

Developing Trauma-Informed Responses to Disclosures of Domestic Abuse



A briefing for professionals by the Equally Safe Edinburgh Committee

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Introduction

This resource is for professionals working in services that don't specialise on domestic abuse. It is **not** a complete guide and it is **not** meant to substitute training on domestic abuse. All professionals in Edinburgh are expected and encouraged to actively participate in learning and development to improve their knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse. Learning and Development Opportunities can be found on [My Learning Hub](#) (for Council employees) and on [My Learning Hub events](#) (for external partners). Some resources that can assist with this are also included in the document titled 'Supporting a Disclosure of Domestic Abuse – Trauma – Informed Practice'.

If someone discloses domestic abuse to you, this document outlines the key principles of an appropriate response. However, it is not possible for one person to offer all of the support the person needs and you may need additional support. It is important to remember that you should reach out to a more experienced/specialist colleague if you feel you need to.

Key principles

The guidance provided in this document is for professionals who do not work in specialist domestic abuse services and whose remit is not to provide a specialist domestic abuse intervention. It is intended to equip professionals across all sectors and areas of work with the basic principles of responding to domestic abuse in a safe, trauma-informed and person-centred way.

Risk Assessment and safety planning

Risk Assessment and Safety Planning should always be the first and foremost step to protecting victims/survivors and their children. This section provides an overview of how you can dynamically assess risk, with more details available in the document titled: 'Domestic Abuse: Risk Assessment and Safety Planning'. **Please make sure to read the Risk Assessment and Safety Planning Document in full.**

When assessing risk, the following are key things to determine:

- Is the abuse becoming more severe and/or more frequent?
- Is the victim/survivor pregnant or recently had a baby?
- Has the abuse ever resulted in physical injury?
- Has the abusive partner/ex-partner ever put their hands around the victim's neck attempting to choke, strangle or suffocate them?
- How is the victim's/survivor's mental health? Are they feeling anxious, depressed, suicidal?
- Are they self-harming or using alcohol and/or drugs to cope?
- Is the victim/survivor planning to leave or have they tried to leave the relationship?
- Is the abusive partner/ex-partner targeting the children? If yes, how?

If the person responds yes to some or all of the above, this is a high-risk case of domestic abuse. **If the person is at risk of serious harm, you can contact Police Scotland for advice.** If the risk is **not** immediate, you can call 101 (non-emergency number). If the risk is **immediate and/or life-threatening**, you can contact 999 (Police Scotland emergency number). You can find out more about how Police Scotland can help on the [City of Edinburgh Council website](#) as well as on the [Police Scotland website](#).

The best next step to follow, if the risk is **not immediate** and/or life-threatening, would be to contact a specialist organisation for advice, support and onward referral/signposting. You will find a list of support services available [through the Council](#) as well as in [the third sector](#) on the [City of Edinburgh Council website](#). If you are working out of hours and cannot reach an Edinburgh-based service, you can always contact [Scotland's Domestic abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline](#), which is available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, on 0800 027 1234; via text or WhatsApp on 0740 12 88 595 or at helpline@sdafmh.org.uk.

If you have not identified high risks, there are still things you can do to support the victim/survivor. A helpful resource is the [Domestic Abuse Safety Planning Booklet](#) available on the [Council website](#) – this is a resource created by the Equally Safe Edinburgh Committee and can be used both by victims/survivors and professionals to assist with safety planning.

If a person under 18 discloses domestic abuse

Any person under the age of 18 is a child. They may disclose abuse in the relationship between their parents or abuse from their own partner or ex-partner. To respond to a disclosure of domestic abuse made by a child, please refer to local [Child Protection Procedures](#).

Employing Principles of Trauma Informed Practice

If someone you are working with has disclosed to you that they are affected by domestic abuse, use trauma-informed practice principles to guide your response. Good practice in responding to a disclosure of domestic abuse includes:

Thanking the victim/survivor for their disclosure.

It takes victims/survivors a lot of courage, and possibly a very long time to disclose what is happening to them. You must recognise this. It is a privilege to be trusted with such sensitive information about someone's private life, as it means that you play an important role in their support structures.

Remind the victim/survivor that the abuse is not their fault

It is extremely important to remind the victim/survivor that abusive behaviour has no place in a relationship. This includes threats, intimidation, humiliation, physical or sexual violence, or degrading language. It also includes any attempt to control the victim/survivor's money, movements, communications or life choices. Most importantly, nobody can make, provoke, or force someone behave in an abusive way. **When someone behaves abusively, this is a choice they make.**

Avoid victim blaming

When discussing domestic abuse with a victim/survivor, the language we use is very important. We must avoid any suggestion that the victim is causing the abuse or that they are responsible for it.

Examples of victim-blaming language include:

- Why don't you leave him?
- What did you do to provoke him?

We need to make sure not to imply that the victim/survivor caused or is somehow responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour.

Instead, ask questions like:

- If you want to leave the relationship, what does the perpetrator do to prevent you from leaving?
- What did the perpetrator say to excuse their abusive behaviour?

