

# Domestic Abuse: Good note-taking principles



A briefing for professionals by the Equally Safe Edinburgh Committee

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## Domestic Abuse: Good Note-taking Principles

This document is intended for use by professionals in services and organisations that do not specialise in domestic abuse. It provides guidance on how to take notes regarding domestic abuse that has been disclosed to you in a way that is detailed, relevant, appropriate and promotes safety and accountability. **Please read it together with the document titled “Domestic Abuse: Record Keeping: Legal Responsibilities”.**

## What to bear in mind when keeping notes

Good notetaking is the responsibility of all professionals. Where someone has disclosed domestic abuse to you, it is extremely important to be concise, objective, factual and clear. Remember that any notes you make can be accessed by:

- The person with whom you are working (this could be the victim, the perpetrator or the parent(s) of children with whom you are working)
- The partner/ex-partner of the person with whom you are working (this could be the victim, the perpetrator or the parent(s) of children with whom you are working)
- Police Scotland and the Scottish Courts

The Domestic Abuse: Record Keeping: Legal Responsibilities document outlines the circumstances under which you might be required to share your records when a request is made, as well as circumstances when you may be able to refuse to share them.

## Principles of good notetaking for domestic abuse

Bearing in mind that all people have a right to see what notes and records you keep about them, below is some advice on best practice in notetaking for domestic abuse:

**Take notes in a manner that you would like a professional to make notes about you.**

Always ask yourself: how would I like a professional to write notes about me? What would I be happy/unhappy to read in my notes?

Below are the key principles to bear in mind when taking notes about disclosures of domestic abuse or domestic incidents:

### 1. Stay as factual, accurate and objective as possible.

It is important to use straightforward language in your notes and avoid descriptions where possible. Try to reflect the narrative you were given by the person you are working with as much as possible.

### 2. Try to use the same language as the person you are working with

It is important that your notes reflect what you are told by the person you are working with. Avoid summarising or drawing conclusions to avoid misunderstandings.

This principle is especially important when working with children and young people. Often, children and young people might not use formal terms to describe behaviours or people so trying to summarise or interpret what they have said in your notes could unwittingly become misleading.

### 3. Avoid personal opinions, interpretations or impressions

The person you are working with has the right to access any information you hold about them, and this includes case notes and session notes. If your notes include personal opinions (positive or negative) then this will influence your relationship with them. Remember that your notes might also become part of court proceedings.

### 4. Avoid victim-blaming language

Victim blaming language is any language that appears to attribute the responsibility for domestic abuse to the victim rather than the perpetrator. This is important to remember regardless of whether you are working with a victim/survivor or the person whose behaviour is abusive.

Victims will often internalise the abuse and express it as though it's their fault or responsibility. It is important to recognise when this is happening so when you record your notes, it is clear that this is their belief, rather than the actual relationship dynamic.

People whose behaviour is abusive will also use language that shifts the responsibility for their abusive behaviour onto the victim and minimises its impact. Your notes must reflect how the person presented a situation, instead of reading like you are endorsing their views.

### 5. Ensure that the perpetrator and their pattern of abuse is clear in your notes

Note-taking often focuses on incidents that have occurred and on how the victim/survivor can safeguard themselves and their children. Safeguarding is the key priority when working with people affected by domestic abuse. However, there is often disproportionate focus on what the victim/survivor can do to protect themselves and their children, with little mention of how the abusive partner's/ex-partner's behaviour is forcing the victim/survivor to have to take those steps. This can lead to the abusive partner/ex-partner becoming 'invisible', rather than demonstrating the impact of the abusive behaviour on the victim/survivor and their children. It is important for notes to reflect that abusive behaviour is a choice, while living in an abusive relationship is not.

### 6. Provide factual context

Very often, the actions of victims/survivors of domestic abuse might appear 'strange' or 'counterintuitive'. Simply describing what a victim/survivor does or doesn't do in case notes and session summaries might not explain the reasoning behind their decisions. This can increase risk as your notes can be interpreted as the victim/survivor behaving in unpredictable, provocative, unsafe or unprotective ways. The pattern of abuse shapes victims'/survivors' decisions, behaviour and actions, and it's important that this is reflected in notes. Explaining how the victim/survivor has decided to act in certain

situations must be linked to the pattern of abuse by their partner/ex-partner to demonstrate how, under the circumstances, their actions are protective.

## 7. Be clear about whom you are referring to in your notes

Sometimes people in same-sex relationships might present to the same service to seek support for domestic abuse. When speaking to the person directly, it will be clear what the actions of the victim/survivor are, and what those of the abusive partner/ex-partner are. However, this often does not translate clearly in case notes and session notes when using the same pronouns to refer to both the victim/survivor and the partner/ex-partner who is abusive. In such circumstances, it's best to use first names rather than pronouns like 'she/her' or 'he/him', as this will avoid confusion as to who did/said what to whom.

## 8. Be clear about your advice and next steps

Last but not least, it's important that your notes explain your actions, your evidence and your decision-making process together with the person you are supporting. You should record:

- What information you asked for from the person you are working with
- What risk assessments you carried out (if any) and the outcome of those
- The summary of your discussion with the person you work(ed) with, their views, their level of concern
- Any additional vulnerabilities you discussed (for example immigration status, disability, age, etc.)
- Other people involved in the relationship that could be at risk, who could aggravate the abuse or who could be protective
- What advice you provided, including what services you signposted the person to and what safeguarding tools you used (if any)
- Any child protection concerns
- Any referrals that you discussed and how the person felt about additional referrals
- Any discussion around the need to make additional referrals to child protection, Police Scotland, Social Work, Health Services due to heightened level of risk
  - How did the person respond to those?
  - Did they understand the need for an onward referral?
  - Did they agree to an onward referral?
  - If they did not agree to be referred, what action did you take (for example, consult a more senior colleague, phone a specialist organisation, etc.)