

“He told me if I tried to leave, he would kill my dog.”

Domestic Abuse Awareness:
Guidance for Veterinary and
Animal Welfare Teams



Links Group



Domestic abuse awareness:

Guidance for Veterinary and Animal Welfare Teams

This guidance is designed to accompany the 'domestic abuse awareness' online training available on the Links Group website. We hope that you will find this guidance a useful resource in terms of developing your understanding about the dynamics of domestic abuse, signs to watch out for and how to help victim-survivors. If you are a line manager, you will also find information about supporting employees who may be experiencing domestic abuse.

Why is an awareness of domestic abuse important to veterinary and animal welfare teams?

Victim-survivors of domestic abuse (people and animals) will access your practice/centre regularly and being prepared with some basic information could make all the difference to their personal safety and lives.

Animals are often abused by perpetrators of domestic abuse too. You could be the first professional point of contact for many victim-survivors who may visit your practice/centre with or without the knowledge of the abusive partner. Or, the perpetrator may accompany them. You may see animals that have been physically, sexually and emotionally abused, neglected and killed by the perpetrator. It's not only pet animals that experience abuse, this can happen to livestock and equines too.

"I had a horse at the time and he told me that if I ever went it would be like in the film that I'd get the horse's head given to me"

Vicki

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is defined as any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse:

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Violent or threatening behaviour
- Controlling or coercive behaviour
- Economic abuse
- Psychological, emotional, or other abuse

This definition and legislation relating to domestic abuse varies across England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

"It just got worse and I became so much more frightened. It was becoming so dangerous to be in the same house as him, that I really thought if I didn't go, I may not get out of that house alive. With the mental abuse it was the chipping away effect that it had on me, the derogatory remarks, the silence, the name calling and putting me down, controlling what I wore and the finances. It chipped away at my confidence. I ended up in Accident and Emergency, probably about four, maybe five times during those 13 years. It got to the situation where I was so in denial about what was happening, that I could go to A&E with a broken bone in my leg and I would lie. I would say I have tripped over, I had fallen"

Tracy

Who does domestic abuse affect?

Anyone can be a victim-survivor of domestic abuse:

- Both men and women perpetrate and experience domestic abuse, but it is more common for men to perpetrate violence and abuse against women. This is particularly true for severe and repeated violence and sexual assault (NICE, 2016).
- Domestic abuse can happen in same sex relationships and can affect anyone regardless of age, occupation, ethnicity, religion and so on.
- Adults, children and animals can be victim-survivors of domestic abuse.

When animals are abused
people are at risk, when people
are abused animals are at risk.

(Arkow, 2008)

Many victim-survivors of domestic abuse find it very difficult to recognise and name what is happening to them as 'abuse' during the relationship. Perpetrators are often not always abusive, they can at times be quite 'loving' which can be very confusing for victim-survivors. There are many parallels between how perpetrators use children and animals to coerce and control the non-abusive partner.

“He could be perfect for months on end, and then you are kind of lulled into this false sense of security: ‘Well here is this man, the love of my life’ and then you put all the bad stuff to the back of your mind, and you actually start doubting yourself. ‘Did he really do that? How could he? Look, here is this lovely man.’”

Kate



Why does domestic abuse happen?

Domestic abuse is a matter of power and control and occurs when one partner or family member seeks to gain power and control over others. The Power and Control Wheel (Duluth, 1980) is often used to show the different types of abuse that victim-survivors may endure. We have added a section to demonstrate how animals can be used by the perpetrator:

USING COERCION AND THREATS

- Making and/or carrying out threats to do something to hurt her
- Threatening to leave her, to commit suicide, to report her to welfare
- Making her drop charges
- Making her do illegal things
- Threatening, harming and murdering animals

USING INTIMIDATION

- Making her afraid by using looks, actions, gestures
- Smashing things
- Destroying her property
- Threatening, harming and murdering animals
- Displaying weapons

USING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

- Putting her down
- Making her feel bad about herself
- Calling her names
- Making her think she's crazy
- Playing mind games
- Humiliating her
- Making her feel guilty

USING ISOLATION

- Controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, where she goes
- Limiting her outside involvement
- Using jealousy to justify action

MINIMISING, DENYING AND BLAMING

- Making light of the abuse and not taking her concerns about it seriously
- Saying the abuse didn't happen
- Shifting responsibility for abusive behaviour
- Saying she caused it

