



## It doesn't happen here

First steps for the local church

part of the Dignity initiative



## What can my local church do to raise awareness of domestic abuse?

For many people in the churches, domestic abuse is a taboo subject which 'we don't like to talk about.' But it is likely that many in the church will know victims of violence or be victims or abusers themselves. It is important that the subject is on the church agenda.

### Taking the first steps

Form a small group to help your church address the whole issue of domestic abuse. Include both women and men – remember that abuse can affect anyone.

Look at the *Church Charter* and the accompanying notes and think how you can raise awareness and take this forward in your own church.

Get the support of your minister, pastoral team, deacons or elders in addressing this issue and then consider the following suggestions:

- ✚ Find out what helping agencies exist in the local community.
- ✚ Display posters and leaflets and use the church magazine to offer information about available local and national organisations and helplines (eg Rape Crisis; Local Housing Office; National Helpline numbers, Women's Aid, Refuge).
- ✚ Place Domestic Violence Hotline cards in pews and other suitable locations, such as the back of toilet doors. Remember it is important for people to be able to access material discreetly, without embarrassment.
- ✚ Offer suitable space on your premises for use by a local domestic violence agency.
- ✚ Encourage the church to designate a special day each year when the focus will be on developing awareness about domestic abuse issues.

### As church members:

- ✚ Encourage your worship leaders and ministers to speak out against domestic abuse in their teaching, preaching and prayers.
- ✚ Recognise that this may raise difficult issues for those who hear - ensure that there is someone who will listen.
- ✚ Invite appropriate speakers to church groups, including youth groups.
- ✚ Respect people's wishes during greetings, sharing the peace, being careful not to invade someone's 'personal space'.
- ✚ Give financial support to a local domestic violence agency or refuge.
- ✚ Pay for a church leader to attend training sessions on the pastoral care of those who experience domestic abuse.
- ✚ Make books available through your church library or bookstall.

## If you are a minister or church leader:

- ✚ Do all you can to make church a safe environment.
- ✚ Encourage inclusive language.
- ✚ Avoid approaches to worship and church business which close down the possibilities for someone to speak of their experience of abuse.
- ✚ Offer marriage preparation and ongoing sessions for couples which address the themes of equality, conflict, violence and control.
- ✚ Ensure that the children and young people's programmes contain regular opportunities to look at anger management and violence in ways appropriate to age and stage of development, working closely with the youth and children's workers.

## Things to anticipate in beginning to address domestic abuse issues in the church

- ✚ Presentations need to be handled by someone who is well-versed in the issues. Often it is best to invite someone from outside the local church, or from one of the key agencies.
- ✚ People need a safe environment to discuss the issues.
- ✚ Make sure that opportunities are available for people to offer their responses and reactions and to ask questions.
- ✚ Remember that domestic abuse issues rouse very deep emotions. Some will find it hard to believe and others may have memories of past or current violence.
- ✚ Ensure listening support is readily available and that access to counselling (preferably by people trained in these issues) can be provided.
- ✚ Remember that if couples stay together during counselling for domestic abuse, danger to the victim increases dramatically. One person within a church fellowship cannot offer pastoral support to both partners. Unless both partners, seen independently, want to work through issues together, this is not a safe option.

## What can I do if I think someone I know has been abused?

One of the hardest things for a victim of abuse to do is to admit it - most abuse is unreported. If you are at all concerned that someone you know might be the victim of abuse, you may notice some or all of the following signs in that person:

- ✚ unexplained bruises or injuries
- ✚ becomes unusually quiet or withdrawn
- ✚ frequent absences from work or regular commitments
- ✚ wearing clothes which conceal, even on the warmest days
- ✚ stops talking about their partner

It is difficult to begin a conversation, even if you have a close relationship with the person you are concerned about, but if you are able to broach the subject, your offer of help could be the first step to helping them break free from an abusive situation.

## Dos and Don'ts in dealing with domestic abuse

### What can you do?

DO ensure her immediate safety. She will not be able to talk or think clearly if she is afraid. Explore ways to maximise her safety whether she stays in the relationship or leaves.

