

# Coronavirus lockdown is a dangerous time for victims of domestic abuse: What you need to know

19 March 2020, by Nicole Westmarland and Rosanna Bellini



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Emphasis is currently being placed on people to self-isolate from their places of work and leisure, posing the home as a place of relative safety during the coronavirus pandemic. However, there is growing concern about what impact this might have on those trapped in intimate relationships with people who use violence and abuse.

For some people, home is not a safe place to be, so the prospect of large parts of the population being confined to prevent the spread of the [coronavirus](#) opens the potential [for increased incidents of domestic violence](#).

Of course, COVID-19 cannot cause [domestic violence](#), just as alcohol, drugs, unemployment etc. do not cause it. However, a heightened state of anxiety and stress—including medical anxiety and the stress many of us will feel around being in such close proximity for such extended periods of time with our families—is likely to make this a more dangerous time for women and children. This is in line with existing research that highlight that [natural disasters](#) and [diseases](#) are factors in increased reports of domestic [violence](#).

Perpetrators may attempt to deal with extra stress and anxiety by imposing stricter and more unrealistic regimes on their families' activities and behaviours. It's a moment when the net of coercive control can be tightened. In fact, "social distancing" and "isolation" are core tactics of a coercively controlling partner.

The majority of us are in contact with domestic violence victims, survivors and perpetrators, even if we do not usually recognise it. We are their lecturers, their [medical professionals](#), their carers, their teachers, their social workers, their line managers and so on. If we are working in any kind of support role or direct contact role during the COVID-19 crisis it is important to remember that "working from home" brings with it very different challenges for different people. We need to be aware of how this may impact victims and perpetrators of domestic violence as well as children in the home.

Here are a few things that we thought might be useful for people to consider during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Understand that stress and anxiety does not cause domestic [abuse](#) but it may increase it in families where it is already being perpetrated. Acknowledge that this is an extremely unsafe time.

Check in with someone who you are personally worried about. If making a [phone call](#) to a suspected domestic violence victim or survivor, always assume that the perpetrator could be listening in. The same goes for instant messaging services.

If you suspect that the victim or survivor isn't able to talk because of being overheard, give them a readily thought out line to end the call, eg if it is not

safe to speak right now then please repeat after me  
"I'm sorry there is no one called Tina here, you  
must have got the wrong number."

If it is safe to talk when you call, arrange a  
codeword or phrase that the victim can use if  
interrupted, eg if you need to end the call at any  
point please say "no, sorry I'm not interested in  
taking part in the survey."

### **Taking a time out**

Where there is not a complete lockdown and  
people are still able to leave their houses to go for a  
walk if not ill or in quarantine, the ["time out"](#)  
technique can be used as a last resort to stop  
immediate physical abuse. If there is a complete  
lockdown then a garage or garden shed could also  
work. The time out technique is taught within  
behavior change programs (perpetrator programs)  
and is a way of creating physical space during  
times of escalation. It involves arranging an amount  
of time (between 45 and 60 minutes) for someone  
being abusive to physically remove themselves  
from an environment. They go to a pre-agreed  
location and message the victim when they are  
returning to the physical environment. We must  
underline that this is a last resort to using abuse  
and should not be treated as a "cure" for violence.

At the [time](#) of writing, in the UK helpline services  
are still available. Respect run a phonenumber for  
people concerned about their use of violence and  
abuse (0808 208024040), a webchat [available  
through their website](#) and also a specialist helpline  
for male victims of domestic abuse (0808  
8010327). The National Domestic Abuse helpline is  
open 24 hours a day on 0808 2000247.

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