USING CHILDREN

- Making her feel guilty about the children
- Using the children to relay messages
- Using visitation to harass her
- Threatening to take the children away

USING ANIMALS

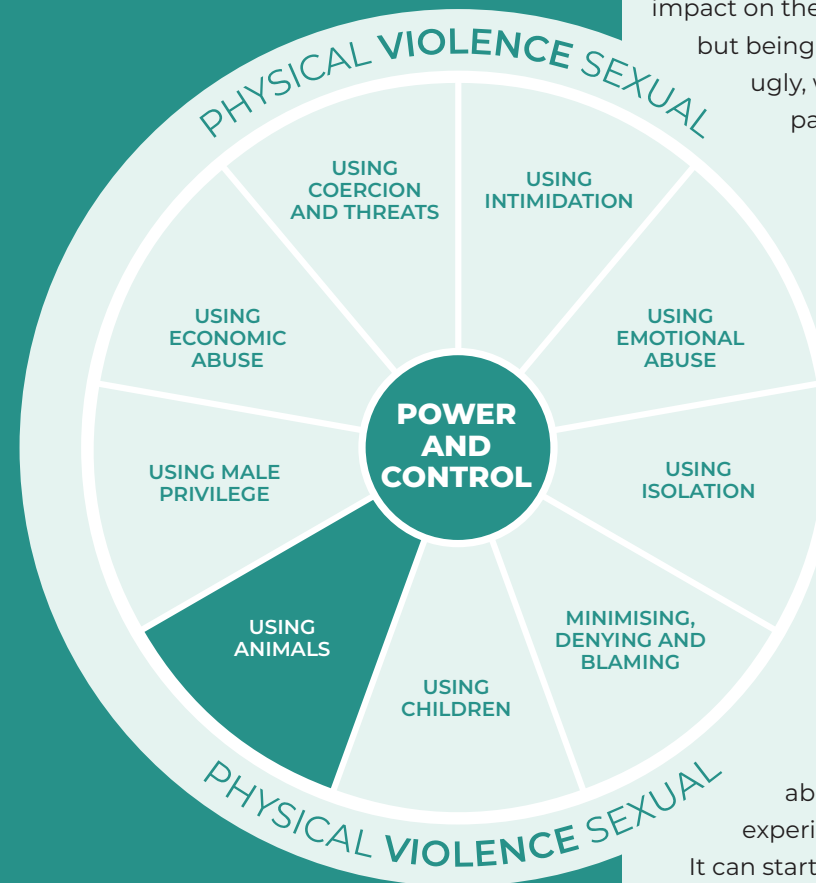
- Using the bond that she has with animals to hurt her
- Threatening, harming and murdering animals to control her
- Not letting her take animals to the vet
- Stopping her from being with her animals
- Making her feel guilty about the animals
- Threatening to take the animals away or report her to welfare

USING MALE PRIVILEGE

- Treating her like a servant
- Making all the decisions
- Acting like the 'master of the castle'
- Being the one to define men's and women's roles

USING ECONOMIC ABUSE

- Preventing her from getting or keeping a job
- Making her ask for money
- Giving her an allowance
- Taking her money
- Not letting her know about or have access to family income



Perpetrators use many strategies to gain power and control over the non-abusive partner which the wheel can demonstrate. Power and control is at the centre of abusive relationships.

The nine sections of the wheel show the emotional, psychological and economic abuse that victim-survivors may experience which has a devastating impact on their lives. Bruises heal, but being told you are useless, fat, ugly, worthless, mad, a bad parent, a rubbish partner and so on can all sit in the heart and mind for many years and destroy future relationships through lack of self-worth.

Perpetrators will use or threaten to use physical and sexual abuse to keep their victim in that relationship, or to 'keep them in their place'. Often the abuse that victim-survivors experience escalates over time. It can start to happen more often, get worse or both.

Animals are victim-survivors of domestic abuse too

People often refer to animals as 'family members' and 'best friends', but for victim-survivors of domestic abuse animals may provide their only source of comfort, companionship and love. Perpetrators can often exploit this bond that victim-survivors have with animals and abuse animals as a way to coerce and control the non-abusive partner. Any species or breed of animal may be abused, it is the significance of the bond that victim-survivors have with animals that can make certain animals a target for abuse by the perpetrator.

