



Managing and Supporting colleagues experiencing Domestic Abuse

A guide for Managers



It's what we do

Introduction

This guide supports our [Domestic Abuse Policy](#) and is designed to help you assist a colleague who is, or who you may be concerned is, experiencing domestic abuse. It includes information about the internal and external support available, offers practical advice on what you can do to assist the colleague and clarifies what your responsibilities are as a manager.

When reading this guide it's worth remembering:

As a manager it's not up to you to 'solve' the problem. We don't expect you to be a domestic abuse expert or take on the role of counsellor. Your role is to help colleagues access the appropriate support and to be empathetic and understanding



Please note that this guide contains information about domestic abuse which some people may find upsetting

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse describes abusive behaviours that take place between two people over 16 who are personally connected to each other. This includes people who are, or have previously been, married, in civil partnerships or in relationships, or have a child together, or are relatives, including adult parents or adult children. Domestic abuse is not gender specific and can happen to anyone regardless of gender, race, religion and sexual orientation. It is a criminal offence and can lead to a criminal conviction.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 states that abuse can be a single incident, but is often a pattern of behaviours that can take many forms, including: -

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Violent or threatening behaviour
- Controlling or coercive behaviour
- Economic or financial abuse
- Online abuse
- Psychological and emotional abuse

It also includes stalking and so called 'honour' based violence, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage. The law also defines children as being victims of domestic abuse if they see, hear or experience the effects of the abuse

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was signed into law on the 29th April 2021.

Why is domestic abuse a workplace issue?

- All employers have a duty of care and a legal responsibility to provide a safe and effective work environment. Preventing and tackling domestic abuse is an important part of this. For many people who experience abuse, the workplace can offer a safe space and a respite from their abuser. Colleagues and managers are often the only other people outside the home that survivors talk to each day and are uniquely placed to spot signs of abuse.¹
- It's the right thing to do and could save lives.
- A recent international study from [KPMG](#) commissioned by Vodafone estimates the direct cost of domestic abuse to business bottom line as £316 million a year due to decreased productivity, time off work, lost wages and sick pay.² As a large employer we can reasonably assume that domestic abuse will be impacting our colleagues and our costs.
- Helping colleagues stay in work can provide economic independence that can help people plan a route out to rebuild their lives.
- Research shows that between 36% and 75% of those experiencing domestic abuse are targeted at work.³
- Employers who talk about difficult and sensitive topics like this help reduce the stigma and fear that colleagues may have about raising issues and speaking out.

The [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) has produced a film which highlights the difference a supportive employer can make. You can watch the film [here](#).

¹Domestic Abuse - A Toolkit for Employers 2021 - Business in the Community

²Domestic Abuse - A Toolkit for Employers 2021 - Business in the Community

³<https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/domestic-violence-and-workplace>

The statistics⁴



Calls to Domestic Abuse helplines have **increased by 61%** since the first National lockdown



Domestic abuse costs the economy an estimated **£14 million a year**



There are **2.3 million** victims of domestic abuse each year



2 women each week are killed in England and Wales by a current or former partner



2 in 10 offences recorded by the police are domestic abuse related



1 man each month is killed in England and Wales by a current or former partner



Domestic abuse takes place at all levels of society regardless of gender, social class, race, religion, sexuality or disability



⁴Domestic Abuse – A Toolkit for Employers 2021 – Business in the Community

Myth busting⁵

Alcohol and drugs are to blame

Blaming abusive behaviour on drink or drugs is an excuse, a way of denying responsibility. Both may be the trigger for a particular attack, but they are not the underlying cause.

Abusers grew up in violent homes

This is not true. Growing up in a violent home is a risk factor and some children who experience abuse do go on to be abusive in their relationships. But many do not. Instead, they are repelled by abuse because they have seen the damage it causes.

Domestic abuse is a private matter and we shouldn't get involved

For too long domestic violence has been allowed to happen behind closed doors. People think what goes on in the home is private, and not their problem. Domestic violence is a crime. It is against the law. We are all affected by domestic violence; we all have a responsibility to speak out against it.

It only happens in poor families on council estates

Anyone can be abused, no matter where they live or how much money they have. Money cannot protect you from domestic violence.

People would leave if it was that bad

It can be extremely difficult to leave an abusive partner. The abused may fear what their partner will do if they leave. There are also practical considerations to take into account. They may not have access to money, or anywhere to go. They may not know where to turn for help, particularly if English is not a first language. If the abused person is emotionally and financially dependent on their partner, they can be very isolated.

A person's self-esteem will have been steadily worn down by abuse. They may feel ashamed at what has happened and feel like it's their fault.

⁵<https://www.refuge.org.uk/our-work/forms-of-violence-and-abuse/domestic-violence/myths-of-domestic-violence/>

Identifying domestic abuse at Work

It may not be immediately obvious as a manager that a colleague is experiencing domestic abuse.

Some signs to look out for are illustrated below. This list is not exhaustive and these behaviours may be an indication of other concerns. However, it's important to not rule out possible domestic abuse if you spot these signs.

