

DOMESTIC ABUSE - GUIDELINES FOR EMPLOYEES

1.Introduction

1.1 This policy applies to all employees of <insert organisation name>.

1.2 We recognise that domestic abuse primarily affects women and that research shows that 1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives*. Domestic abuse can occur in same sex relationships and can also affect men.

1.3 This policy is intended to ensure that employees affected by domestic abuse are supported and receive access to appropriate sources of help.

1.4 The policy makes clear the roles and responsibilities of managers in supporting employees affected and in dealing with the impact of domestic abuse in the context of the workplace.

2.Definition

2. Domestic violence and abuse is:

- The misuse of physical, emotional, psychological, sexual or financial control by one person over another who is or has been in a relationship. This includes family members.
- Domestic violence and abuse can include being threatened with abuse.
- Domestic violence and abuse is usually by men against women but not exclusively.
- Domestic violence and abuse is a pattern of abusive and controlling behaviours, from one partner to the other in one direction.
- Domestic violence and abuse includes forced marriage, “honour” crimes and female genital mutilation

Domestic violence and abuse happens in all groups and sections of society. Race, sexuality, disability, age, religion, culture, class or mental health may have an additional impact on the way domestic abuse is experienced, dealt with and responded to (this definition is taken from the Bristol Domestic Abuse Forum).

3.Effects of Domestic Violence

3.1 Domestic abuse erodes confidence and well being and can have a wide range of impacts on health and wellbeing e.g. depression, loss of confidence, anxiety, physical injury. The effects of domestic abuse are often invisible and therefore not obvious to managers and colleagues.

3.2 Research shows that there is a link between pregnancy and domestic abuse. Domestic abuse may begin or worsen during pregnancy.

3.3 Domestic abuse can often, but not always, impact on the employee's ability to function at work and may result in sickness absence, poor performance, stress, loss of concentration, negative impact on career progression and low morale.

3.4 An employee affected by domestic abuse may be harassed on the way to work or at work by the perpetrator (e.g. by telephone) and may fear the perpetrator turning up at the workplace. This fear is likely to increase at the point where the employee is attempting to leave the abusive relationship.

3.5 The most dangerous time for a women experiencing domestic abuse is the time when she takes action to escape the violence and this should be kept in mind at all times. It will often take months or years for a woman to leave an abusive partner and in some cases the woman may never feel able to leave.

3.6 Children are affected by domestic abuse. In the vast majority of domestic abuse incidents in homes that include children, the children are in the same or adjacent room.

4. The Role of the Manager

4.1 The manager should be aware of the possibility of domestic abuse when implementing sickness absence policy and procedures. If the manager suspects domestic abuse could be the root cause of absence the manager should try to create a supportive environment in which the employee is able to disclose the abuse if they wish to do so. The manager should not pressure the employee for information in this respect.

4.2 The manager should make freely available to employees information about sources of support and services for employees affected by domestic abuse. Some of these services will be targeted at women e.g. Nextlink. This information should be available to all employees and not only those who are office based. For more information and resources www.bdaf.org.uk

4.3 Arrangements should be made to give managers discretionary powers to allow reasonable time off for any employee who is seeking help to escape abuse e.g. to consult a solicitor or attend a housing appointment. This may be as additional authorised leave.

4.4 Where domestic abuse impacts on the employee's child the employee may need to be granted additional leave.

4.5 Employees may wish to alter or reduce hours of working because of the effects of domestic abuse and managers should consider such requests positively in order to support and accommodate the employee wherever possible.

4.6 Once a manager is made aware of domestic abuse the manager should discuss with the employee whether there is any risk to the employee while at work. If the employee believes this to be the case, the manager should carry out a risk assessment and take

action to minimise risks in the workplace e.g. additional security measures at the entrance to the building, interception of telephone calls, transfer to another location, redeployment. Where incidents at work do occur these should be recorded and followed up under the Health and Safety Policy. Employees may need to seek legal advice in relation to taking out an injunction against the perpetrator in the vicinity of the workplace.

4.7 The manager has responsibility for ensuring that confidentiality is maintained at all times and that information about domestic abuse is only shared with other parties where this is necessary and where the employee has given permission. Appropriate steps should be taken to ensure files containing information about those experiencing domestic abuse do not contain details of current addresses, particularly if the employee is living in a refuge. Addresses may need to be held separately to ensure the abuser has no way of accessing them.

4.8 The manager should be aware that there may be employees who are themselves perpetrators of domestic abuse and that confidentiality is of paramount importance as both victim and perpetrator may be employees of the same organisation.

4.9 If the employee discloses domestic abuse the manager should make information about sources of help available to the employee and should offer support.

4.10 Employees affected by domestic abuse may be absent from work periodically. Again managers should be aware or may have reason to believe that domestic violence is the root cause and should support the employee to seek help and work towards resolving the issue. The manager should consider whether it is appropriate to issue sickness warnings where the known cause is domestic violence. Managers should focus on supporting rather than penalising employees affected.

5. Employees and Colleagues

5.1 If you are an employee affected by domestic abuse you may wish to seek support and information from your line manager, personnel team, occupational health and/or trade union representative. There are a range of agencies and services who can help (see www.bdaf.org.uk).

5.2 If your colleague is experiencing domestic abuse it is important to be supportive and to ensure your colleague has access to information about sources of help (see www.bdaf.org.uk for more resources and guidance).

6. Harassment at Work

6.1 Harassment at work is unacceptable and often unlawful. Managers should ensure that employees know that jokes and comments that trivialise, condone or even encourage

violence or abuse are totally unacceptable and should deal effectively with any incidents brought to their attention.

7. Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse

7.1 Employees who perpetrate domestic abuse should be aware that such behaviour goes against this policy. Some forms of domestic abuse are a crime.

7.2 Employees who perpetrate domestic abuse may be disciplined.

7.3 Employees charged or convicted in court because of domestic abuse should declare this formally to the line manager. Where the manager believes the charges/conviction to have implications in terms of the employee's work role (e.g. where an employee works with children or vulnerable adults) an investigation should be undertaken to assess any risk and mitigating action taken accordingly e.g. redeployment, suspension from duties, moving work location or other appropriate action.

APPENDIX ONE – SUPPORTING SERVICE USERS: GUIDELINES FOR SAFETY AND GOOD PRACTICE

When a survivor asks for help and support, she or he should receive a helpful and sympathetic response from all professionals. She may be afraid, indecisive and ashamed. She may expect you to blame, disbelieve and/or judge her. She may minimise the abuse she has suffered and may be terrified that talking to you will result in Social Services trying to take her children away. Be conscious of your body language and attitude.

Women: If a female worker is available, ask her if she would prefer to talk to a woman.

Men: genuine male survivors have the same rights as women survivors. Be aware, however, that services for male survivors find that a substantial number of their callers – as many as 40% - are perpetrators disguised as survivors, so you need to ask questions carefully.

Privacy: Offer her the opportunity to talk in privacy.

Friends and family: If she has come to your office with someone else, try and ensure that you speak to her alone. The person with her – male or female – could be her abuser.

Children: If she has children with her, offer to make a later appointment if she can arrange childcare. However, if necessary be prepared to talk to her (with care) with the children there – and make sure there are toys or games available for them so you can do this comfortably. If you offer her a later appointment, make sure she understands that you are not trying to ‘put her off’.

Respect: Respect her judgement and decisions – she knows the facts better than you. Be honest with her – don’t promise what you can’t deliver.

Confidentiality: Explain clearly what your confidentiality policy is, especially with regard to child protection. Make sure she understands that you are not trying to put her off, but are being open and honest with her from the start.

Enquiries from others: Never give out information about someone else to a caller, whatever the reason they give you. It could be an abuser – or someone asking on behalf of an abuser - who is trying to get information about the whereabouts of someone who has fled.

English as a second language: If your caller’s English is hesitant, ask them whether they would like an interpreter. Your agency should have a link with a telephone language interpreting service for a first appointment; you can use this to get basic information and arrange a professional interpreter for a later appointment. Never use children to interpret.

Sensory, physical and learning impairments: Ensure that your office is accessible; if not, try to arrange another accessible meeting point where your caller feels safe to come. If they are visually impaired, make sure you have accessible materials. Remember that a disabled person’s assistant or carer may also be their abuser. If they are hearing impaired, arrange for a signer. If they have a learning impairment and need an advocate, do not talk through their partner.

Reading and writing skills: Do not presume your caller can read a leaflet, but they may be embarrassed to say they can’t. Offer to go through the leaflet with them.

Golden rules:

- **Never assume** – survivors know more about their abuse than you do.

- **Never underestimate abusers** – there is no limit to what some will do, including lying and manipulating you.
- **Ask yourself:** "will my intervention increase or decrease the safety of this person?"

Thanks to Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Abuse, Bath and North East Somerset for the above information.

APPENDIX TWO – MANAGING STAFF WHO ARE VICTIMS OR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

A lot of the advice above applies to supporting staff who are victims or survivors of domestic abuse. However, there are some additional issues to be aware of:

- **Worries:** A victim may be very wary about disclosing abuse to someone she works with, because she is worried about how it might affect her life at work if people know, or if they do not believe her. If her abuser works at the same place, she may also be worried that he will find out what she has said.
- **Supportive environment:** there are things you can do to let people know it's okay to disclose abuse, and that you will support them if they do. You could print out and put up some of the posters on the <resources> page. You could also use the sample policy below to create a policy for your workplace, and publicise this to staff. If you have an intranet, think about having a support page that lists agencies working with victims of domestic abuse, or links to our <For Survivors> page. You could also send some of your staff on one of our <training courses>.
- **Ask the question:** if you suspect someone you work with may be being abused at home, it's okay to ask them directly. You could use a question like: is everything okay at home? Is someone at home hurting you? Are you worried about what your partner might do to you? She might not tell you straight away what is happening, but she will know that you are willing to listen when she is ready to talk, and will be non-judgemental.
- **Enquiries from others:** it's natural, when taking a phone call from someone else, to say things like 'she's not in yet, she doesn't get in till 9.30,' or 'she's at a meeting in X place.' Try not to do this when taking messages for someone who has disclosed abuse – it could be her abuser, or someone calling on their behalf. Instead, take a name and number so she can return the call. You could say something like, 'She can't take your call at the moment,' or 'I'll ask her to call you later.' Try to avoid giving information about where she is and when she'll be back; never say that she is on leave.
- **Time off:** if a colleague is currently being abused, or is trying to leave, she may need you to be flexible about time off, and how much notice she can give for this. This may also be a sign that she is experiencing abuse. On the other hand, there may not be clear signs – many women are very good at covering up what is happening to them, which is why an environment where domestic abuse is condemned, and victims are made to feel that they can disclose safely, is so important.
- **Remember:** it is not your responsibility to stop the abuse or help the victim escape, or even provide on-going specialist support. There are several agencies in Bristol whose job it is to do this – the best thing you can do is support the victim within the workplace, and help her to access this support.