Reassure the victim/survivor that they are not alone

Domestic abuse is very isolating. Victims and survivors may not have any friends, family or other support networks to turn to. It is very important that we remind victims and survivors that they can reach out for help.

You should familiarise yourself with [support services and organisations available in Edinburgh](#). Many of those services specialise in domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women. They can offer highly specialised, free and confidential support and advice. They can do this safely, in a manner and at a time that is best for the victim/survivor.

Don't pressure the victim/survivor to make contact or refer to those services if they are not ready to do so. There are still things you and your service can do to help increase their safety.

Ask additional questions sensitively and non-intrusively

To provide the best support and safeguarding advice it might be necessary to ask additional questions. It is important to only ask further questions:

- If you need to know the answers to appropriately assess risk to the victim/survivor and any children
- If they are going to help you determine the best way to provide safeguarding support and advice
- If you are carrying out a formal risk assessment using a standardised tool like the DASH-RIC (please see Document titled 'Domestic Abuse – Risk Assessment and Safety Planning' more information)

If you need additional information from the victim/survivor, remember:

- the principles of trauma informed practice
- to avoid victim-blaming and
- confidentiality, its limitations and how to communicate this to the victim/survivor

Offer options and free and informed decision-making

In line with Trauma-Informed Practice principles, Choice is very important when someone has disclosed experiences of domestic abuse. It is likely that the person has decided that they need to take action for their own (and their children's, if they have any) safety and wellbeing so it is important to help them become aware of what options are available to them.

Some simple but important steps in offering victims and survivors of domestic abuse choice include:

- **Be clear about your, and your organisation's/service's remit:** What support can you offer and what is out of your/your organisation's scope?
- **Choice about confidentiality:** Be clear about what information can stay confidential and what you might need to disclose to another service to help safeguard the person and their children. Also specify at what point you may need to involve other agencies such as social services or Police Scotland.

- **Clarity over specific limitations to confidentiality:** It is important that the person understands that there are circumstances where breaching confidentiality is essential. This includes:
 - Any disclosure of immediate risk of significant harm
 - Disclosure of harm to children¹
 - Disclosure of harm to a vulnerable adult²
 - Disclosure of risk to the public
- **Choice about record-keeping and information-sharing:** Be clear about what notes you take after a session with the people you work with, why you take them, how the information is stored and who from your organisation has access to it. Also explain the victim's/survivor's right to access any information you hold on them and how you will prevent any unauthorised access to it.
- **Choice over what outcome the victim/survivor expects from receiving a service:** It is important to ask the person what help they need with their situation and what outcome they would like to see from the support you can offer. This creates a shared understanding of their expectations and what realistic outcome might come out of the support that you/your service can offer.
- **Offering realistic choices:** It is important that the options you offer to the victim/survivor are pragmatic so that they are fully informed of the realistic potential outcomes of their choices and decisions. For example, if the victim/survivor wishes to leave the relationship, it's important to emphasise that this is going to be challenging and potentially dangerous; however, it is also not impossible with the right support and planning.

Recognising when you need more support

As professionals, it is extremely important that we are aware of the limitations of our knowledge, skills and competence. One individual alone cannot provide all the answers and solutions to help someone affected by domestic abuse. An effective response always involves numerous key agencies working in partnership.

It is important that you seek support and advice from more experienced or specialist colleagues and your line manager to ensure that you deliver best practice in domestic abuse and that you are supported in performing your best when disclosures of domestic abuse come to your attention.

¹ For more information about child protection, please see [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 \(updated 2023\)](#). Local guidance is available on the [City of Edinburgh Council Website](#), while it is also important to be familiar with the [Edinburgh and the Lothians Multi-Agency Child Protection Procedures](#).

² For more information on adult protection, please see the Care Inspectorate's [National Adult Support and Protection Policy & Procedure](#). Edinburgh has its local [Adult Support and Protection Policy](#), an [Inter-agency Adult Support and Protection Procedure](#), as well as a range of downloadable [guides and resources](#) for professionals.

Looking after yourself

A disclosure of domestic abuse can be very distressing. It is very important that you look after yourself. There are things you can do to support your wellbeing after a disclosure of domestic abuse:

- Speak to your line manager or a trusted colleague in confidence. This can help you to debrief while receiving support at the same time.
- Record the information that was disclosed to you as soon as possible. Use neutral language and be as factual as possible. This ensures that your practice is accountable.
- Seek advice and support from a more senior colleague
- Use the support and supervision arrangements available in your organisation/service. This includes any clinical supervision arrangements, if available. This will help you to be more accountable. It will also help you debrief, process your emotions and develop your professional practice.

Looking after yourself is even more important for any professional who has lived experience of domestic abuse. It does not matter whether they experienced this as children or in their adult lives. Hearing about experiences that resonate with our own can be extremely challenging.

Apart from debriefing with a colleague/manager and using supervision, you might want to consider additional options. For example, you might wish to access support for yourself to help you process your experiences through specialist services, employee assistance programmes, or privately, for example through counselling.

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.

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

Rape Crisis 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.