



# Domestic Abuse

***“Any single 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.”***

*[Statutory definition of domestic abuse]\**

## Defining Domestic Abuse

Other terms which are commonly used to describe domestic abuse are: ***domestic violence, coercive control, intimate terrorism, violence in the home***. It is important to recognise that domestic abuse encompasses much more than just physical violence (see below for the different forms of abuse).

Some people who have been subjected to domestic abuse prefer the term “survivor” but others prefer to use “victim” or to recognise the journey from victim to survivor to “thriver”. It is helpful to be guided by the person you are supporting. ***In this document we use “victim/survivor”.***

Some people find it hard to use the words “domestic abuse” to describe their own experiences. If you are supporting someone who is uncomfortable with that language, it can be helpful to use phrases like ***“controlling behaviour”*** or ***“scary behaviour”*** or ***“behaviours which make life difficult at home.”***

Whatever language we use, it is important to be clear that it is wrong, and that the Church stands firmly in support of victims/survivors and their right to be safe and free of abuse.

References:

\*Statutory definition of domestic abuse [www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-bill-2020-factsheets/statutory-definition-of-domestic-abuse-factsheet](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-bill-2020-factsheets/statutory-definition-of-domestic-abuse-factsheet)



# Recognising The Different Forms of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse can be hard to recognise because it can take many different forms. Some examples are:

**Physical abuse** Hitting, kicking, burning, choking, shoving, shaking, withholding food or medication, blocking exit from a room, threatening violence.

**Sexual abuse** Forced sex or sexual activity, sexual shaming, policing clothes, coerced consent (to avoid other abuse) serial cheating, reproductive abuse (forcing or disrupting family planning).

**Psychological abuse** Isolation, gaslighting (making someone doubt their reality) mind games, threats (including threats of suicide).

**Emotional abuse** Intentional emotional harm, belittling or shaming privately or publicly, minimising abuse and ridiculing or denying distress, preventing or ridiculing grief after bereavement or loss, constant criticism.

**Economic Abuse** Preventing or discouraging someone from earning an independent income, taking control of someone's earning, coerced or fraudulent debt in the victim's name, making someone account for each detail of spending, withholding money needed for daily life or to escape.

**Digital abuse** Using tracking technology (with or without knowledge) hidden cameras or microphones, using social media to spread false information or threaten to harm a person's reputation, sharing or threatening to share intimate images, cyber stalking, hacking or checking phone use or browsing history.

**Harassment and stalking** Online or in person following or tracking, or unwanted messages, communication or threats.

**Post separation abuse** Any form of abuse which continues after the victim/survivor has left the relationship. This often uses child contact arrangements or family court proceedings as tools of abuse.

**Harmful practices** This can include harmful practices such as so-called honour based violence, forced marriage and dowry abuse, FGM, breast ironing which are often linked to certain cultures. They can be practiced by people of any faiths including Catholics.

**Spiritual abuse** This can include ridiculing or preventing someone from practicing their faith, or forcing someone to convert to or follow religious practices against their will, or using a twisted version of faith teaching or scripture in order to subjugate or control someone. When a victim/survivor is a person of faith, this can be the most powerful way to control them.

**Understanding Coercive Control:** *All forms of abuse are rooted in one person's desire to have power and control over another. Coercive control is the umbrella under which all the forms of abuse mentioned above are perpetrated. It is helpful therefore to look out for control as a way of recognising domestic abuse rather violence.*

## The Scale Of The Problem

Domestic abuse is much more widespread than most people realise.

[1] In the UK one in four women and one in seven men are subjected to domestic abuse in their lifetime.

[2] A woman is killed every 5 days by a partner or ex-partner in the UK.

[3] Every day almost 30 women attempt suicide as a result of domestic abuse.

[4] Domestic Abuse occurs in Christian communities at the same rate as the general population.

[5] 60% of Christian domestic abuse survivors experience spiritual abuse as part of domestic abuse.

In 2024 the UK Government declared violence against women and girls to be a national emergency.

## An Intersectional Approach: Domestic Abuse & Different Groups

Men can also be victims of domestic abuse, with male or female perpetrators, but women are more likely to be victims, and women victims are much more likely to experience more extreme violence or to be murdered by their partner.

