

Supporting a Disclosure of Domestic Abuse: Trauma-Informed Practice



A briefing for professionals by the Equally Safe Edinburgh Committee

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Image Credit: [Wallace Chuck](#)

Introduction

This document is intended for use as a guide for any professional working with people in a context where domestic abuse might be disclosed. Please note that this is only a briefing containing essential information. It is **not** a complete guide, and it is **not** meant to substitute formal training on domestic abuse.

We encourage all professionals in Edinburgh to actively participate in learning and development to improve their knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse and to seek out further training and information. Some resources that can assist with this are included in this document.

What you need to know

It is extremely important that all professionals across sectors, organisations and services receive training on domestic abuse, including how to recognise and respond to indicators of abuse. This training is provided throughout the year by the [City of Edinburgh Council](#) on an inter-agency basis, although training is also available through other organisations such as [Scottish Women's Aid](#) and [SafeLives](#).

There are also a range of online material and resources you can access to make sure that you have a good enough understanding of domestic abuse to enable you to support people. A great introductory session to Domestic Abuse is [the Domestic Abuse Awareness Raising Tool \(DAART\)](#). This is a short online session that introduces domestic abuse and coercive control, the law in Scotland and how to respond and safely signpost or refer victims/survivors to appropriate support. Other resources can be found on the [City of Edinburgh Council website](#), including a [Safety Planning Booklet](#) and information on [how different organisations can help](#).

The key thing to remember is that regardless of whether someone discloses domestic abuse or not, all professionals have a duty of care to provide the best support that they can in a trauma-informed, safe and person-centred way. You should not push someone to disclose domestic abuse – just to make sure that they feel safe and supported enough to identify and possibly tell someone if and when they are ready.

Barriers to Disclosure

Disclosing domestic abuse is extremely challenging for any victim/survivor. They might struggle to make a disclosure for many reasons, such as:

- Trauma as a result of the current abuse and/or previous abuse,
- fear of what might happen if they disclose (for example, Social Work/police involvement, which is a common threat used by perpetrators)
- fear for their own or their children's safety and fear of what will happen to the perpetrator
- cultural/language barriers, financial & housing dependency or fear of deportation
- being the carer or being cared for by an abusive partner
- because they may not recognise or identify their experience as domestic abuse
- individual characteristics might affect someone's ability to recognise and disclose abuse.

Professionals are responsible for creating a supportive environment. This can enable people to disclose domestic abuse. It is extremely important to note that the person you are supporting may not see the behaviour as abusive or may resist being identified as a victim/survivor of domestic abuse. In all cases, regardless of the context or organisation/service we work in, it is good practice to assess risk of harm for any person we are working with and take appropriate action, regardless of where risks might be originating from.

Domestic Abuse: Spotting the Signs

When working with people- especially women- it's important to be able to spot the signs of domestic abuse. Some of those include (but are not limited to):

- A person who appears fearful, secretive or anxious about being away from home, engaging in conversation with staff etc
- An unwillingness to answer questions or provide information beyond a 'need to know' basis
- Appearing meek, fearful, extremely apologetic or overly eager to please their partner. The constant presence of a partner or ex-partner may also indicate abuse
- A lack of access to money, for example no access to a payment card or cash, or an absence of available funds inconsistent with the person's employment status
- Extremely low confidence or self-esteem
- Unable to attend appointments alone, but is always escorted by a partner/ex-partner or member of the family or extended family
- High anxiety, or appearing 'jumpy' and easily startled
- Constantly checking the phone for messages or receiving repeated phone calls from the same person
- Physical injuries- both recent and different stages of healing, potentially with unlikely explanations
- Heavy makeup or clothing unsuitable for the weather and context, for example, long sleeves in hot weather, sunglasses indoors or in overcast weather conditions.

