

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse (DA) is the repeated abuse of a person (or persons) in an intimate or family relationship. It can happen to anyone, of any gender, background or circumstances. It is not just abuse between people who are sexually intimate, it includes abuse that happens between family members.

There is a difference between occasional conflict (which most people experience) and DA, in a relationship.

DA is about the use of **threats and intimidation** by one person (the perpetrator) **to control** another person (the victim) and make them feel **scared of the consequences** of challenging the abuse.

DA is not only about physical assault or violence, the definition currently includes emotional, psychological, financial, economic and sexual abuse and it also covers **coercive** and **controlling** behaviours, forced marriage, 'honour' based abuse, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and other harmful practices.

It usually (but not always) happens in private or in the home. It happens between couples and between family members it can be very difficult to recognise and talk about outside the home.

It is not fair, it is not your fault and you do not deserve it. The only person who can stop the abuse is the perpetrator(s).

You can get help to make you and your family safer and the perpetrator can get help to change their behaviours, if they are willing to try.

How to recognise DA and unhealthy control?

DA is about power, **control** and **fear**. The perpetrator wants control over their victim and gets it by 'bullying' their victim, by threatening or intimidating them, which results in a victim feeling alone and scared.

DA usually starts with unhealthy controlling behaviours. If you are a victim of unhealthy control or domestic abuse:

- You may start to notice that your current or ex-partner, spouse or another family member has become jealous and possessive, has become critical of you, started to call you names or put you down, telling lies or somehow making you feel bad about yourself.
- You might feel that you are being checked up on or stopped from making your own decisions or choices.
- You may be accused of things you have not done or blamed for things that are not your fault.
- You may feel confused, embarrassed or ashamed about what is happening.
- You may feel alone or feel isolated from your usual support network of family and friends.
- You may feel that no-one would believe you if you told someone about what is happening.
- You may be scared to tell anyone, because you are worried about what the perpetrator might do if they find out.
- You might change the way you behave or how you live your life because it seems easier and safer, to agree with the perpetrator.
- You may still have strong feelings for the perpetrator, especially if the perpetrator is a family member or if you have been in the relationship for a long time.
- You may believe that the person you love and trust is simply temporarily overwhelmed by stress, family, work, money worries, drink, drugs or mental health. You may think they simply have anger issues.
- You may notice that your children are affected by what is happening at home. The impact of unhealthy control and DA can be devastating for children, whether they witness the abuse directly or not. It can affect their behaviour, their development, their mental health and the way they manage their own relationships into their adult lives.

A healthy relationship is built on trust, honesty, mutual respect and support for each other. If these things are missing or replaced by jealousy, dishonesty and mistrust then it is a strong indicator that your relationship is not a healthy one. Acknowledging or sometimes even recognising that a relationship has turned into an unhealthy or an abusive one is really difficult.

You may share a home, a mortgage or other debts, you may have children with the perpetrator, or they could be someone you rely on for care. You may have known the perpetrator for a long time or they could be someone

you met recently and have just started to feel that things are not going as well as they should be in your relationship. They may be your parents. Whatever the situation, everyone deserves to live a life free from fear and abuse. There is support available and you do have choices and options.

Remember that you did not ask for this to happen. It is not fair, it is not your fault and you do not deserve it. The only person who can stop the control and abuse is the perpetrator(s).

Take the risk test

Below are a few questions that might help you to consider what is happening in your relationship and how unhealthy or abusive it could be.

- Do they make you feel that you are not good enough for them or for their friends or family?
- Do they criticise you or make you feel stupid or ugly?

- Do they complain about their previous partners/relationships?
- Are they possessive of you and jealous of your previous relationships or your friends or co-workers?
- Are they very demanding?
- Do they stop you seeing your friends and family?
- Do they seem to stop you from achieving at work or at school/college?

- Have you tried to end it but feel that they prevented you from leaving/ending the relationship?
- Do they constantly contact, follow, stalk or otherwise harass you (even after you have separated)?
- Have they ever forced you to have sex or made you do anything of a sexual nature against your will?
- Have they ever physically hurt you, your children or a family pet?
- Have they ever threatened to harm or kill you, your children or themselves?
- Are you scared of your ex or current partner or a family member?

