

# SAFER STREETS

Tackling Violence Against Women  
and Girls in South West London



Supporting disclosures in the workplace

A partnership between



# SUPPORTING DISCLOSURES IN THE WORKPLACE

Kingston, Merton, Richmond and Wandsworth Councils are working together with the Met Police as the South West London Safer Street's Partnership to tackle violence against women and girls.

We all have a role to play to help keep women and girls feel safe – and that includes employers. Employers should strive to create a working environment that promotes the view that abuse against people, and all forms of Violence Against Women and Girls, is unacceptable.

Employers also need to take proactive steps to promote a safe and secure culture for women and girls. We suggest employers read the Safer Streets 'Employers – Policy Guidance' prior to this guide on how to support disclosures in the workplace.

Domestic abuse is the most prevalent form of violence against women. To support disclosures around domestic abuse, we would encourage employers to provide further training to people so they know the steps to take to support colleagues (and clients, where relevant). Supporting a disclosure can be challenging, however, the following information provides a useful guide.

It is important employers are aware that disclosures may be more likely to occur following the launch of the organisation's policy/guidance on Violence Against Women and Girls. Therefore, to support next steps following a disclosure, you should ensure you have the correct signposting and support procedures in place including clear roles and responsibilities for managers and HR, and a commitment to confidentiality and safeguarding.

## What is domestic violence and abuse?

The government definition which can be found in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 gives a legal definition of Domestic Abuse as:

Behaviour of a person (A) towards another person (B) is "domestic abuse" if A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and the behaviour is abusive.

Behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the following:

- a. physical or sexual abuse;
- b. violent or threatening behaviour;
- c. controlling or coercive behaviour;
- d. economic abuse
- e. psychological, emotional or other abuse; and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.

## Who may experience domestic abuse?

Research informs us that in terms of scale, scope, range of abusive behaviours used, and in the repeat pattern of abuse, this is a crime in which the majority of perpetrators are male and survivors are female. Men also experience abuse from male and female partners and family members. Every case of domestic abuse should be taken seriously and each individual given access to the support they need. Any form of violence is unacceptable.

# SIGNS TO SPOT

## Workplace signs could include:

- ▶ Changes in behaviours, for example: frequent absences or lateness, or spending more hours in the workplace without reason or avoiding going home
- ▶ Changes in working patterns or work which could include over or under performance, or missed deadlines and a shift in the quality of work
- ▶ Changes in appearance, for example: lack of care in dressing, sudden weight loss or gain, wearing more covering garments that may disguise physical symptoms
- ▶ Changes in mood, for example: loss of confidence, difficult remembering things, being withdrawn from colleagues, inability to concentrate
- ▶ Partner or family member frequently visiting or calling the workplace

## Physical symptoms

- ▶ Bruising
- ▶ Bite, strangulation or scratch marks
- ▶ Pelvic pain
- ▶ Broken bones
- ▶ Burns
- ▶ Chronic pain
- ▶ Old injuries

## Stress related physical symptoms

- ▶ Sleep disturbances
- ▶ IBS
- ▶ Migraines
- ▶ Chronic fatigue syndrome
- ▶ Problematic drug or alcohol use
- ▶ Impaired immune system

## Emotional symptoms

- ▶ Mental health issues (e.g. depression, anxiety, eating disorder, suicidal, self-harm)
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Fear
- ▶ Isolation

## Signs of control/ other indicators

- ▶ Frequent missed appointments
- ▶ Limited access to money, including for things like transport, leading to an enforced course of action
- ▶ Tries to hide injuries/signs of abuse or minimise their extent
- ▶ Reluctance to speak in front of partner or family member
- ▶ Neglect



## BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE AND CREATING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

Regardless of gender, the person experiencing domestic abuse has many obstacles that may stop them disclosing the issue or reporting a crime.

Many people may not be ready to admit or tackle the issue themselves, or even feel comfortable to share their experiences. It is also important to note that some people face additional barriers to a disclosure due to factors including their ethnicity, a disability, their sexuality, their gender, or age.

However if you, as a manager or HR, are concerned that an employee is experiencing domestic abuse it is important to carefully approach a conversation to assess their wellbeing and support a person to access further help. In doing so, you must facilitate a supportive, inclusive, and non-judgemental environment.

Research tell us that those experiencing domestic abuse are normally comfortable to be asked about their situation provided it is done so safely. The majority of women are happy to be asked and those experiencing domestic abuse want to be asked. Women experiencing domestic violence and abuse will rarely disclose without having been asked.

## LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Your role is to triage the situation and offer support, informed by the workplace policy, and to signpost the employee to appropriate help. It is not your role to deal with the abuse directly and personal safety when supporting a disclosure is vital. Confidentiality is key and the employee's boundaries must be respected.

Supporting a disclosure can be challenging and you must also look after yourself. Following a disclosure, you may wish to share your experience and seek support from an appropriate channel, for example, your line manager, peer support, HR, or an employee helpline such as an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). It is important you acknowledge your own feelings following a disclosure and do something to address them, as they must not come out in your relationship with the person experiencing domestic abuse.



## THE AVAA MODEL (ASK)

If you are concerned an employee is experiencing domestic abuse there are four key steps to take. The **Ask, Validate, Assess, Action (AVAA) model** is recognised as an effective and sensitive way to do this.

Firstly, you need to ask the person about their experiences and, secondly, if someone discloses abuse then you must provide messages of support and validation and ask some key follow up questions to assess the level of concern and risk, before finally taking action based on that information.

Your messages to the victim must remain clear and consistent, for example: “you can talk to me; I can help you; I can support you to get to a safe place”.

### Step one: Ask

There are four points to think about before you start the conversation:

#### Is it safe and appropriate?

Choose the right setting and moment before you start the conversation. Make sure you allow plenty of time for the conversation. You should find a quiet and safe space to speak privately – this might be in a setting outside of the usual workplace or in a private room.

If the employee works from home, you could suggest meeting for a walk in a neutral safe space. Or if the conversation is taking place remotely, discuss upfront that the person experiencing domestic violence can set the pace and length, and boundaries.

#### Explain why you are asking and ask a generic introductory question

Begin with indirect and generic questions to start the conversation, e.g.:

- ▶ You seem distracted recently at work, how are you feeling?
- ▶ I’m always here to support you, is there anything you’d like to talk about?
- ▶ I’ve noticed some changes recently at work, I wanted to ask if you are ok?

#### Ask a more direct question

Then follow up with more specific questions regarding domestic abuse, for example:

- ▶ Did someone you know cause your injuries?
- ▶ Is there anyone close to you who is hurting you or making you afraid?

An example of a positive question is:

- ✓ *I’m concerned that [you seem anxious/frightened/upset; have repeat attendance issues; have noticed injury]. Has somebody caused your injuries/ is there anything going on at home/in your relationship that might be causing you to feel anxious/frightened/upset?*

An example of how NOT to ask the question is:

- ✗ *I’m really sorry to have to ask you, I know it probably feels very intrusive – but I have to ask you about domestic abuse – this isn’t a problem for you, is it?*

This format comprises of two parts: (1) stating your concerns (2) asking a direct question about those concerns.



# THE AVAA MODEL (VALIDATE)

## Step two: Validate

**If you do receive a disclosure:** if someone does disclose that they are experiencing domestic abuse it is important to share messages of validation. The first thing you should do is practice active listening and offer messages of support and validation, for example:

- ✓ What you are describing sounds like abuse.
- ✓ The abuse is not your fault.
- ✓ You have options. We can help you find support

Remember that this might be the first time the employee is talking about their experience. How you respond is key to helping them accessing services and further support. Most people will minimise their experiences due to potential feelings of fear and shame and they should always be believed.

It is important to recognise the courage of the employee, and the difficulties they have overcome in sharing their experience. Show that you are listening by acknowledging what they are saying. Some phrases you can use are:

- ✓ Thank you very much for telling me that. I can't imagine how difficult it must be for you but I want you to know that you are safe here and we can help you get support if you wish. I believe you
- ✓ You have the right to live free from violence and abuse
- ✓ You are not alone
- ✓ Abuse is not your fault
- ✓ I/we can help

Often the responses a person gives may not give you an accurate picture of what is going on (for e.g., "sometimes we fight", "it's passionate", "it's messy"). Provide feedback by repeating back what you are hearing or ask questions to clarify, or paraphrase.

It is also helpful to reflect their language back to them for example:

- ✓ ..."you said you felt..."
- ✓ "you mentioned that ..."

### It's also important to:

- ✓ Do list the facts
- ✓ Do ask them what actions they would like you to take
- ✓ Reassure
- ✓ Ask permission to...put arm round the person or sit beside them and to report it
- ✗ Avoid asking "why?"
- ✗ Don't be judgmental
- ✗ Don't interrupt
- ✗ Don't use blameful language such as "why don't you leave?" or "why haven't you told me before?"

**If you do not receive a disclosure:** you might suspect an employee is experiencing domestic abuse, and ask the questions, but not receive a disclosure. It's okay if this happens - your role is to ask the question, not force a disclosure.