Animals experience similar types of abuse to human victim-survivors including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional/psychological abuse and neglect. Tragically animals are also murdered by the perpetrator in some households. Perpetrators may encourage animals to come into the household and they may give the non-abusive partner and children in the household animals as gifts. These animals are often then abused by the perpetrator. Having animals can make it even harder for victim-survivors to escape as it can be difficult to leave with animals. It can also be very hard for victim-survivors to talk about the abuse that animals have experienced because they often feel a sense of self-blame and shame.

For more detailed information about the dynamics of animal abuse in the context of domestic abuse please visit the Links Group website:

www.thelinksgroup.org.uk

How many people are affected by domestic abuse?

It is impossible to measure the prevalence of domestic abuse in the UK as it remains such a hidden crime. Many victim-survivors live with violence and abuse for years without disclosing what is happening to them for varying reasons including fear, being totally isolated from any form of support, concerns that they will not be believed, having nowhere else to go, feelings of shame, self-blame and helplessness.

- According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2024, 2.3 million adults experienced domestic abuse each year. This figure is likely to be underestimated because all types of domestic abuse are under reported.
- One in seven (14.2 per cent) children and young people in the UK under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic abuse at some point in their childhood.
- Animals are also victim-survivors of domestic abuse. According to PDSA it is estimated that there are animals in 50 per cent of UK households and where domestic abuse is happening in households animals are often abused by perpetrators as a strategy to coerce and control victim-survivors (adults and children).
- Two women are murdered in the UK each week by a partner, ex-partner or family member. Children and animals are also killed.
- On average the police in England and Wales receive over 100 calls relating to domestic abuse every hour.
- The economic and social cost of domestic abuse each year in England and Wales alone is £66 billion.

Myths and facts about domestic abuse

Myth #1:

Alcohol and drugs make a person more violent

Fact: Alcohol and drugs can make existing abuse worse, or be a catalyst for an incident, but they do not cause domestic abuse. Many people use alcohol or drugs and do not abuse their partner, so it should never be used to excuse violence and abuse.

Myth #2:

If it was that bad, she'd leave

Fact: Women stay in abusive relationships for many different reasons, and it can be very difficult for a woman to leave an abusive partner - even if she wants to. Like any other relationship, one that ends in abuse began with falling in love and being in love. Abuse rarely starts at the beginning of a relationship, but when it is established and often harder to leave.

A woman may still be in love with her partner and believe him when he says he is 'sorry' and 'it won't happen again'; she may be frightened for her life or for the safety of her children, or other dependants if she leaves; she

may have nowhere to go; she may have no financial independence. Abusers often isolate their partners from family and friends in order to control them, making it even more difficult for an abused woman to exit the relationship. Women in abusive relationships need support and understanding - not judgement.

Myth #3: Domestic abuse always involves physical violence

Fact: Domestic abuse does not always include physical violence. Emotional and psychological abuse often take place and can be as damaging as a physical assault and the impact can last a lot longer.

Myth #4: He can be a good father even if he abuses his partner

Fact: An estimated 90 per cent of children whose mothers are abused witness the abuse. The effects are traumatic and long-lasting. When a child experiences domestic abuse against a parent, they are not a witness, but a victim and this is child abuse. These children are also often

direct victim-survivors of the abuse which is happening at home.

Myth #5: She provoked him

Fact: This myth is widespread and deep-rooted. It is often based on the belief that the man is the head of the family, and that his role is to punish his partner or children if they act in a way he doesn't approve of. This myth is dangerous because any reference to 'provocation' means that we are blaming the woman and relieving the abuser of responsibility for his actions. **Abuse or violence of any kind is never the victim's fault. Responsibility always lies with the perpetrator, and with them alone.**

Myth #6: Women are just as abusive as men

Fact: At least 29.9 per cent of women and 17 per cent of men in England and Wales have experienced domestic abuse at some time. These figures are likely to be an underestimate, because all types of domestic abuse are under-reported in health and social research, to the police and to other

services. Note that official published Crime Survey for England and Wales data 'caps' the maximum number of incidents in a series at five. Evidence suggests that once this cap is removed, domestic abuse increases by 70 per cent and this is predominantly against women.