Signs to look out for:

- Frequent absence from work, lateness or needing to leave work early
- Reduced quality and/or quantity of work or missed deadlines
- An increase in the number of hours spent at work for no reason
- Changes in the way a colleague communicates - many personal calls or texts or a unusual reaction to personal calls
- Physical signs and symptoms such as unexplained or frequent bruises or other injuries
- A change in behaviour - for example becoming more withdrawn than usual
- Excessive clothing on a hot day
- Change in the amount of make-up worn
- Changes in social behaviour - for example not turning up to social activities
- An obsession with leaving work on time
- Frequent visits to work by the colleague's partner, which may indicate coercive control
- Substance use/misuse

Your role as a manager

As a manager it's not up to you to 'solve' the problem. We don't expect you to be a domestic abuse expert or take on the role of counsellor. Your role is to help colleagues access the appropriate support and to be empathetic and understanding.

We know that it may feel overwhelming as a manager to step into sensitive conversations about domestic abuse particularly as domestic abuse is unlikely to be disclosed easily by those experiencing it. To help, we propose following the Four Rs approach:

Recognise

Be alert to the possible signs of domestic abuse in the colleagues around you. Although the behaviours in the list above could reflect a range of issues and, at the same time, potentially lead to disciplinary procedures, it's important to establish what is behind them

Respond

Ensure that your colleagues know about the [Domestic Abuse Policy](#) and that the Co-op can offer support. As a manager, create a supportive workplace which would allow for conversations where disclosure may happen. **Do not push** for a disclosure even if the abuse is obvious to you

Refer

Provide your colleagues with access to internal confidential support should they need it (Lifeworks for example) and signpost appropriately to external organisation who can help employees that disclose abuse to you. **If you are in doubt**, seek advice from one of the external organisations at the end of this guide

Record

If a colleague does disclose abuse to you, it's important to record the details of what is said as accurately as possible. Should the abuse become subject to criminal proceedings, this is an exhibit and should be given to the police

Opening up a conversation when abuse is suspected⁶

It's important to remember that the **aim of starting a conversation with a colleague when you suspect abuse is to be supportive rather than to encourage disclosure.** Many people dealing with domestic abuse will never feel comfortable sharing their experience at work, as they may not even be ready to admit it to themselves or even realise that what they are experiencing is abuse.

If you suspect that a colleague is experiencing domestic abuse, you should have a private conversation even if it feels uncomfortable, whether in person or remotely, if your colleague works from home, to discuss their wellbeing and to implement the appropriate support.

Here are some ideas for starting the conversation:

How are you doing at the moment?

You don't have to tell me anything, but please know that I would like to support you if and when you feel ready

Your wellbeing is important to me and I've noticed that you seem distracted/upset at the moment - are you ok?

Is there any extra support you need at the moment? We can look at your workload?

If there's anything you'd like to talk to me about at any time I'm always here to support you

I've noticed recently that you are not yourself. Is anything the matter?



It's important that you, as a manager, provide a non-judgemental and supportive environment where you are led by the colleague and are respectful of their boundaries. Even if you can clearly see that what they are experiencing is abuse, don't push for a disclosure from them - they may not realise that their situation is abusive.

What should I do if a colleague discloses domestic abuse to me?⁷

Use the following as a guide if a colleague tells you that they are experiencing domestic abuse:

Make sure that the conversation takes place in a safe and private place. If you have no space in your working environment and it's practical and reasonable to do so, you could suggest meeting in a [Safe Space](#).

Acknowledge the courage of your colleague and how difficult it must be to talk

Confirm the confidentiality of the disclosure. As a guide, any information should only be given to anyone else if it is absolutely necessary in providing help and support and with the prior agreement of the person who has made the disclosure. Let them know you will take notes (it's important to document a disclosure conversation in case it's needed as evidence)

Exceptions to confidentiality are if you believe that there is an imminent threat to life, harm of children or threat against the Co-op. If you believe this is the case you should contact the police on 999 and follow their advice on next steps

Be prepared for them to be upset and tearful

Don't be judgemental. Avoid language that suggests blame or fault or questions like 'Why don't you leave?' or 'Why haven't you told anyone before?'

Allow plenty of time for them to speak

Don't ask them for proof of the abuse

Ask them if they have full access to their pay

If they want to report the perpetrator the police should be called and your notes from the conversation given to the police

Discuss with them what steps might be appropriate to make sure they remain safe and have access to their pay. Signpost them to the internal and external support provided at the end of this guide



Practical things you can do to help

There are lots of things you can do as a manager to help a colleague experiencing domestic abuse without stepping into the territory of trying to fix or solve the problem. These include:

DOs

- Explore **time off work** if your colleague needs it to manage practical arrangements such as legal or accommodation issues, deal with family demands or attend medical appointments. Use your discretion and judgement to decide whether this time should be paid or unpaid. Reassure your colleague that if they are taking [Emergency Leave](#) then they will not hit an absence trigger.
- **Allow your colleague to use a Co-op phone** to make important calls, especially if they are concerned about conversations being tracked by their abuser
- **Discuss reasonable work adjustments** with your colleague that will give them additional reassurance. Do what is reasonable and practical for you in your area of the Co-op. Examples of practical adjustments might be: -
 - Screening or diverting phone calls and email messages
 - Making arrangements for them not to work alone or in an isolated area
 - Making arrangements for them to travel safely to and from home or work
 - Checking their emergency contact details are correct
 - Giving them a personal alarm. You can order alarms through Bunzl or contact crimeandsecurity@coop.co.uk if you work in the Support Centre
 - Giving them access to an alternative entrance or exit from work
 - Arranging to check in with them once a day if they are isolated and working from home