Domestic abuse can happen in same sex relationships as well, and people can use threats to “out” them as part of the abuse. It can be harder to ask for help if you don’t feel safe or comfortable coming out as LGBT+.

Domestic abuse can intersect with different forms of oppression, like racism, ablism and homophobia. Perpetrators can use these oppressions as part of their abuse. One in two Deaf or disabled women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, and perpetrators can use their deafness or disability, breaking hearing aids, withholding medication or access to wheelchairs or preventing access to professionals who might offer help.

Domestic abuse can happen in every culture, although sometimes culture will affect how it happens. For example in some cultures where it is common to live with extended family, there can be multiple perpetrators. Some forms of harm like FGM or honour based violence can happen anywhere but are much more likely amongst certain cultural groups.

### References:

[1] Office of National Statistics 2023

[2] Refuge [www.refuge.org.uk/the-facts](http://www.refuge.org.uk/the-facts)

[3] Safe Lives [www.safelives.org.uk/prevalence](http://www.safelives.org.uk/prevalence)

[4] “In Churches Too” (Restored UK 2018)

[5] “Turn the Tide” Oakley and Wright 2023



## Domestic Abuse & Children

The ***Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises that children living in a home where domestic abuse is taking place are not witnesses but victims.*** The traumatising effects of growing up in a home where domestic abuse is taking place can last into adulthood. If children are present where domestic abuse is taking place, it is a safeguarding issue and the safeguarding procedures of your diocese should be followed.

## Domestic Abuse Perpetrators

Domestic abuse perpetrators can be extremely dangerous, but they often seem charming and likable to people outside the relationship. They may be a popular person in the parish community, and people often find it hard to believe that they could be capable of such behaviour.

Domestic abuse perpetrators might promise that they have changed their behaviour, but it is important to be aware that repentance or apparent conversions might not be genuine.[1]

## Understanding Risk

It can be difficult, even for trained professionals, to accurately assess the level of risk to a victim/survivor of domestic abuse. It might be tempting to assume that risk is low if there is no evidence of physical violence, but that is often not the case.

It is helpful to understand the factors which increase risk:

- If a victim/survivor is planning to leave, or has recently left the relationship
- If a victim/survivor is pregnant or has a young infant
- The abuse is becoming more frightening, or more frequent
- Threats of harm (including threats of suicide)
- Non-fatal strangulation (choking, grabbing the throat or blocking off air supply, even in a “playful” context)
- Stalking and harassment
- The victim/survivor feels afraid – even if none of the usual risk markers are present

References:

[1] “Domestic Abuse in Church Communities: A Safe Pastoral Approach (Nikki Dhillon Keane 2018)



## Domestic Abuse & The Catholic Church

Catholic teaching is very clear that domestic abuse is wrong and is not a part of Catholic marriage. The Church supports and encourages victims/survivors to prioritise their safety and that of their children. Pope Francis has spoken about the moral necessity of leaving an abusive spouse, an action which is supported by Catholic Canon Law.[1]

Pope Francis has called all Catholics to take action to protect victims/survivors of domestic abuse and all forms of gender-based violence.

***“It is our duty, the responsibility of each person, to give a voice to our voiceless sisters...It is necessary to act immediately, at all levels, with determination, urgency and courage.”*** [Pope Francis, 27th October 2023]

## Understanding Spiritual Abuse

**Some domestic abuse perpetrators can use a twisted version of the religious beliefs of their victim in order to control and trap them.**

This can take the form of:

- Twisting parts of scripture to “support” their abuse and control
- Demands for repeated forgiveness
- Encouraging their victim/survivor to believe that it would be sinful to leave the marriage
- Encouraging their victim/survivor to believe that their suffering is God’s chosen path for them, either to help them grow spiritually or as a punishment
- Spreading false information about the victim/survivor in their parish community
- False repentance or claims of redemption
- Ridiculing their victim’s faith or preventing them from going to Mass
- Perpetrating reproductive abuse by preventing, or enforcing a twisted version of Catholic teaching on family planning

Spiritual Abuse is recognised in the **Statutory Guidance for the Domestic Abuse Act 2021**[2].