Supporting a disclosure: Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice

All professionals should adhere to working to the [Trauma-Informed Practice Principles](#). If your work regularly brings you in contact with people, you should apply the following 5 principles:

- 1. Safety:** the principle of doing no harm by being attentive to the sense of physical and emotional safety we provide to people to whom we offer services and support. For example:
 - 1.1. Sharing your confidentiality policy and explaining to people what can be kept confidential or when you may need to involve support from other agencies to help them stay safe
 - 1.2. Confirming safe modes of contact – when is it safe to communicate with the person you are supporting? By what means (for example, email, text, phone)? Can you establish a code word to indicate whether it's safe to speak or not?
 - 1.3. Making sure that you provide a confidential and private environment for sensitive conversations to take place, if this is not possible, arrange a further meeting
- 2. Trust:** providing support through listening actively and empathically, being reliable, honest, caring and dependable. For example:
 - 2.1. Be honest about what you can/cannot offer to the person
 - 2.2. Be clear about what information can stay confidential and what information might need to be shared

- 3. Collaboration:** supporting and encouraging people to do things for themselves while taking into account their views and individual characteristics, challenges and strengths. For example:
 - 3.1. Asking the person's opinion and feelings about the options you're discussing
 - 3.2. Work with them to come up with actions or solutions that are appropriate and feasible for them
 - 3.3. Accept their decisions, regardless of whether you agree with them or not, unless you have immediate concerns for their (and their children's) safety and wellbeing that might lead you to consider breaking confidentiality- and explain why
- 4. Choice:** offering people the opportunity to make fully informed decisions where those are available, while also being honest about situations where there are very few/no choices that can be made. For example:
 - 4.1. Discussing different options available to the person can take across different areas of their life such as housing, money, childcare, law, immigration, etc.
 - 4.2. Discussing the pros and cons of different options and the potential outcomes of those to help the person make informed decisions. Try not to overload with information and options- remember they may not have had freedom to make choices for a long time and they may find this difficult.
- 5. Empowerment:** making sure that people retain agency and a sense of authority and power over their lives. Trauma is intimately and inextricably linked to loss of power and control over one's life or circumstances. It is crucial that the support we provide to people enables them to be active decision makers in any matters that concern them as much as possible. You can instil a sense of empowerment when working with people in a number of ways- for example:
 - 5.1. Offer different options to the person and accept their decision
 - 5.2. Remind the person that they are not alone and that they can reach out for support as and when they are ready
 - 5.3. Respect the person's choices and decisions as they know their own circumstances and risks better than anyone else.
- 6. Culture:** People coming from different cultural backgrounds (ethnic, religious, linguistic, migrant, refugee etc.) might express themselves differently. It is important that you take this into account when working with someone and follow [best practice guidance](#) around how to communicate effectively to promote trauma-informed practice. For example:
 - 6.1. Make sure communication is as accurate as possible from both sides. Consider using an official interpreter if needed, but make sure the interpreter is not known to the person you are working with.
 - 6.2. Ask open-ended questions to help you understand what acceptable/unacceptable behaviour in another culture is
 - 6.3. Remember that abusive behaviour can look different in different cultures. For example, in Islam, forcing someone to eat pork is abusive; forcing someone to continue with an

unwanted pregnancy or to discontinue a pregnancy against their religious beliefs is abusive.

- 6.4. Similarly, different cultures can have different norms for what behaviours are deemed 'expected' or acceptable in a relationship. For example, it can be considered 'normal' for a man to take care of all of a household's finances, or for a woman to be expected to carry out all the housework and childcare. In such situations, it may be possible for people not to realise that a line has been crossed between what is culturally 'acceptable' or abusive.

Asking the right questions

When supporting someone and you suspect domestic abuse might be an issue for them, it's important to ask sensitive, open-ended questions to create an environment of openness, trust and acceptance. For example:

- How are things at home?
- How is your relationship with your current/former partner?
- How do things go when your ex-partner has contact with the children?
- How does your partner's/ex-partner's behaviour make you feel? Explore signs of fear and anxiety
- What are your concerns about your/your children's safety and wellbeing?
- What support can I offer you that could help with this issue?
- What kind of resolution would you like to see with this issue?

The important thing when asking questions, is to create a trusting environment that is conducive to a disclosure. A disclosure may or may not come, or the issues identified might not be related to domestic abuse. The key takeaway message is to 'leave the door open' for future discussions, and to identify and respond to the needs and concerns of the person as these are presented to you.