DO believe her. She is far more likely to minimise the problem than to dramatise it. Take time to listen, and talk in a safe private place.

DO recognise her need for positive response and support, even if there is nothing practical that you can do immediately.

DO be sensitive to and discuss her fears about approaching the Police or Social Services. She may never have done so, or she may have done so many times and is hesitant to do so yet again!

DO make sure she knows how to contact the Police and reach the local refuge where she can talk to workers even if she decides not to move there. The local Citizens' Advice Bureau will also give up to date advice, whether she is in a crisis situation or just wants to talk over her options.

DO reinforce that we all expect to live free from abuse. No-one should have to live with abuse in their own home. Violence – of any kind - is not an appropriate way to communicate within a relationship.

DO reassure her that the violence her partner commits is his responsibility and he should not blame her for his actions. He is the only one who has control over his behaviour.

DO remember that if she is from an ethnic minority group, her problems could be compounded by racist reactions, language and cultural barriers, or fragile immigration status.

DO always check that it will be safe to contact her at home should it become necessary. Do respect her wishes if she does not want you to make any contact. Her partner is unlikely to know that she has been to see you about the violence, and is even less likely to take kindly to it. Confidentiality is crucial.

DO find out what **she** wants to do and see if you can help her achieve it. With her agreement, consult with specialist agencies or individuals and see what they can offer. Inaccurate advice can increase her danger. Take personal responsibility for

referring her appropriately and if you fear that the agency to which you are sending her may be less sympathetic than you are, warn her about it, and discuss how she can deal with this and retain her self-respect. Bear in mind that she may prefer to speak with a woman.

DO offer to meet again soon and keep in regular supportive contact.

## What not to do

DON'T ask her what she did to provoke the abusive behaviour. If you do, you are implicitly condoning his action.

DON'T suggest that she should 'try again'. She has probably been doing that for a long time now. Once abuse has become part of a relationship it will not go away. There is a lot of evidence to show that violent incidents increase in severity and become more frequent over time.

DON'T suggest a combined interview. She and/or the children may feel too threatened to speak freely in the presence of her assailant, and responsibility for the abuse can become lost in justifications, etc. If she does speak out, the repercussions afterwards may be serious.

DON'T expect her to make binding decisions in a hurry. Many women say that they wish to stay with their partner, and that they only want the abuse to stop. This decision-making process can be assisted by your patient and long-term support and encouragement. It may take years for a woman to make a final decision to leave.

DON'T make decisions for her. It is up to her to decide if she wants to leave the man or give it another try. By all means discuss her options, but leave her to decide what fits best with her situation.

DON'T pass on information about her new home to anyone, without her specific permission. It may be tempting to act in the role of go-between. It will not help and may increase her problems and those of her children.

DON'T judge, or criticize the victim, and don't initiate any physical contact. If someone is put off initially for any reason, it may be a long while before they trust anyone and speak out again.

DON'T ignore your intuition, nor underestimate the seriousness of the situation. Remember that when someone does speak out or decide to leave, the danger of the situation increases.

## Other leaflets available include:

### For Churches:

- CH1 *It doesn't happen here*
- CH2 *The Dignity Coalition Church Charter*
- CH3 *Notes to accompany the Charter*

### For Survivors:

- S1 *Breaking the silence... wanting change*
  - \* Add leaflets from your own locality for appropriate services

### For Ministers:

- P1 *When the silence is broken... what does the law say?*
- P2 *When the silence is broken... prepared to listen*
- P3 *When the silence is broken... marriage... where do you stand?*
- P4 *Why do women stay? Towards a spiritual understanding*
- P5 *What churches need to know about pastoral support for abusers*
- P6 *Agencies which may be able to help*

### Contact numbers

Freephone National 24-hour Domestic Violence Helpline	0808 2000 247
Scottish Women's Aid	0800 027 1234
Men's Advice Line and Enquiry	0808 801 0327
Action on Elder Abuse National Helpline	0808 808 8141
NSPCC	0808 800 5000
Respect National Helpline for perpetrators or professionals seeking advice	0845 122 8609
Samaritans	08457 90 90 90

### Local Phone Book

Women's Aid and Refuge services  
Citizens' Advice Bureau

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