References:

[1] Canon 1153.1

[2] <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62c6df068fa8f54e855dfe31/>



## What can I do?

- Domestic abuse is happening in every parish. Be aware of the people around you and who might need support
- If someone discloses domestic abuse, believe them, even if you know the perpetrator and can't imagine them acting that way
- Discreetly check on anyone you are worried about (never in front of the possible perpetrator)
- Support domestic abuse charities
- Learn more about how to help
- Contact the national domestic abuse helpline or your local domestic abuse service if you are worried about yourself or someone you know

## What can my parish do?

You can ask your parish or parish priest to:

- Display the **Safe in Faith poster**
- Display information for victims/survivors seeking help
- Display information about help to stop perpetrating abuse
- Talk about domestic abuse in homilies (particularly when the readings are about marriage, forgiveness or suffering)
- Set up an **"ask for Mary" safe space** in your parish office
- Tell your priest about the **Safe in Faith signposting toolkit**
- Sign up to the **Safe in Faith training for parishes**
- Find out your local domestic abuse service and make contact with them so you know where to refer people for help.





## SIGNPOSTING PEOPLE TO HELP

**If someone is in urgent danger always call 999.**

*Children are co-victims, not witnesses.* If children are at risk you need to follow safeguarding procedure of your diocese. If there is any reason you cannot do that (eg if there is a risk of conflict of interest or breach of confidentiality) contact the child's local social services, or the NSPCC or Childline.

If someone is at high risk they may need to be referred to a MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) you can do this through your local social services, or through contacting your local domestic abuse agency. Contact the **National Domestic Abuse Helpline 0808 2000 247** for more advice or information.

If someone in your parish is at risk you need to follow diocesan safeguarding procedure.

Do not pressure someone to take action before they are ready; they may be facing dangers you don't understand.

Offer a safe place to use the phone or internet (perpetrators often check their victims' devices for call and browsing history, so offering a "safe phone" can be very helpful).

Listen without judgement.

Do not overwhelm people with too much information or direct them to make choices they might not be ready for.

## WHAT TO AVOID

Don't hand someone books or leaflets that might not be safe to take home.

Don't recommend relationship therapy with the victim/s and the abuser.

Don't recommend anger management for the abuser.

Don't ever tell the abuser that their victim has asked for support (even if you know the family).

Don't express concerns in front of the suspected abuser.

Don't assume that someone is safe now just because they went on a perpetrator course or claim to have repented.

Don't pressure someone to forgive or stay with a dangerous or controlling partner.



# HELPFUL RESOURCES

## Catholic Resources

Safe in Faith signposting toolkit

<https://caritaswestminster.org.uk/safe-in-faith/>

Safe in Faith training courses

[www.caritaswestminster.org.uk/safe-in-faith](http://www.caritaswestminster.org.uk/safe-in-faith)

NBCW Domestic Abuse Booklet

[www.nbcw.co.uk/raising-awareness-of-domestic-abuse-a-resource-pack/](http://www.nbcw.co.uk/raising-awareness-of-domestic-abuse-a-resource-pack/)

Bishops Conference information on domestic abuse

[www.cbcew.org.uk/domestic-abuse/](http://www.cbcew.org.uk/domestic-abuse/)

“When I call for help” United States Catholic Bishops Conference

[www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministires/](http://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministires/)

Domestic Abuse in Church Communities: A Safe Pastoral Response

[www.rpbooks.org.uk/domestic-abuse](http://www.rpbooks.org.uk/domestic-abuse)

## Christian Resources

Survivors' Handbook Restored

[www.restored-uk.org/survivors/i-need-help/survivors-handbook/](http://www.restored-uk.org/survivors/i-need-help/survivors-handbook/)

Restored UK Church pack

[www.restored-uk.org/resource-directory/churchpack](http://www.restored-uk.org/resource-directory/churchpack)

Black Churches Domestic Abuse Forum Toolkit

[www.bcdaf.org.uk/toolkit](http://www.bcdaf.org.uk/toolkit)

## Helpful phone numbers

**National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247**

**Live Fear Free Helpline (Wales): 0808 8010 800**

**Respect Phonenumber (if you think you are harming people you love): 0808 802 4040**