Offering the best support that you can

The best support we can offer people that use our services is to make sure that we focus on their needs, believe what they say, and that we attend to them as unique individuals in a trauma-informed way.

There is detailed guidance on understanding the trauma stemming from domestic abuse and on how to apply the principles of Trauma-Informed Practice in the document titled 'Domestic Abuse: Developing Trauma-Informed Approaches to Disclosures'.

Useful Contacts

Crisis Response

Call 999 for emergency response if someone's life is in danger

Emergency Social Work service: 0800 032 5968

NHS24: Call 111 for critical physical and mental health support outside of GP opening hours

Edinburgh Crisis Centre: 0808 8010 414 for mental health crisis support

Breathing Space: 0800 538 587 support when you are feeling low, anxious or depressed

The Samaritans: 116 126 to talk about anything that's worrying you.

Scotland's Domestic abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline (24/7): 0800 027 1234

Non-emergency

Call 101 for Police Scotland (non-emergency)

Social Care Direct: 0131 200 2324 for support and advice to anyone experiencing or feeling at risk of domestic abuse

The Access Place: 0131 526 5015 (option 2) Homeless support for people with support needs

Scotland's Domestic abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline (24/7): 0800 027 1234

Specialist GBV support

Aditi: 0131 603 4865/ aditi@sacro.org.uk: Mental health and wellbeing support for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women affected by domestic and honour-based abuse.

Beira's Place: 0131 526 3944: available Monday – Friday between 10am – 5pm. Support, advocacy and information on all forms of sexual violence, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, to women aged 16 and over in any part of the Lothians. The service is free and confidential and available no matter when the violence or abuse has happened. Beira's Place is a single-sex service for women as defined in the Equality Act 2010.

Bright Choices: 0131 622 7500: Supports any woman, man, child or family affected by honour-based violence, including forced marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). This service is provided by the Multicultural Family Base.

Specialist GBV support

EDDACS: 0131 315 8122: EDDACS is a support and advocacy service for female victims of domestic abuse crimes going through the court process. EDDACS supports by explaining the court process, completing a risk assessment and individual support and safety plan with each woman. If you are currently going through the court process as the victim of a domestic abuse crime you can phone EDDACS for support.

Edinburgh Women's Aid: 0131 315 8110: Provides confidential information, support and, if needed, refuge accommodation for women and any accompanying children and young people experiencing domestic abuse.

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre:

0131 556 9437 (office hours) or text: 07966 067 301

Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline 7 days per week between 5pm – midnight:

08088 010 302 (5pm-midnight) or text 07537 410 027

Email: support@rapecrisisScotland.org.uk or webchat: www.rapecrisisScotland.org.uk

Offers free emotional and practical support, information and advocacy to women, girls aged 12 and over and all members of the transgender community who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives. Support includes helpline, face to face, long-term, group, advocacy and crisis, email.

There is support for young survivors aged 12 – 18, as well as counselling and support service for women and transgender people involved in prostitution who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives, complementary therapies and alcohol counselling.

FearFree: 0131 624 7266: Support for any man or LGBT+ person experiencing domestic abuse

Feniks: 0131 629 1881. Mental health and wellbeing support for central and east European community members, particularly Polish and Ukrainian. Feniks has a dedicated mental health and practical support service for migrant women affected by domestic abuse.

Hourglass: 0808 808 8141 (24/7 support helpline that does not appear on itemised bills): Support for people over 60 who are affected by any kind of gender-based violence, as well as support to stay safe, reduce isolation, and improve safety and wellbeing.

LGBT Helpline: 0300 123 2523 (available Tuesdays and Wednesdays between 12 noon and 9pm and Thursdays and Sundays 1pm to 6pm): Information and emotional support for the entire diversity of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community across Scotland. This includes families, friends and supporters of LGBT people, and health and social care professionals working with LGBT people.

SARCs – Sexual Assault Referral and Coordination Service: 0800 148 88 88: Help after rape or sexual assault available through the NHS.

Shakti Women's Aid: 0131 475 2399: Shakti helps women who are experiencing domestic abuse. They offer support and information to all black minority ethnic women over 16 years and their children experiencing and fleeing domestic abuse.