

TOYNBEE HALL'S FREE LEGAL ADVICE CENTRE

Coronavirus lockdown's impact on domestic abuse in the UK

Now more than ever, homes should provide a safe and sound environment for all families and individuals. The government's guidance to protect us against COVID-19 has introduced some challenges for those suffering from domestic abuse.

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse includes different types of abuse between partners, family members and cohabitants, regardless of gender. Individuals can suffer from a certain type of abuse or a mixture of different types. Such abuse happens on a regular basis or can be triggered at certain times or events.

Types of abuse

PHYSICAL ABUSE	<p>Includes all physical violence such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hitting, kicking, punching, shoving, biting and throwing things. • Injuries and bruising caused during arguments and physical struggles.
EMOTIONAL ABUSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belittling, name calling, being blamed for abuse or arguments. • Controlling what to wear, who to see, where to go, what to think. • Isolation from family and friends. • Preventing you from continuing to study or going to work.
SEXUAL ABUSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure to have sexual intercourse or other sexual activities including unsafe sex • Causing harm during sexual intercourse or other activities • Unwanted touching and/or sexual demands
FINANCIAL ABUSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controlling money available. • Not giving financial support for basic necessities. • Pressuring victims to work and earn money.
THREATS AND INTIMIDATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats to kill themselves, victims or other family and friends

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- Harassment and controlling behaviour such as following victims and checking their personal belongings.
- Standing over victims and invading their personal space.

Why is domestic abuse increasing now?

The government said those fleeing from domestic abuse can leave their properties despite the lockdown. However, the reality shows escaping abuse during this period is difficult. The requirements to stay home has led to many losing jobs and facing various problems just to meet their basic needs. Families and vulnerable individuals are now stuck inside properties with their abusers for an indefinite period.

The lockdown environment is a breeding ground for perpetrators to take advantage of the situation. Some may not find the right opportunity to contact services and report incidents. Now that children do not have to be taken to school anymore and work is mainly done from home, there are less opportunities to reach out to family, friends, emergency services and organisations for help. It is harder to find opportunities to get away from their house.

Some may continue to suffer in silence out of fear that reporting their abuser will lead to the loss of financial support and poverty for their family. Vulnerable women are particularly at risk with limited options, as abusers tend use isolation as a tool of control; it is easier for them to block further action or convince victims that they will not be able to receive help.

Getting help:

In addition to all the other difficulties during this lockdown, it is a challenging time for anyone facing abuse at home. If you find yourself in this situation:

1. CALL EMERGENCY SERVICES, DIAL 999

You should always consider reporting incidents to the police and seek out help as soon as you can. **The lockdown measures still allow you to leave your property if you are facing abuse.** Your health and safety is the most important consideration.

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- If you cannot speak on the telephone because it puts you or someone else in danger: **after calling 999, press 55 if on a mobile phone.** The operator will ask you simple yes or no questions and attempt to get information to assist you.

2. Contact a domestic abuse charity or organisation that can assist you

Domestic abuse helplines and shelters are still running their services.

A full list of organisations you can contact is available on the government's website: <https://www.gov.uk/report-domestic-abuse>.

Further help you should consider:

- **HESTIA** have created the free app '**Bright Sky**' to provide support and information on domestic abuse. It is available in 4 languages (English, Urdu, Punjabi and Polish) to download on both App Store and Google Play.
- **Women's Aid** have launched their *new instant messaging service* and offer *email support, a handbook* (on housing, safety planning and dealing with police) and a *forum* to share stories from survivors. This is all available on their website.
- '**Rail to Refuge**' scheme offers **free train tickets** for those fleeing from abuse. Tickets can be accessed by members once an offer for refuge has been confirmed through Women's Aid Federation of England, Welsh Women's Aid, Scottish Women's Aid and Imkaan.

3. Reach out for legal advice

We understand that seeking legal advice during traumatic experiences such as domestic abuse is overwhelming. At Toynbee Hall, we have been running our women only service for many years. We have a dedicated team of female advisers specifically trained to deal with women facing difficult situations.

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Toynbee Hall's Free Legal Advice Centre offers legal advice on domestic abuse and other areas of law too. We will be providing remote advice through telephone and video conferencing (where possible). Interpreters can be arranged if requested.

Women seeking legal advice on domestic abuse can also access our bi-monthly Women Only Legal Advice service. This is provided by female legal advisers and runs on the first and third Saturday of each month.

Please note that this service is provided on an appointment only basis. However we are usually able to arrange appointments quite quickly, so please contact us. (email: flac@toynbeehall.org.uk) if you would like some advice.