Both men and women perpetrate and experience domestic abuse, but it is more common for men to perpetrate violence and abuse against women. This is particularly true for severe and repeated violence and sexual assault. Abuse perpetrated by men tends to create a context of fear and related to that, control.

Myth #7: Men who abuse women are mentally unwell

Fact: There is no research that supports this myth. The use of violence and abuse is a choice, and there is no excuse for this behaviour.

Myths and facts about domestic abuse - cont.

Myth #8:

Men who abuse their partners saw their fathers abuse their mothers

Fact: Domestic abuse is prevalent throughout society. Because of this many people have grown up witnessing domestic abuse. But, most of these people will never perpetrate domestic abuse in their own relationships, so it is never an excuse.

Myth #9:

All couples argue - it's not domestic abuse, it's just a normal relationship

Fact: Abuse and disagreement are not the same things. Different opinions are normal and completely acceptable in healthy relationships. Abuse is not a disagreement, it is the use of physical, sexual, emotional or psychological violence or threats in order to govern and control another person's thinking, opinions, emotions and behaviour. When abuse is involved, there is no discussion between equals. There is fear of saying or doing the 'wrong' thing.

Myth #10:

They are both as bad as each other

Fact: There is always a primary perpetrator. Victim-survivors will experience a range of emotions including anger and they may lack trust in professionals. Victim-survivors can commit 'desperate acts' when pushed so far and they adopt a range of strategies to try to cope with violence and abuse, sometimes this involves turning to drugs or alcohol.

Perpetrators will deny, minimise and justify their abuse. They may attempt to manipulate professionals and threaten victim-survivors with having children and animals taken away by authorities. Leaving is the most dangerous time for victim-survivors and the abuse often continues post separation through the family courts, child contact and shared care of animals.

“

It was a form of control, a threat of violence; 'I can do this to the dog, I can do this to the cat. You better toe the line or you will be next'.”

“

He used to punch and strangle the dog. She would have bright red eyes, bloodshot eyes...it turned out the dog had a hernia, so I think he actually gave the dog a hernia due to the assault.”

These myths and facts about domestic abuse are taken from the Women's Aid website:

www.womensaid.org.uk

Are you worried that someone you know or work with may be being abused?

Perhaps they...

- Seem afraid of their partner.
- They may not be able to give a plausible reason for the animal's injury, give a reason that doesn't add up or give varying reasons to different practice staff.
- They may not be able to provide the veterinary history and may visit multiple practices.
- If an abusive partner is present, they may blame their partner, put their partner down and talk down to them in front of you.
- This person may not be allowed to go anywhere by themselves and their partner may do all of the talking and not allow them to speak.
- They may give excuses for their own injuries.
- They may have physical injuries that they try to hide which means they may wear what seems inappropriate clothing. For example, jumper and trousers on a hot day.
- If they are alone, they may not want their partner to know that they are at the practice and they may be afraid of their partner finding out where they are.
- If their partner knows where they are they may have to check in with them and ask their permission to go ahead with any treatments.
- They may not be allowed to make any decisions about their animals.
- They may have limited access to money and may not be able to make follow up appointments, not turn up to appointments, or cancel appointments at the last minute.
- They may appear anxious, submissive, nervous or apologetic.

This is not an exhaustive list. Trust your instincts and talk to the wider practice team who may share your concerns.

Supporting victim-survivors of domestic abuse

These are just a few suggestions about how to support someone who you suspect may be a victim-survivor.

- **Ask if anything is wrong.**
- **Listen carefully and believe.**
- **Talk specifically about what concerns you regarding their situation.**
- **Try to support their choices.**
- **Respect their right to privacy. Be upfront about confidentiality. There are some circumstances when confidentiality cannot be assured. These occur when there are safeguarding concerns about children, or vulnerable adults.**
- **Don't try to 'fix' or 'save' them - give them the number for an organisation that can help.**

You don't need to be an expert in domestic abuse, empathy and passing on the contact details for the National Domestic Abuse Helpline could make a big difference to a person.

- **Call** **0808 2000 247**
- **Live Chat** **chat.womensaid.org.uk**
- **Website** **nationaldahelpline.org.uk**

Reporting concerns and accessing support

Safeguarding vulnerable adults, children and animals is our joint responsibility. The only way that we will effectively tackle the abuse of people and animals is through a multi-agency approach. If you have concerns please talk to your practice/line manager. Veterinary teams can also contact RCVS on **020 7202 0789** or refer to the **Suspected Abuse of Animals and People: Guidance for the Veterinary Team** available on the Links Group website.

