He had previously turned up at her workplace when she wouldn't answer his phone calls. She's worried that if she tries to leave again he might show up at her work and become violent or harass her or her colleagues.

Mariam said that the organisation is able to provide support while she leaves her partner and relocates to a new house with her children. Mariam asked what kind of support she needed. They talked about creating a plan to ensure Samira's safety at work, as well as getting to and from work. They agreed to change her working hours so her partner wouldn't know when she would be there. They also agreed that if Samira didn't arrive to work that a colleague would call her sister to let her know. The organisation offered special paid leave while she moves to a new house and registers her children at a new school. They also agreed that Mariam would tell the rest of the team not to share any of Samira's personal details so her partner wouldn't find out her new address. Mariam set out a time to check in again with Samira to see if they needed to change or amend any support she was receiving.



## QUICK AND SIMPLE SAFETY MEASURES

Develop a staff safety plan for getting to and from work. This could include outlining different routes to work, taking the bus or train at different times, changing start and finishing times or using different entrances or exits.

Divert phone calls and email messages.

Change work patterns or workload.

Encourage the staff member to keep records of any incident of abuse in the workplace, including persistent phone calls, emails, or visits to the staff member by their partner/ex-partner.

Agree in advance when and who to contact if the staff member does not come into work, for example, a friend, a family member, a neighbour, or the police.

Ensure that the staff member does not work alone in isolated areas, wherever possible.

Issue instructions to all staff not to reveal the staff member's personal details to anyone. For example, if a staff member moves to a new house, make sure that their new address is not shared with anyone. If the perpetrator works in the same workplace, make sure they cannot access any staff details.



Move the staff member out of public view, wherever possible.	
Agree if the partner/ex-partner telephones or visits the workplace.	
Alert reception and security staff if the perpetrator is on work premises without authorisation.	
Have a list of local specialist support services that's easily accessible, and signpost to appropriate organisations that deal with domestic abuse such as Women's Aid groups.	



## ONGOING SUPPORT

Staff affected by domestic abuse will require different types of support depending on their situation. Having a range of practical support you can offer means you are more likely to meet their needs, which in turn will minimise the longer-term impact on the business.

Domestic abuse can have lasting effects on victim-survivors which stay with them long after the abuse or violence has ended. It's important to remember that victim-survivors may need different support at different times. It's good practice to:

- Make provisions for special leave which may include specific domestic abuse leave;
- Provide access to an employee assistance programme;
- Link into an occupational health service;
- Continue to check in with the victim-survivor;
- Review whether the victim-survivor needs different support;
- Update on the progress of any reports made;
- Provide an update on any changes made in the workplace as part of the risk assessment or safety plan; and
- If the victim-survivor is on leave, communicate with them about anything happening in the workplace as a result of their disclosure or report.



## DOMESTIC ABUSE LEAVE

An increasing number of employers are moving towards providing employees with paid domestic abuse leave of up to ten days. The ability to take time off work without facing disciplinary action or losing out on pay is crucial for victim-survivors who are trying to leave an abusive relationship. Reasons staff would use domestic abuse leave may include taking time off to attend doctor's appointments, solicitor's appointments, appointments to change bank accounts, making arrangement to move schools, moving to a new house, or for necessary involvement in police investigations.



# LIST OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN SCOTLAND

## SCOTTISH WOMEN'S AID

Scotland's lead domestic abuse organisation working towards preventing domestic abuse and supporting victim-survivors.

[www.womensaid.scot](http://www.womensaid.scot)

Scottish Women's Aid local group directory:

[www.womensaid.scot/find-nearest-wa-group](http://www.womensaid.scot/find-nearest-wa-group)

## DOMESTIC ABUSE AND FORCED MARRIAGE HELPLINE

Support for anyone experiencing domestic abuse or forced marriage, as well as their family members, friends, colleagues and professionals who support them.

**24hr service: 0800 027 1234**

[www.sdafmh.org.uk](http://www.sdafmh.org.uk)

## RAPE CRISIS SCOTLAND

Scotland's national rape crisis organisation providing helpline and email support for anyone affected by sexual violence.

**Helpline from 6pm-midnight:**

**08088 01 0302**

[www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)

Rape Crisis Scotland local service finder:

[www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/find-a-service-near-you](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/find-a-service-near-you)

## SCOTTISH WOMEN'S RIGHTS CENTRE

Free legal information and advice for women experiencing gender based violence.

**Freephone: 08088 010 789**

[www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk](http://www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk)



## SHAKTI WOMEN'S AID

Support and information for Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

**0131 475 2399**

[www.shaktiedinburgh.co.uk](http://www.shaktiedinburgh.co.uk)

## AMINA MUSLIM WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

Culturally-sensitive signposting and support service for Muslim and ethnic minority women.

**Helpline from Mon-Fri 10am-4pm:**

**0808 801 0301**

[www.mwrc.org.uk](http://www.mwrc.org.uk)

## HEMAT GRYFFE WOMEN'S AID

Support to Asian, Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people.

**Helpline (24hrs): 0141 353 0859**

[www.hematgryffe.org.uk](http://www.hematgryffe.org.uk)

## LGBT HELPLINE SCOTLAND

Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

**Helpline: 0800 464 7000**



Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

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 Close the Gap



Close the Gap

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