

Supporting staff who may be experiencing Domestic Abuse during Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions

Survivors of domestic abuse may feel particularly alone & at risk during self-isolation with fewer opportunities to seek help.

Domestic abuse is defined by the UK Government as;

“any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality.”

Those affected by domestic abuse, could include our own staff. Managers need to be aware of this, be alert to possible signs and consider how to support staff who may be experiencing domestic abuse. It is important to keep in mind that domestic abuse occurs within all types of intimate and family relationships and affects people from all backgrounds and of all ages.

Best practice approach

For some, disclosing the abuse they are experiencing does not feel possible. Research shows that survivors of domestic abuse *prefer to be directly asked about their situation as this makes it easier to seek help*. Managers should therefore sensitively ask employees about their safety and welfare at home and within their relationships. This can be built into management supervision or catch ups and asked as standard to all staff.

Ensure it's safe to talk

- At the start of the conversation ask if they are safe to talk, if not, ask for a good time to call back. Be aware that risk is dynamic and they may need to hang up.
- Use closed questions with 'yes/no' answers when asking about safety – these will be easier to answer if the perpetrator can overhear.

How to ask

- It may be helpful to use an opening question e.g.
 - *“Are things manageable for you at home?”*
- Then ensure you also use direct questions such as;
 - *“Do you feel safe at home / in your relationship?”*
 - *“Do you ever become frightened by what your partner/ family member says or does?”*

Best practice response

It is not your responsibility as the manager to deal with the abuse itself or provide counselling or specialist advice. It is your role to provide a supporting, empathetic response and outline what help is available.

When an employee discloses that they are experiencing domestic abuse, line managers should take the below steps:

- ① Provide a good first response: believe them, be empathetic and supportive.
- ② Consider risk. Ask about their immediate safety. If the employee is in immediate danger call the police on 999.

③ Provide information on available support services

- If they are unsafe to remain at home consider alternative options with them e.g. a refuge, staying with safe friends or family.
- If they're in Lambeth the [Gaia Centre](#) can help. Confidential advice & support by phone, text or email – whatever's safest. Tel: 020 7733 8724 / Email: lambethvawg@refuge.org.uk
- The [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) offers free 24/7 advice and information about local specialist support services, regardless of where the survivor lives. Tel: 0808 2000 247.
- Explain the [Employee Assistance Programme](#) and give them information.

④ Explore options and agree a safety plan

- Ensure you are directed by the employee who will have the best understanding of their risk and how you can help. Guidance can be sought from the Gaia Centre with the employee's consent
- With the employee's consent, work with the employee and Lambeth Council's Human Resources and Health and Safety teams in agreeing the plan
- If it is safer for the staff member to come into work, this should be allowed and planned with your support
- Agree what, if anything, can be shared with colleagues and how to respond if the perpetrator contacts the workplace (*remind all staff never to divulge personal information about employees to callers*)
- Identify an emergency contact should the organisation be unable to contact the employee
- Agree a safe and confidential method of communication (e.g. email or face to face communication may be safer than phone calls where phone calls are necessary, it may be helpful to identify a phrase to indicate they are not safe to talk)

The employee is under no obligation to access support and may choose not to at this time.

The VAWG Team is available to provide further information and advice to Managers: you can contact the VAWG Programme and Commissioning Manager by emailing RParker1@lambeth.gov.uk