Supporting children

If you are worried about a child or young person (aged under 18), even if you are unsure you should contact the NSPCC for help, advice and support on **0808 800 5000**.

Supporting animals

When reporting suspected animal abuse you should follow practice protocol and contact:

- RSPCA (England & Wales) on 0300 123 4999
- SSPCA (Scotland) on 0300 099 9999
- The appropriate Local Authority Welfare Officer in Northern Ireland which can be found by visiting www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/animal-welfare-local-councils

In any emergency you should advise victim-survivors to always call 999, if they are afraid to speak, or cannot speak, they can use the silent solution by pressing 55 on the keypad and the person on the line will know they are in danger.

For more detailed guidance about your professional obligations visit www.thelinksgroup.org.uk

Domestic abuse Awareness:

Guidance for Managers

Given how many people are affected by domestic abuse you may have employees who are victim-survivors, and their experiences may impact work. It is important that employees impacted by domestic abuse receive appropriate support to promote their wellbeing and safety at work.

As a manager you have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992 to ensure the welfare and safety of all employees at work. Domestic abuse legislation, for example the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 statutory guidance highlights the important role employers have in helping victim-survivors of domestic abuse to remain in work and access the support they need.

We recommend that you familiarise yourself with your domestic abuse policy. If you do not already have a domestic abuse policy you can visit the resources section of The Links Group website for further information.

Signs to watch out for that an employee may be experiencing domestic abuse:

- You may have noticed a change in an employee's performance or behaviour at work. Perhaps they seem distracted, overly tired, upset, stressed, anxious.
- An employee's appearance may have suddenly changed. They may have started dressing differently, lost weight, gained weight and so on.
- An employee's partner may phone work or turn up at work regularly. They may be on their mobile phone more than usual as they could be under pressure to respond to a partner.
- There may have been a change in an employee's attendance and time keeping.
- An employee may need their partner's permission to make decisions, see friends and family or attend work events.
- An employee may have physical signs of abuse that they attempt to explain away or cover up.

These are just some of the signs to watch out for. An employee may disclose that they are being abused to you, or another team member may inform you that they are concerned about a colleague.

“He would phone up work and ask ‘What time are you finishing?’ He knew what time I finished, it was six o'clock, and it never changed. It was always just to check where I was. He would just literally turn up at my branch when I was working, which was a nightmare. And then he would sometimes make it so I was late for work to jeopardise my job.”

Shelly

Supporting an employee who may be a victim-survivor of domestic abuse

These are just a few suggestions about how to support an employee who may be a victim-survivor of domestic abuse:

- Create a confidential space and time to talk.
- Respect an employee's right to privacy. Be upfront about confidentiality. There are some circumstances when confidentiality cannot be assured. These occur when there are safeguarding concerns about children, or vulnerable adults.
- Listen carefully and believe.
- Employees should feel that support and assistance is available.
- Talk specifically about what concerns you regarding their situation.
- Try to support their choices.
- Where domestic abuse in a same sex relationship is disclosed pay due regard to the double disclosure of confidential information particularly where the victim-survivor may not be 'out' about their sexual orientation at work.
- Respect the right of an employee to make their own decision on the course of action at every stage.
- Remember, the responsibility for the abuse lies with the perpetrator, not the victim-survivor.
- You are not expected to be an expert in domestic abuse. Don't try to 'fix' or 'save' an employee - give them the contact details for an organisation that can help.

Reporting concerns and accessing support

You can signpost employees to the 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline to access free, specialist, confidential advice by calling **0808 2000 247**, or accessing the Live Chat Helpline at **chat.womensaid.org.uk**. If you would like further advice about how to support an employee who is experiencing domestic abuse you can also get in touch via the helplines.

If you are worried about a child (aged under 18), even if you are unsure you should contact the NSPCC for help, advice and support on **0808 800 5000**.

If you have concerns that a vulnerable adult may be at risk of harm you should contact your local adult social care team.

For more practical information and resources visit
www.thelinksgroup.org.uk

“

My dog was a comfort to me and a means of getting out of the house to take her for a walk. She was just so important to me, she kept me sane.

”

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Notes



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