

Domestic Abuse and other types of Violence in Relationships



A briefing for professionals by the Equally Safe Edinburgh Committee

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Introduction

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 an understanding of domestic abuse and how to distinguish it from other forms of abuse or violence that might be present in a relationship. To make best use of this document, please also make sure to read its accompanying documents, available on the [Domestic Abuse Information and Resources](#) page on the City of Edinburgh Council website. Together, these documents will give you a more well-rounded understanding of domestic abuse and how to implement best practice as a non-specialist service provider.

Definition of Domestic Abuse

When discussing how to recognise that someone may be behaving in an abusive way towards a partner, ex-partner or children, it is important to remember the definition of domestic abuse. The definition is **a pattern of coercive, controlling, abusive, or intimidating behaviour** that:

- makes the partner or ex-partner dependent on the person behaving abusively
- isolates them from friends, family and support networks
- controls or monitors their daily activities
- restricts or deprives them of freedom- basic needs such as food, money, ability to sleep etc
- frightens, humiliates, degrades or punishes them.

This Act makes domestic abuse an aggravated offence if it involves a child. This can mean that:

- The behaviour targets a child
- The perpetrator uses a child to abuse their partner or ex-partner
- The child sees, hears or is present during an incident of abuse towards the partner or ex-partner

The term **pattern of behaviour** is extremely important, as domestic abuse sometimes gets confused with an isolated incident. An isolated incident where there has been abusive language or behaviour does not in itself constitute domestic abuse in the legal sense, even if, on its own, it was abusive and could have been dangerous or life-threatening.

Domestic abuse and situational partner violence

An isolated incident of violence or abuse in a relationship is called '**situational partner violence**'. Situational partner violence (SPV) is a form of violence arising from a conflict where, in a moment of frustration or anger, one or both partners turn to violence. Unlike domestic abuse, SPV is not necessarily *always* part of a broader pattern of control or intimidation.

However, you must always remember that **SPV can still be extremely serious, and on occasion, deadly**. If an incident of SPV is disclosed to you, it still needs to be taken very seriously and addressed according to your organisation's or service's policies and procedures, and your public protection responsibilities.

It's also important to remember that if a partner describes only occasional incidents of violence and abuse, if these have resulted in them changing their behaviour, habits, the language they use, or the way they dress for example, then situational violence, no matter how infrequent can serve the same purpose as other domestic abuse tactics.

Domestic abuse, SPV and Violent Resistance

Violent Resistance is a form of partner violence where a victim fights back against a partner/ex-partner who is using coercive, controlling, abusive and/or violent behaviours. This behaviour is often used by women, who overwhelmingly tend to be victims of domestic abuse where men tend to be responsible for the abuse¹.

The difference between SPV and Violent Resistance is that SPV often begins, and is carried out by, both partners/ex-partners simultaneously, and it is not necessarily motivated by an attempt to control or threaten either partner. Violent Resistance on the other hand, is a response to one partner's attempt to control or threaten the other using violence, coercion or other means. Violent Resistance must also be treated seriously, **but it must always be viewed within the context of an abusive relationship**: it is a response to, or defense from, abuse, violence, coercive and controlling behaviour.

Women are generally more likely to use self-defensive and retaliatory violence to protect themselves and others (usually their children) from an abusive partner, and approximately 50% of women who have used violence against a male partner or ex-partner have been found to do so in the context of self-defense or retaliation².

It is important that professionals understand Violent Resistance in the context of domestic abuse. When there is little or no understanding, it is easy to consider violence as part of an unhealthy or 'toxic' relationship where both partners are 'as bad as each other'. This not only misrepresents the situation, but also has the potential to introduce or increase service generated risks. For more information, see the document titled 'Delivering Best Practice and Avoiding Service-Generated Risks' on the City of Edinburgh Council's [Domestic Abuse Information and Resources](#) website.

Principles for a professional response

1. Your Public Protection Responsibilities

When working with someone who discloses a violent incident to you, the most important consideration is to establish safety based on your public protection responsibilities, your organisation's policies and procedures and on local and national guidance on child protection and adult protection if necessary. You will find more

¹ [Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2024-2025](#): 94% of recorded Domestic Abuse crimes in Scotland involved a female victim and 6% involved a male victim. [Domestic Abuse: Statistics recorded by the Police in Scotland, 2023 to 2024](#): 81% of Domestic Abuse crimes involved a female victim and male perpetrator, 15% involved a male victim and female perpetrator, while in 3% of cases the perpetrator and victim were of the same sex.

² [Female perpetrated domestic violence: Prevalence of self-defensive and retaliatory violence](#).

information on [Child Protection Procedures](#) and [Adult Protection procedures](#) on the [City of Edinburgh Council website](#).

2. Responding in a Trauma-informed way

Regardless of the situation(s) described to you, and whether the person you are working with describes being the instigator of the incident(s), remember that there must always be a trusting, respectful and professional working relationship established. Adopting and implementing the principles of trauma-informed practice (Safety, Trustworthiness, Choice, Collaboration, Empowerment and Culture) is necessary in any work with people accessing services.