- **Discuss alternative working arrangements** with your colleague such as a temporary change in hours, workload or location if appropriate
- **Make sure they have a copy of the Domestic Abuse Policy** and can access the helplines and specialist websites if they need them. This might include allowing them to have private access to a computer where possible in a store, depot or branch
- **Make sure they know about the Bright Sky App** where they can search locally for support - let them use an alternative phone if they are fearful or suspicious of being watched
- **Adjust their goals or performance targets and review any disciplinary action if the root cause is domestic abuse**
- **Help them update their bank details or change their MyHR passwords** if you know that the abuse they are experiencing is financial
- Highlight the ways in which the Co-op can offer **financial support** by signposting the [Rental Deposit Scheme](#), [Grocery Aid](#) and [Wagestream](#) in particular
- Highlight the full range of **Wellbeing Support and counselling** opportunities offered by the Co-op by encouraging colleagues to access the [Wellbeing Hub](#)

DONTS⁸

- DO NOT contact or confront the abuser
- DO NOT force colleagues to accept support
- DO NOT adopt the role of counsellor or support worker
- DO NOT put yourself or other colleagues in a dangerous situation. If you believe there is an immediate risk of harm to someone or it's an emergency, call 999

⁸<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/DV%20Employer's%20guidance%20FINAL%20Update%203%20-%20SafeLives%20rebranded.pdf>

Perpetrators

The Co-op does not tolerate or condone domestic abuse in any form. We recognise that the responsibility for domestic abuse lies with the perpetrator.

You may become aware that a colleague is a perpetrator of domestic abuse through self-disclosure, sometimes prompted by a violent assault, an arrest or an ultimatum from the person experiencing domestic abuse.

However, if a colleague discloses their abusive behaviour and genuinely wants to change, you should engage with them to identify the appropriate external support. This could include providing access to specialist support services decided on a case-by-case basis. The Respect Helpline 0808 802 4040 works specifically with perpetrators and can be passed to the colleague. This helpline also takes calls from partners or ex-partners, friends and relatives who are concerned.

By engaging with the perpetrator following a disclosure, you are not excusing the abuse but increasing safety by helping interrupt the cycle of abuse. You should keep records of any disclosure which may be used at a later point.

If you suspect that there is an immediate risk to the family members of the perpetrator or a risk to other employees, you should contact the police.

If a member of your team uses Co-op equipment to inflict domestic abuse, such as mobile phones, laptops or other mobile devices, this should be seen as gross misconduct and dealt with through the [Disciplinary Policy](#).

Perpetrators and survivors who work together

In some situations, the perpetrator and the survivor may work together, and work-related abuse may occur, including verbal abuse and threats or physical violence. If you become aware that a colleague is regularly threatening another at work, you will need to take reasonable action to keep everyone safe. Call ER Services for advice on what action would be appropriate.

It is not your responsibility to take direct action against a colleague who is suspected of being abusive towards a partner or ex-partner. However, if a colleague carries out abuse or violence at work this should be dealt with through the Disciplinary Policy.

Looking after yourself

We realise that there may be times when you yourself might also need some support. For example, if a disclosure or a conversation with a colleague is particularly upsetting. If you are affected by any of the conversation you have with your colleagues, remember we have an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which can provide you with support. You can contact the EAP on 0800 069 8854. It's independent and totally confidential. And there's no charge for Co-op colleagues. You can also contact ER Services for advice and help.

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Signposting

There are a wide range of organisations who specialise in the subject of domestic abuse. If you are in any doubt or are unsure what to do, contact Hestia's [Respond to Abuse Advice](#) line which is a free resource for employers. Employers can call 020 3879 3695 Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, or email adviceline.eb@hestia.org for support, guidance or information about domestic abuse and how to support employees and colleagues experiencing domestic abuse. You can also contact ER Services for advice.

- [24-Hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) 0808 2000 247 – run by Refuge
- [Women's Aid](#) 0117 944 44 11
- [Bright Sky App and Website](#) - a mobile app and website for anyone experiencing domestic abuse or wanting to help someone they know. Signposting to local support
- [National Centre for Domestic Violence](#)
0800 970 2070
- [Retail Trust](#) 0800 801 0808
- [Men's Advice Line](#) 0808 801 0327
- [Mankind](#) 01823 334 244
- [Galop](#) - supporting victims of domestic abuse in the LGBT+ community - 0800 999 5428
- Forced Marriage Unit - 020 7008 0151
- [Suzy Lamplugh Trust](#) - National Stalking Helpline - 0808 802 0300
- [Respect Helpline](#) - for anyone worried about their own behaviour - 0800 802 4040
- [Grocery Aid](#) - providing practical, financial and emotional support for those working in Retail



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