It is important to consider if your concerns needs to be shared and if you can speak to HR or your line manager about whether someone else can approach the conversation or if further safeguarding action needs to be taken.

You might also receive a disclosure of domestic abuse but it is later retracted – make sure you have documented and undertaken any safeguarding responsibilities. There are many reasons someone may retract a disclosure, including fear for their safety.

# THE AVAA MODEL (ASSESS AND ACTION)

## Step three: assess

If you receive a disclosure, you will need to consider two things:

- ▶ **Is the person at immediate risk / danger? For example, is it unsafe for them to return home?**

If someone has shared their experience, it is important that you confirm the confidentiality of the disclosure to your employee. The guidance for managers is that an employee's disclosure should only be shared further if you have permission from them to do so and if it is necessary to secure them further help.

The exception to this is in an emergency, if you believe there is an immediate threat to the life of the employee, to children, or to the employer then you should always report it and dial 999.

If there is an imminent danger or it is unsafe for the employee to return home then, with the employee's consent, you must contact HR or your line manager for support to make a decision on reporting and whether the police need to be called.

- ▶ **What is the level of the ongoing and current risk?**

As a manager or HR you should arrange follow up check-ins with the employee, agreed with them and in respect of their boundaries, and in line with your workplace policy.

## Step four: action

If you have assessed that it is not an emergency, then you should agree the next steps with the employee – respecting confidentiality and adhering to your workplace policy.

This may include documenting your concerns to your line manager and/or HR, and a domestic abuse lead in HR (if available). This should be done with the consent of the employee and agreement on the information and aspects of the disclosure that will be shared. They can support you to provide further follow up with the employee and to signpost further help – a range of services are listed below.

You may also need to consider, with input from HR, if there are any reasonable adjustments that need to be taken to protect the employee's wellbeing and safety at work.



# SIGNPOSTING AND SUPPORT

In addition to the internal reporting and support procedures, there are a number of local and national resources and help available when taking action:

## Local:

Safer Streets at Merton Council: ([merton.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/crime-prevention-and-community-safety/vawg/safer-streets](https://merton.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/crime-prevention-and-community-safety/vawg/safer-streets))

## Regional and National Services:

### Police – reporting

- ▶ Call 999 (in an emergency)
- ▶ Non-Emergency line – Call 101
- ▶ StreetSafe ([met.police.uk/notices/street-safe/street-safe](https://met.police.uk/notices/street-safe/street-safe)) is a service for anyone to anonymously tell us about public places where you have felt or feel unsafe, because of environmental issues, e.g. street lighting, abandoned buildings or vandalism and/or because of some behaviours, e.g. being followed or verbally abused
- ▶ Walk & Talks are open to women aged 18 and above, living or working in London, who would like to go for a walk with an officer in their local area and discuss their views on women’s safety: ([met.police.uk/police-forces/metropolitan-police/areas/campaigns/2022/walk-and-talks](https://met.police.uk/police-forces/metropolitan-police/areas/campaigns/2022/walk-and-talks))
- ▶ Report Domestic Abuse ([met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/daa/domestic-abuse/how-to-report-domestic-abuse](https://met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/daa/domestic-abuse/how-to-report-domestic-abuse))
- ▶ Report a Crime ([met.police.uk/ro/report/ocr/af/how-to-report-a-crime](https://met.police.uk/ro/report/ocr/af/how-to-report-a-crime))

## Support and helplines

- ▶ National Domestic Violence Helpline - 0808 200 0247 (24hr helpline)
- ▶ Pan London Harmful Practices Helpline - 0808 169 4455
- ▶ GALOP (LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline) - 0800 999 5428 or [galop.org.uk](https://galop.org.uk)
- ▶ Men’s Advice Line (support for male survivors) - 0808 801 0327, visit [mensadviceline.org.uk](https://mensadviceline.org.uk) or email [info@mensadviceline.org.uk](mailto:info@mensadviceline.org.uk)
- ▶ Hourglass – support around elder abuse - 0808 808 8141
- ▶ Rape Crisis South London - 0808 802 9999, visit [rasasc.org.uk](https://rasasc.org.uk) or email [info@rasasc.org.uk](mailto:info@rasasc.org.uk)
- ▶ Respect Phone Line - 0808 802 4040 (Confidential helpline for people who are being abusive and want help to change)
- ▶ National Stalking Helpline - 0808 802 0300

## Sources and acknowledgements

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- ▶ Sensitively Handling Disclosures of Domestic Abuse, Kingston Council and the Kingston Domestic Violence Hub
- ▶ Night Time Economy Solutions Limited: [www.nighttimeeconomy.com](http://www.nighttimeeconomy.com)