For more information, please see the [Trauma Informed Practice](#) document by the [Edinburgh Partnership](#). For more specific guidance around Trauma Informed Practice and Domestic Abuse, see the documents titled '[Supporting a Disclosure of Domestic Abuse: Trauma-Informed Practice](#)' and '[Developing Trauma-Informed Responses to Disclosures of Domestic Abuse](#)' on the City of Edinburgh Council's [Domestic Abuse Information and Resources](#) website.

3. Establishing the pattern of abuse

As part of implementing your public protection responsibilities, it's important to work with the person you are supporting to understand the type of abuse or violence present in the relationship. Domestic abuse refers to a **pattern** of coercive, controlling, abusive or intimidating behaviour to isolate, frighten, control and isolate a partner or ex-partner, and to increase their dependency on the abusive partner.

To establish whether the abuse or violence is part of this pattern of coercion and control, you can direct the person to the '[Am I experiencing Domestic Abuse?](#)' quiz on the [Scottish Women's Aid website](#).

Alternatively, you can ask questions such as:

- Do you feel like you are constantly 'walking on eggshells' around you partner/ex-partner?
- Does your partner's/ex-partner's behaviour leave you feeling emotionally drained?
- Does your partner/ex-partner regularly check up on you, wanting to know your every move, where you go and who you see?
- Does your partner/ex-partner prevent you from seeing friends and family or take part in activities outside the home?
- Does your partner ever call you insulting names or threaten you?
- Does your partner often get jealous or possessive for no reason?

If the person you are working with answered “yes” to any of these questions then it’s likely they are experiencing domestic abuse.

If the person responded ‘no’ to all of these questions, **or** their responses indicate that there is no ongoing abuse or attempts to control, coerce or create a dependency within the relationship, **or** incidents of violent/abusive language or behaviour are rare, then it’s more likely that they are describing situational partner violence (SPV). However, always remember that **SPV and domestic abuse are not mutually exclusive**.

4. Risk Assessment and Safety Planning

The person knows their own circumstances better than anyone. As a result, it’s important to get their views on how safe they feel, how intimidated or controlled they feel by their partner, and whether they would like to continue or end the relationship.

Depending on whether the person you are working with is affected by domestic abuse or situational violence, the level of risk assessment and safety planning that would be helpful might differ. The [Domestic Abuse Safety Planning Booklet](#) on the [Information and Resources](#) section of the City of Edinburgh Council website contains some really useful information to help you work together with the person to increase their safety, regardless of the nature of the abuse they have disclosed.

Remember that all incidents of abuse or violence need to be taken seriously, as they can always escalate and lead to serious harm, and your response needs to take this into consideration.

5. Additional considerations

If someone describes abuse or violence in the context of a current or former relationship, apart from establishing whether there is domestic abuse, you may also need to consider additional ways to improve safety and respond to risks. For example:

- How recent was the last incident? If very recent, did the person sustain injuries that may need medical attention?
- Does the person you are working with want support from Police Scotland to help them stay safe or to report incidents of abuse?
- If there are concerns about a partner’s behaviour, would the person you’re working with like to make a DSDAS ([Disclosure Scheme for Domestic Abuse Scotland](#)) application to find out if their partner has a history of abusive behaviour? Would they like you to submit a DSDAS application on their behalf? If

you have concerns, you might want to do this regardless of whether the person you're working with wants you to³.

- Are there children or other vulnerable family members who could be at physical, emotional or psychological risk from the partner's/ex-partner's abusive or violent behaviour?
- If violence or abuse are situational, are there consistent triggers for them, for example, alcohol use, housing issues, discussions about debt, or other stressors? Would it be helpful to signpost the couple/family for support with those issues?
- Is the person you are working with pregnant or recently had a baby? A lot of domestic abuse begins or escalates during pregnancy, and this could indicate that you might want to discuss [Child Protection](#) procedures.

6. Sources of Support and Information

The [Protect Someone from Harm](#) section of the City of Edinburgh Council website contains a lot of information on how to help people stay safe including:

- [Protecting Adults](#)
- [Protecting Children](#)
- Information and support for [Domestic Abuse](#)
- [How to report abuse or leave your home](#)
- [Support for men who are abusive towards female partners or ex-partners](#)
- How to [Ask Social Care Direct for advice](#)
- [Who to call in an emergency](#)
- [Support for families](#)
- A [list of organisations and services](#) that can support people affected by Domestic Abuse in Edinburgh.

[Police Scotland](#)'s website contains very useful [advice](#), including information about [Domestic Abuse](#), [Internet Safety](#) and [How to Report a Crime](#).

The [Safer Scotland](#) website also contains information on services and organisations across Scotland that can provide support and advice.

³ For more information about the DSDAS scheme, see the [City of Edinburgh Council website](#). For details of the process, see the "[Introduction to the DSDAS](#)" resource on the City of Edinburgh Council [Information and Resources website](#).