If you have answered 'YES' to the questions in the green zone

At the beginning of your relationship things were great, maybe it got serious quite quickly and it seemed almost too perfect? Then something changed and you started to feel less confident and less content. Are there more low points than high points in your relationship?

If you feel safe to do so you could try talking to your partner/relative about how you are feeling and asking them to consider your feelings. If they refuse to accept how you feel then you may need to think about whether you want this relationship to continue. A healthy relationship should not make you feel confused, uncertain or unhappy.

There is support available for you. You might like to review the information on our website or call our 24 hour Supportline. Our operators can tell you more about the services in your area.

Have you heard about Clare's Law (The Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme)? The scheme allows you or a concerned person to ask the police about any information they hold on a person in relation to DA offences and convictions. Contact your local police to find out more.

If you have answered 'YES' to the questions in the amber zone

It sounds like things are getting worse in the relationship. The level of unhealthy control is increasing. The perpetrator may seem very different now. They may also tell you that they have had bad relationships before. You become aware that they drink more than you thought, misuse drugs or you discover they have a history of violence or abuse. You might start to change your behaviours because it seems easier to give them what they want or what they demand.

This stage is designed to make you feel dependent on them and isolated from people who might question your relationship and be able to support you.

It sounds like there is unhealthy control, emotional, psychological and possibly financial/economic abuse happening in your relationship. If this abuse continues then it may escalate to physical violence or the threat of violence or the perpetrator's controlling behaviours may become even more intense and coercive.

There is support available for you. Why not take a look on Bright Sky (see below) to find details of services local to you, call one of the national helplines overleaf, or call our 24 hour Supportline who can tell you more about the services in your area.

If you have answered 'YES' to the questions in the red zone

If these things are happening to you now or have happened within the last three months then there is no doubt that you are in a potentially dangerous DA relationship.

There is an increased risk of harm to you (and your children) and it is unsafe for you (and your children) to remain in this relationship without support and safety planning.

If the perpetrator misuses drugs and alcohol, has mental health issues or a previous history of violence or criminality then this also increases your risk.

You may need help to safely end the relationship. We know that separation increases your risk of further abuse including stalking and harassment. Please do not decide or threaten to leave without first getting advice about safety planning.

We would encourage anyone describing these risk factors in their relationship to seek support as soon as possible. Please call our 24 hour Supportline. If you are in immediate danger then please call the police on 999.

Have you heard of the Bright Sky app? It is a mobile app that is free to download and provides advice and information for anyone experiencing DA. You can also find your local support service on Bright Sky. For further advice and guidance and to download the app, visit www.hestia.org/brightsky

Safety planning

Some basic safety planning to help keep you safe:

- If you feel that you or someone else is in danger please always call **999**. If you cannot speak then cough or make a noise then tap **55** on keypad and follow instructions.
- Keep your phone charged and with you at all times.
- Think about varying your routines and consider changing your timings or routes when leaving the home or workplace etc.
- Avoid rooms in the home where the perpetrator could access a weapon (kitchen, shed etc) or where they could lock you in.
- Agree a code word **NOW** with a trusted friend, family member or neighbour to let them know you are safe or to signal that you need them to call for help.
- Show your children how to call **999** and how to ask for help.
- Check or update your social media, banking, email and computer privacy and password settings.
- If you are not living with your abuser think about your home security (smoke alarms, door chain, change locks, CCTV, video doorbell).
- If you have children at school it can be very helpful to talk to the teachers or family workers about what is happening. They can also signpost or refer you to further support.
- Consider changing phone contact names of key/ support workers to general titles ie dentist, school office.
- Do not threaten to leave. Get advice about how to leave safely.
- Prepare an emergency bag with important documents, keys, essential clothing and other items such as toiletries, toys, some cash/card for yourself and your children, and keep in a safe place or with a trusted person.

Getting help

Remember, DA does not get better on its own, it only gets worse.

Please seek support as soon as possible. Whether this is the police or one of the many national helplines. Remember that you can chat to us, on the phone or by live chat at any time.

National helpline numbers

Victim Support 24 hour Supportline:
08 08 16 89 111

National 24 hour Domestic Abuse Helpline:
0808 2000 247

Men's Advice Line:
0808 801 0327

Honour Based Abuse Helpline:
0800 5999 247

LGBT DV Helpline:
0300 999 5428

National Stalking Helpline:
0808 802 0300