



# Domestic violence and abuse during COVID 19- Information for practitioners.

## Introduction

Both in the UK and across the world the Covid-19 Pandemic has led to extensive implementation of social distancing guidance and household isolation measures.

The responses to stop the spread of the virus are having very real consequences for women and children who are impacted by Domestic violence and abuse (DVA), Perpetrators of DVA will use these infection control measures as a tool of controlling tactics to impose stricter regimes on their family's activities and behaviours, and therefore limiting women and children's space for action, and subsequently their routes to safety.

In this fast-changing situation, we understand that practitioners may have many questions about widening opportunities for women and their children to safely and confidentially seek support. At BSWA we have been working with these challenges, adapting our practice to ensure that we are able to effectively support survivors of abuse. Teachers, health care workers, social care staff, police, voluntary groups are all key to ensuring we continue to provide a consistent and proactive response to keep women and their children safe through COVID-19.

The aim of this document is to share our best practice, to support practitioners locally, and understand how we can continue to provide support to women and children in these unprecedented times

## Perpetrator tactics -spotting the signs

Many women will experience DVA through coercive control, which is a pattern of behaviours that can be intimidating, controlling, threatening, emotionally abusive, and most commonly involves some form of isolation. Therefore 'social distancing' and 'isolation' tactics, which remain fundamental within DVA, are likely to escalate. The abuse will already have been part of women

and children lives, and the COVID-19 guidance should not be an excuse to remove perpetrator accountably.

So, what might coercive control look like during 'lockdown' when women and their children are either quarantined with perpetrators or have left the abuser? Remember women and their children who are not living with the abuser are still at risk.

### Abusers possibly will:

- Use misinformation about the virus to frighten and entrap women and their children, for example, not safe to shop/take exercise/or go to work if they are keyworkers.
- Tell women and children that it not safe to use computers or phones.
- Threaten to leave women destitute/abandoned if they have come in on spousal visa.
- Threaten her with financial dependency if woman is at risk of job loss or has to access Universal Credit.
- Remove phones/computer/mobiles or constantly monitor technology
- Use intimidating looks or gestures or physical presence in confined spaces within the home, this can be relentless as there is little opportunity to escape this currently, and can really instil fear.
- Tell women that if they tried to access support no-one will help due to COVID-19
- If women are carers of older/disabled partners, abusers tell women they need them for support as they are particularly frightened of being alone during this crisis.
- Create exhaustion by reinforcing roles within the home around cooking, cleaning, and childcare.
- Sabotage women's ability to work from home, thus impacting her work performance.
- Degrade women around the virus, she deserves to get it, the children will be better off without her, can be done through harassing online messages if she is separated from abuser.
- Excuse or minimise his behaviours due to current COVID-19 situation.
- Threats/actual physical and sexual violence is likely to escalate.

### We know perpetrators use children as part of the patterns of abuse:

- Turning up to house regularly as he is worried about children, endless texting expressing concern about children, wanting to move back in due to concern about safety of the family during the pandemic
- Getting children to administer surveillance on mum, asking which relatives they have been speaking to/ who has face timed.
- Belittling mothers' ability to establish routine in home for children, help with school work.
- Threats to expose children to virus if she does not comply to his demands
- Will refuse to return children as they would normally, claiming to do so would put the children 'at risk'. This is particularly problematic when there is no order in place, leaving the woman with little option but to engage in a lengthy court process to try and get her children back.
- Threats/actual physical and sexual violence is likely to escalate towards children.

## Working safely with women and children impacted by DVA during COVID-19

- Practitioners will have to adapt the ways in which they can continue to communicate with survivors of DVA who are living with their abusers/have left, by being innovative and flexible in the ways they establish safe contact. Check with survivors whether contact via phone, text or app is safe and feasible.
- Women and children's mental wellbeing will be hugely compounded during these times, the fact that they have someone who is checking in with them safely may alleviate some of their anxieties and fears. Be re-assured your support will be hugely valued by survivors.

- Strength based approach:

Your initial response will be crucial to engaging women and children

Provide opportunities to build women's sense of control, acknowledge her strength and tools that help keep her and the children safe. Remove her increased isolation by believing and validating her experience:

- You are not alone
  - You don't deserve this
  - This is not your fault
  - There is help and support available.
- BSWA and other specialist DVA services are continuing to deliver services, it is likely that survivors of DVA may assume or have been told that these services are not operating and sharing this information is crucial. If you are not sure about how to respond to those living with DVA you can access our helpline.
  - Women should feel in control of any safety planning, they will be the best judge of what will or will not work for them. Don't force them to make decisions, there are likely to be additional barriers during this pandemic, or issues around intersectionality that compound their access to services.
  - Be mindful that survivors are likely to be entrapped with perpetrators, and the perpetrator may be listening in on your conversation, or reading texts or emails that are sent. Ask how you can safely check in with them, are there times when the perpetrator is out? Is texting/emailing safe? Can code words be established with women to check if it safe to talk/or not.
  - Documentation should be part of best practice, nonetheless be aware that information of any updates around safe ways to make contact are recorded.
  - Harassment by ex-partners – For DVA survivors that have left abusive relationships discuss with them routines they engage in with the children, for example if they take regular walks

can they change the times every day. If they have set times/locations for appointments could these be changed? If the perpetrator begins or is continuing harassment, survivors have the right to report criminal behaviour to the police and can still seek injunctions through the Family Court where needed and necessary.

- Child contact

Perpetrators of abuse may still use the advice the Government has made around travel as 'essential' if families have children between two homes. If there are child contact orders in place that are not being followed, women can contact their solicitors or the police to report breach of orders.

- Inform survivors that they have the right, if there is an immediate risk of harm, to contact the police or to leave their home to a place of safety regardless of COVID-19 restrictions. The Government have confirmed that survivors can leave home to seek help, including refuges. Advise survivors of [Silent Solutions](#) system if fearful of being overheard or seen: call 999 then 55 from a mobile to have the operator transfer the call to emergency services without having to speak.
- Multi Agency Risks Assessment Conferences (MARACS) continue to happen, although have adapted to meet remotely during lockdown. MARACS are information sharing and risk management meetings to ensure the safety of survivors and their children who are high risks of harm.
- Useful Apps for survivors  
[Hestia's Bright Sky App](#) Free downloadable app: providing support and information for anyone experiencing domestic abuse, or someone concerned about a friend or family member. In addition, the app is available for use by employers and service providers.  
[Hollie Guard Personal Safety APP](#) Free downloadable personal safety app.

If you're supporting someone in an abusive relationship, or they would like to speak to a specialist, call us on **0808 800 0028** or use our **webchat** facility.



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